

Seven Factors of Compassion (3 of 5) Joy

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Today, the topic is the joy factor of compassion. I think compassion is not often associated with joy. It might be more easily associated with it if we realize that joy has a wide range of meanings.

It was a very big surprise to me the first time I cared for someone who was challenged and needed support. I was doing it matter-of-factly. It felt natural to do it. But what surprised me was the sense of pleasure, joy, and well-being that seemed to well up in my chest as I did so. I wondered, “Is it okay to feel a sense of well-being and joy in helping this person?” I even wondered, “Am I doing this for the pleasure of it or to support her?” I was so surprised by how good it felt.

Since then, I've discovered that when I feel compassion, it can come with a sense of rightness, joy, and pleasure. Sometimes when the suffering is really huge, it's a little difficult to see or recognize it as joy or pleasure exactly. But it feels really good. It feels right to be a witness to suffering – to be open to it.

How is it that compassion, which is the awareness of suffering in oneself and others, can be associated with joy? The Dalai Lama has gone around the world with the teaching that if you want to be happy, be compassionate. How is it that compassion is associated with joy?

There are many answers to that question. Our psychology has many different facets, but one has to do with how we're compassionate. If compassion comes along with a sense of a lot of duty and obligation, it can feel quite heavy. If compassion comes along with conclusions such as, "This means that life is frightening and terrible," it can also feel oppressive to experience compassion.

But if compassion comes along with an open awareness, like an open window with the wind blowing through – nothing stops or blocks it, it blows right through – then we are available for things as they occur. Part of the joy of this availability is that we're not contracting, resisting, or coming to conclusions. We're

not elaborating, “This means that the world is a terrible place.” We’re not immediately caught up, “I have to do something; I’m responsible.” The simplicity of compassion – the simplest version of it – is to be open to experiencing what is.

This openness, the ability to be available, is a very important aspect of mindfulness practice. Some people use mindfulness as the end process of a few very short moments, concluding: “Oh, this is what’s happening. Done. I’ve concluded that.” It’s a checklist approach to mindfulness.

Some people use mental noting, which I used to do. I would note “breathing in” as I began to breathe in. If the in-breath was a little long, I would kind of check out. I would drift off in thought for the last three-quarters of the in-breath because I’d already done my mindfulness practice. Then I would try to be there at the beginning of the exhale: “Out. Done that.” I wouldn’t be very present for the out-breath.

Instead of doing that, I learned to be available for the experience, to be open to the experience. The word “in,” for me, is an invitation, an opening: “Oh. This is the beginning of a process. Okay. I’m breathing in. That’s what’s happening. Now feel that, register it, let it be felt more deeply in the system, in the body.” And exhaling,

“This is the beginning of feeling it now.” It might be very brief, very fleeting, and that’s okay.

As we’re available to what’s happening, a great treasure is that we’re also feeling what it’s like to be available. We’re feeling what it’s like to have the door open as opposed to closed. That feels good; it has a nice feeling.

So when we do that with compassion, we’re open, we see the suffering of the world, and that’s not a time to come to conclusions. It is a time to allow something to begin. At a minimum, it’s the beginning of becoming more fully aware of it. This sense of being aware is the joy of compassion, at least for me.

We’re looking at the seven factors of compassion this week. The first factor is mindfulness of compassion. As we’re being mindful of compassion in a calm, relaxed way, we become aware of how we may not be open – how we’re closed, resisting, or tight. In terms of the compassion, we become aware of how we’re suffering because of the suffering. We may be putting layers of suffering – our judgments, fears, taking it personally – on top of our experience of the suffering of the world.

Then we learn to make a distinction between these other layers of suffering and just being open to the simplicity of the original suffering that we’re being

present for. As we make that distinction, we learn how to be mindful in a more relaxed, open way, and we make the effort to do so. We make an effort to be present for the suffering where we're not tightening up and stressing around it.

That leads to the joy factor of compassion. Now we're available, we're open – an awareness without stress or force, an awareness that's calm, light, and open. In some ways, the lighter and calmer the awareness can be, the cleaner and fuller the experience of compassion, or the way we experience suffering, can be.

For some people, that can seem like going against the grain because when they feel the suffering of others, they think that they better take it seriously – gear up and do something big – “This is really important. Some suffering is huge.” It can seem very counterintuitive that the way forward is to not take the suffering so seriously that we get tense and stressed out. It's so important that we let the best qualities of who we are come forward. Our best ability to think and act comes through relaxing and being open and available in a nice way.

I would like to go back to the example I gave on Monday of the girl who scraped her knee on the playground. If the caretaker who comes over and cares for her is distraught, angry, or feels that this is a disaster

and yells for help, the poor girl is going to learn all kinds of unhealthy things. She's going to feel frightened. She's going to think: "Oh, things are worse than I thought they were. It's bad enough my knee got scraped. Maybe this is a disaster. I wonder if they're going to call 911." Or the little girl learns that the world is a frightening place, all because the caretaker got alarmed and took it too seriously.

But if the caretaker treats her respectfully, carefully, lovingly, and fully, with lightness, ease, calm, and even with a sense of enjoyment, appreciation, or feeling the rightness of it – "I'm here, I'm comfortable being here and doing this" – the little girl learns something very different about life. She learns that this is available in life. She learns that life is a place where things are not a crisis and that we can meet our experience and difficulties with a certain level of calm, lightness, ease, love, and care.

The ability to find sweetness in compassion is one of the great powers of compassion. It's one of the great capacities that compassion has. This week I'm calling it the joy factor of compassion.

I would like to suggest that if you have occasion today to encounter suffering, however small or large it might be, it might be best to not act quickly and immediately in response to it. Maybe it doesn't require that of you. See

if you can find a way to register, feel, and know that suffering clearly – not denying it, not dismissing its importance. You can take time to let the suffering register and be known in you. In the knowing, in being available for the suffering, you may actually feel there is some sweetness, goodness, and rightness. What difference does it make for you if you experience compassion in that way? How do you then respond differently?

The joy factor of compassion. Thank you, and I look forward to continuing tomorrow.