

How to bring Heart Centered Compassion Practices into Everyday Life **By Melissa Moore**

Dear Karuna Training Community,

This year Karuna Training is offering a series of free online talks and emails - with engaging insight into a variety of Karuna related topics. Here is a little in depth discussion from Karuna Founder and Senior Teacher Melissa Moore about our next topic, which was explored in our last online interactive session: Karuna Live - How to bring Heart Centered Compassion Practices into Everyday Life.

How to bring Heart Centered Compassion Practices into Everyday Life

Bringing heart centered compassion-based practices into our everyday life means intentionally bringing awareness directly to our own and other's suffering. This requires we **feel** directly into the challenges arising in practically every circumstance one can imagine. No one reading this article will have trouble conjuring up a current circumstance in their own life that is heartbreakingly real and present.

It is like the old Buddhist parable of a grief-stricken woman who has lost her dead child. She is told by the Buddha that he can help her if she can find a house that has not suffered a loss from death -- and when she does, she should return to the Buddha for further teachings; of course there is no such house to be found. She learns that no one is free from the pain of losing loved ones to death.

Heartbreak is part and parcel to being a human being. The willingness to feel into our personal heartbreak is the portal to discovering the potency of our own compassionate heart. In order to grow our compassion we have to feel the truth of suffering, 'fully and completely'.^[1] Furthermore, in order to lead a life with a compassionate heart, it is necessary that we learn to feel into the suffering of others, as if it were our own suffering.

Why would we intentionally do something like feel into our own personal heartbreak and the suffering of others? It's extremely counter-intuitive. Our willingness to dive into the valley of our own vulnerabilities and feel the groundlessness is what actually makes us stronger and more available to others. It's like all the wealth of our heart potency lies in the valley of our vulnerability, and the mere act of touching and feeling our pain 'as it is' – is what actually strengthens our capacity to be available for others in the world who are suffering.

Finding Compassion Rather Than Sympathy

I've found in Western culture, that we are quite confused around the word 'compassion'. Often we conflate compassion with the feelings of sympathy and charity. However, compassion means 'to feel with'. In Karuna Training we learn to feel into emotional energy with nonjudgmental awareness, both our own and others. This as opposed to feeling into the suffering of others from a place of sympathy or charity.

For example, if we see someone who is suffering on the streets and homeless, and we decide to offer them money; at that moment we could pause and ask ourselves, 'where is my generosity coming from?' Generosity is always kind, and also sometimes it comes from feeling bad for the person, because we have so much and they have so little. Or we may even feel guilty for having more than they do. If we are able to offer someone who is homeless a smile, a dollar or perhaps a warm meal from the space of true compassion, then from this perspective, we would be fully in-touch with our own homelessness.

Feeling into our suffering 'fully and completely' is counter-intuitive. We mostly are involved in managing our discomfort and pain so that we feel our own and others' suffering much less. We are masters at deflecting pain.

The Buddhist practices of conjuring up our own and others suffering in order to grow a true open hearted compassion, is not something that we normally aspire to do. Once we learn the practices however, and learn to apply them in everyday life; we might find them to be the most effective time-tested compassion-based practices that we've been looking for. Over time and with practice these methods can feel relieving. Mainly because we let down our habitual guard of protecting ourselves from our pain, and this act of protecting is exhausting. With practice, compassion-based practices land on one's being like a cool balm on an open wound. At last, we have something to do with our own and other's pain, and we can transform and open our hearts along the way!

Emotional energy is dynamic by nature, when we feel it fully, then it will change or transform because that is its nature. Due to emotional energy being dynamic, when we suppress emotional suffering or try to manage it, then it dams up and becomes habitual. The energy inevitably grows and becomes unmanageable. Another option to managing our emotional suffering is acting it out. We can begin to get high on the energy and feel the power of it – but that is like adding fuel to the fire. We are then greasing the skids to make it easier to act out the next time.

I have noticed this while driving in traffic and allowing myself the pleasure of screaming at another driver, at my worst moments flipping them off and grumbling about it for longer than necessary. This addictive behavior which is seemingly pleasurable, is habit forming and indulgent. I end up carrying the anger down the road and closing my heart in the long run.

Diving into Compassion Enhancing Practices

Buddhism is renowned for its compassion-enhancing practices. Compassion meditation practices have even been scientifically proven to be more effective than mindfulness practices. Scientifically this knowledge that different practices are more effective than others comes about by measuring what is called an 'Altered Trait' in one's brain after a certain number of hours of meditation. (Goleman; Richardson; 2017). An 'altered trait' is a demonstrated enhancement that shows up in the mind when photographed through advanced MRI neuropsychological equipment.

