

Self-Care and Self-Compassion **By Melissa Moore**

Dear Karuna Training Community,

This summer 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 about our second topic, which was explored in our last online interactive session: Karuna Live....

The Karuna Approach to Self-Care and Self-Compassion

In our current market-based, materialistic worldview, self-care and self-compassion are mostly approached in a materialistic fashion—so much so that we don't see how much aggression we are activating toward ourselves in the name of self-care. In common parlance, “self-care” can become a camouflaged attack on ourselves, changing ourselves so that we more closely fit our ideal. The messaging can become an attack for the female body especially. We have to question the underlying messaging that is pretty constant on-line and in the media. Most self-care methodologies approach our bodies, our way of being and our mindfulness or capacity to be present as something in ourselves we have to fix, improve or perhaps even just tolerate.

Think about the messaging we receive daily on how we are not okay unless we buy this or do that. For example, I'm 62 and "they" know it (by “they” I mean the advertising algorithms that control the cyber space of our existence). Thus I'm barraged with “get younger” and “look half your age” advertising. Chief among them is a product called 'Crepe Away'. These are such ceaseless advertisements that it has caused me to worry about my aging skin, so much so that one day I found the organic version (as who knows what's in the chemical, animal tested product? One cringes to imagine). Of course, using a 'crepe away' lotion is another added step in my grooming ritual every day. So that when I do apply it, I notice I'm using my organic crepe away product on my skin in a trepidatious manner.

I have to approach my body as problematic because this is the remedy and therefore I have to look for the problem spots - so it invites me to look at myself critically.

This little example is a microcosm of what is meant by taking a materialistic approach to one's self-care. This approach to self-care is using self-care to *suppress* the truth of our suffering—in this case, the truth of aging. We cannot help but come at ourselves with a wishful projection of who we could be if we looked younger; so this approach objectifies our bodies and minds as something to improve, something to fix. I find there is no kindness in this approach for myself, for the process and dignity of aging, for the female body or for the whole mechanism that is pushing such products making money off of feminine insecurities.

Decoupling Self-Care from Self-Criticism

It's common and it's not a sin to objectify ourselves as something to improve, but that is far from being kind to ourselves or practicing true 'self-care'. There are other more contemplative approaches to self-care, where we are involved in making friends with ourselves as we are.

Making friends with ourselves is equivalent to living a path of defining our own humanity. This is something like what Michele Obama calls "becoming" - always on the journey, never trying to reach a solid idea of who and what we should be.

“For me, becoming isn't about arriving somewhere or achieving a certain aim. I see it instead as forward motion, a means of evolving, a way to reach continuously toward a better self. The journey doesn't end.” - Michelle Obama

This continuous journey points to a path, a spiritual path that unfolds moment to moment, a dance of working with our circumstances and our social conditioning, meeting our experience and everyone involved with it openly and gracefully. This grace really has to do with our ability to be ourselves as we are, no matter who or what we are, with genuine loving kindness. To be ourselves as we are, as opposed to trying to improve or change ourselves, is the ultimate way to care and love ourselves.

Developing Maitri is a Path of Self-Care

In Karuna Training we talk about this as *Maitri*. Maitri is sanskrit word meaning loving kindness toward ourselves and others. In Karuna our main journey is developing maitri, a path that draws on traditional teachings of Mahayana Buddhism.

Practicing Maitri is equivalent to living a life of genuine self-care. This requires we take ourselves as we are with full acceptance and love.

Practicing Maitri requires we make friends with the whole of ourselves, including cultivating compassion for the suffering side of ourselves, the wretched side of ourselves, what we may still hold ourselves hostage over - our weight, our anger, or our forgetfulness, our history, our fears and ignorance. We accept it all as human, as part of our path, as what has made us vulnerable.

In this process of developing Maitri we work to accept, befriend and love ourselves, those we have harmed and all those who have harmed us. We are growing our heart to have compassion for the whole lot. In this light, self-care suddenly elevates from an aggressive project of self-improvement into a path that has to do with growing the potency of our heart.