According to the research of Dan Goleman and Richie Richardson who study the effectiveness of meditation methodologies as to their capacity to produce an 'altered trait' in the brain; it takes 9000 hours of mindfulness meditation to produce an 'altered trait' in one's mind. And it only takes 900 hours of compassion-based practice to produce an 'altered trait'.

Measuring the altered traits produced through one's practice is far from the point of these meditations; however, it does help us to know whether they are working on us or not. And it's interesting to note that compassion-based practices are more effective, and many find them easier than mindfulness-enhancing meditation practices. (Goleman; Richardson; 2017)

From a Buddhist perspective, compassion is something we all possess innately, it is one of the Four Immeasurables which include; Love, Joy and Equanimity as the other three. How is that? Sometimes we are not feeling all that open hearted, right? This means our innate compassion has been shrouded, like a full moon in a cloudy night sky. We can only feel it as a dim light shining from our heart at best or nothing at all and hollow at worst. Compassion-based practices help clear the clouds away and offer us access to our innate potency of heart.

Whilst growing the potency of our heart, we could first discern the type of emotional suffering we are experiencing. There is an inevitable suffering that all humans incur through the inescapable processes of birth, old age, sickness and death. These are unavoidable dimensions of human suffering and they are very painful and real whether we consciously feel into them or not. A second type of suffering is caused by spending hours and hours, and lots of energy and money to avoid feeling the first kind of suffering of birth, old age, sickness and death. This second type of suffering is suffering that we create for ourselves and is where compassion-based practices can wake us up and help us change behaviors.

This second type of suffering is like a 'hat on top of a hat', it is completely unnecessary! Nevertheless, we are often unconscious of the type of suffering we are feeling in ourselves and others and we do not realize that we are busy manufacturing our own suffering -- just because we don't want to experience the truth of human suffering which arises from birth, old age, sickness and death.

Let's look deeper at each of these inevitable kinds of suffering and how we create further suffering for ourselves when we don't experience these human realities directly.

Birth

Physical births are often celebratory events; and there are many ways to avoid the physical suffering of birth. All births are challenging and often very painful, whether we are viewing a birth as challenging or not. There are many kinds of births that occur in our lives which cause us discomfort. Whenever we are entering something important and new; a new school, a new job, a new living situation, a new relationship, etc. We feel challenged to make it all work well, create a good impression and find our ground. There is no way to skip over the newness and lack of knowing in a birth circumstance. Any new beginning in our life will inevitably bring uncertainty, and a feeling of groundlessness.

Since most of us like to know who we are and what we are doing, this experience of groundlessness can be extremely uncomfortable and daunting for those of us who resist change. It can be so daunting for some that we freeze and do not make the changes we need to make, but remain frozen in doubt; which is another way of avoiding the suffering of birth.

One useful exercise is to examine where we fall on the scale of 'change adoption'. Some of us are extremely resistant to change while others are nervous if things are not constantly changing. Nevertheless, the truth of birth is that it can be very painful, and disorienting. Avoiding the suffering we might begin to try and fit ourselves into a situation that may not work, instead of feeling our discomfort, we start trying to manage it. This leads to difficult problems in the long run.

For example, all new relationships go through some kind of birth and if they are meaningful and potentially fulfill the answer to our loneliness, then we often don't listen to our emotions and begin suppressing the signals of our discontent. This is where we begin to establish habits disabling to the relationship in the long run. Learning to feel our discomfort fully in a birth is compassionate because it means we are not lying. We are not leaving ourselves out of the equation and presenting something untrue that in the long can ruin our new found friendship.

Old Age

I recently saw a headline that read 'Anti Aging Market is Determined to Reach US\$ 271.0 Billion by 2024.'^[2] That is almost enough said, world wide, we invest so much in resisting the truth of aging. The pro-youth, pro-diet, pro-health culture we are all subjected to robs us of the ability to make friends with what could be a dignified and inevitable aging process. This avoidance can be minor or extend to the extent of making ourselves foolish in our attempts to stay young.

Unfortunately, in our youth, it is rare to recognize that we will be old one day – and it sneaks up on us. Standing in front of the magnifying mirror counting gray hairs, or fighting the inevitable spread of our midriff after 40 is condoned and common in our culture. I personally have colored my hair my whole life and as the gray grows in, I can feel despair. What is it that scares us about aging? Is that it is a front door to death? Is it about appearances and attachment to the body? What lengths will we go to avoid aging? These are compassion-based inquiries in which to kindly query ourselves with --- in order to discern whether we are causing ourselves unnecessary suffering by avoiding the aging process.

Instead we could launch ourselves on a path of learning to age with dignity; feeling into the pain and impermanence of losing our youth, and recognizing that with age comes wisdom, but only if we embrace the process with nonjudgmental awareness and feel the suffering directly and fully.

In my travels and teaching, I meet a lot of aging boomers who have developed quite a sense of humor towards old age and they inspire me. Laughing at oneself and being light hearted with others who are aging is compassionate practice too. Learning to hold the humor with the pain is a fine art, so that we are not denying the suffering and also not being ruled by it as well.

Sickness

Sickness is a very real unavoidable truth of suffering when we live in a human form; no matter how much health consciousness we employ and practice, people get sick for all kinds of reasons. I, like many of my demographic; white, boomer, hetero and strongly influenced by middle class new age values, have held a wrong view for many years that sickness was due to poor choices and bad behavior, as opposed to factors completely outside of someone's control.

So many people can become convinced that physical sickness is a reflection of an individual's choices. I pose here that is a 'privileged' perspective. Even though, behavior and lifestyle do have an effect on one's health, nobody chooses to be sick. When we lead with a causal-oriented belief towards people suffering, judging people for their poor health and assuming it is in their control, we lack compassion. In some ways, we are separating ourselves from them, trying to convince ourselves that sickness could simply be avoided by them- and thus we can avoid it as well.

But sickness comes along with being human, and our willingness to feel it fully and completely as it is happening in ourselves and feel empathically

into it when it arises for others -- is a deep compassion-based practice. There is probably someone in your life right now who is suffering due to illness and therefore we are continually offered material with which to grow our hearts.

Death

“Death comes without warning. This body will be a corpse” is a Buddhist chant given to initiates who are practicing to prepare for their death. Buddhism offers very comprehensive teachings on death and what occurs after death, and elaboration on rebirth and how we land in our next incarnation. I’m not realized enough to know if any of this is true. These teachings are extensive and esoteric. What I do know is that these teachings on death can be identified in our moment to moment deaths in everyday life.

For example, when a relationship ends, when we end a job, or a long meaningful trip, or if and when we retire. Basically whenever one phase of life is over and we’re moving on to the next; death is part of every moment of our existence if we pay close and reverent attention.

Mostly we do not pay attention and actively avoid acknowledging the millions of mini-deaths which occur in our daily life moment to moment. For some of us it is even difficult to say goodbye properly. We like to slip out and move on -- ignoring the inevitability of death and work to never feel it. Thus we cheat ourselves and end up creating more suffering out of being incomplete. Thus reinforcing fearful and cowardly behavior to not meet our inevitable endings.

Another materialistic game we play with Buddhist teachings is... ‘In my next life I’m going to... (fill in the gap) play an instrument, speak 10 languages, choose rich, kind and loving parents, be more available to my children, etc. etc. etc. This is a fun fantasy and can become a way of avoiding the most basic of Buddhist teachings which is that of impermanence.

The path of bringing compassion-centered practices into our lives is about overcoming our search for pleasure and and encountering the truth of impermanence directly. There is a famous Buddhist slogan: “*Because everything is impermanent, everything is always subject to suffering.*”^[3]

If we are fearless enough to feel our deaths in every moment, then we will discover the luminous transitions that death has to offer. We learn to die with dignity. Perhaps more importantly and accurately we learn to live with the truth of death in a very wise way. Death is the great opportunity in

*Buddhism to realize our potency of heart, meaning we completely wake up.
Every death offers us that opportunity!*

Birth, old age, sickness and death are the truth of everyday life and full of suffering. Relating directly and fully to these experiences as they arise is the ultimate compassion-based practice we can do, because there is no moment that is not an opportunity. Also feeling our suffering as it is makes us honest and wise. We learn the discernment of differentiating between the truth of suffering and the suffering that we are creating in avoiding the truth of suffering. Life offers us endless possibilities to open our heart.

I aspire to be brave enough to feel the truth of suffering and strengthen my trust that in our most vulnerable moments is where we find our greatest strength.

Yours in Compassionate Presence,
Melissa Moore

References

Goleman, Richardson, (2017) *Altered Traits*. New York, New York: Avery.
Trungpa, Chogyam, (2013) *The Path of Individual Liberation, The Profound Treasury*; compiled by Judith L. Leif. Boston Massachusetts. Shambhala.

[1] 'fully and completely' is a redundant phrase used by Chogyam Trungpa, who is a founding inspiration behind the Contemplative psychology offered by Karuna Training.

[2] Marketwatch, March 4, 2019

[3] Trungpa, Chogyam, 1939 – 1987. *The Path of Individual Liberation, The Profound Treasury*; compiled by Judith L. Leif. (2013) p.444, Boston, Massachusetts. Shambhala.