Maitri Vs Self-Compassion

There is a trend currently in the West to turn the tenets and profound teachings of the Mahayana Buddhadharma into a commodity. This goes along with the current mindfulness movement, and includes a current trend to commodify compassion training.

Dr. Julia Stenzal from the Religious Studies Dept. of McGill University in Montreal, Canada, questions the role and efficacy of the current popular movement of compassion trainings found on the market today. She calls these programs secular trainings.

Stenzal's research contrasts what she considers this secular training to the traditional training of Buddhism. She states:

“Secularized compassion training follows in the footsteps of its slightly older forerunner, mindfulness. Both fields represent an integration, or hybridization, of Buddhist-based contemplative practices with contemporary research and application. While the notion of mindfulness has entered mainstream American culture, its modern re-interpretations and mis-interpretations have aroused the critique of Buddhist scholars and teachers for their reductionist approach to Buddhist traditions (Sharf 2015, Wilson 2014)”

This questioning of Buddhist scholars has particularly come into play around the newly coined western topic of 'self-compassion'. Stenzal says:

“ Self-compassion was developed by Psychologist Kristin Neff in 2003, who defines self-compassion as compassion directed inward towards the self. She explains that self-compassion consists of three principal components: [1] being kind and non-judgmental towards the self rather than being self-critical, [2] being mindful, which involves holding painful feelings in mindful awareness rather than over-identifying with them, and [3] seeing one's suffering as part of the human condition rather than as isolating. Self-compassion is not a Buddhist teaching. Śāntideva, in the ... Bodhicaryāvatāra is adamant in seeing any type of concern for oneself as (sowing) seeds for future suffering, saying, 'All the misery the world contains has come through wanting happiness for oneself.' (BCA 8,129)¹.”

¹ Julia C. Stenzel; School of Religious Studies; McGill University, Montreal, CA; Conference: “Mass Meditation: Practices and Discourses in Contemporary Global Buddhisms,” Institute of Buddhist Studies, Berkeley, California 1 October 6th, 2017

Karuna Training, like these critiqued self-compassion programs, has uncoupled itself from the calling itself a 'spiritual path'; we consider ourselves a secular training; however in Karuna, the curriculum stays very allegiant to traditional Mahayana teachings.

In Karuna training we are centered on selflessness (space) and therefore we do not use the word 'self-compassion' because we find it is misleading to the real definition of compassion which arises naturally when we are selfless or 'egoless'. However, in Karuna training, we have utilized the skillful guided 'self-compassion' exercises of Kristin Neff, being careful to speak of these practices as a means of developing 'Maitri' rather than the language of self-compassion. Thus emphasizing that compassion, as understood from a Buddhist perspective arises naturally from this egoless place we all possess.

The heart of Karuna training is in a practice called Maitri Space Awareness, which is an embodied practice of working with emptiness (space), or unbound openness and emotions. To work with space or openness, or to trust in this kind of vulnerability, we need a lot of Maitri; loving kindness toward ourselves. We take a very traditional and ancient approach to self love from the perspective of traditional Mahayana Buddhism and emphasize developing maitri as a precursor to developing compassion.

Maitri means accepting the whole of who we are, as we are. Making friends with our fangs, the parts of ourselves we want to get rid of, and our ugly emotions in a way that is not suppressing them and not acting them out. Maitri means we learn to feel into what is driving unconscious behaviors and usually we find it is the lack of friendliness towards ourselves.

The Karuna approach to self-care is drawn from the ancient selfless approach of the Mahayana: we care for ourselves when we genuinely make friends with ourselves as we are. Maitri towards ourselves is the stepping stone to making friends with others and developing true compassion, the willingness to exchange ourselves with others, and to feel the truth of suffering in the world.

We train in Karuna to take care of ourselves in a way that isn't consumed with ourselves, but allows us to offer ourselves genuinely to others.
