

The Power of Compassion

We have just got home after running a five day retreat at the fabulous Trigonos Retreat Centre in North Wales. We had a wonderful time with a truly beautiful group of people. As the days flew by, a theme of cultivating compassion for ourselves and others seemed to emerge organically and I really felt the benefits of this spiritual practice. So in this month's message, I would love to share with you one or two insights into the power of compassion.

First of all, we need to have some idea of what compassion means. Compassion is basically the art of tuning into suffering without drowning in it, and simultaneously vowing to do something to alleviate that suffering.

The best way to begin to cultivate compassion for all living beings, including our own worst enemies, is to begin by being as compassionate as we can to our own suffering self. Some individuals are so cut off from universal love and compassion, that at first, they really do not know what it means to be kind and compassionate to themselves.

Some people may also believe that compassion is a type of weakness, or that compassion is self-indulgent. No! Egoic self-pity is weak and self-indulgent, but genuine compassion is always strong and ultimately selfless. In fact, we cannot be genuinely compassionate until we have done enough self-healing to be able to stay strong and centred in love and peace when everyone around us is either fearful or angry, because fear, anger and compassion just do not mix.

One guided meditation that Jacky led on our retreat really helped participants to tune into the healing energy of compassion. Jacky guided us to imagine that we were sitting serenely in our favourite beauty spot, or most treasured location. She then guided us to invite a 'compassionate being' to be with us in our favourite place. She told us that this compassionate being could be a really kind relative from our childhood, a spiritual master such as Jesus or Buddha, or even an animal.

Of course, whomever we choose as our 'compassionate being', they really just represent the core part of us who is always totally loving and compassionate to ourselves and others! But the practice of visualising, or feeling, a compassionate being bathing us in their love and light can trigger deep compassion for ourselves in our own hearts and minds. This in turn can have a powerful impact on our own mental, emotional and physical well-being, as the energy of compassion soothes every aspect of our system. I can vouch for this, because I noticed that I felt really relaxed and positive after participating in Jacky's self-compassion meditations during our retreat.

After our retreat, I was so impressed with the impact that cultivating compassion had had on all of us, that I bought a book by the Buddhist author Thupten Jinpa entitled 'A Fearless Heart: Why Compassion is the Key to Greater Wellbeing'. In this easy to read book, Thupten Jinpa provides a lot of new scientific evidence on the ways in which cultivating compassion for ourselves and others can benefit our long term health and well-being. One finding of note was that those who are more compassionate seem better able to take in and thus

benefit from the support of others. So cultivating compassion is clearly good for our own wellbeing, but can it also help our troubled society? I strongly believe that it can.

In recent months, I have been concerned about the increasing levels of anger, and even vengefulness, in relation to the political scene in both the UK and the US. I understand why those who feel poor or disempowered in our unequal society may feel a lot of anger towards the rich and powerful, but I know that anger and hatred never solve a single problem in our troubled world.

I read a really interesting online blog recently by an American commentator, Arthur Brooks, who was worried about the rising level of contempt for politicians of all kinds in American society. He noticed that increasingly, Americans saw their political opponents as worthless human beings. He then asked the Dalai Lama what he could do when he noticed that he was feeling contempt for a politician, and His Holiness told him to practise 'warm heartedness'. In other words, if we pause and send heartfelt good wishes to our 'worst enemies' we can transform our own minds and even have an impact on collective consciousness.

I have been trying to practise this for some time now. For example, whenever I hear of another tragic terrorist attack, I not only hold love and light on behalf of all victims and their families, I also include in that unconditional love and light all the perpetrators of these atrocities.

I do not in any way condone the barbarous actions of mass murderers, but I see them as totally insane, rather than evil. I believe that anyone carrying out some kind of violent attack on other human beings must be suffering from a tremendous amount of emotional pain and mental disturbance to do something so unnatural, and so I cultivate compassion for the perpetrators as well as the victims of all kinds of violence in our world.

I have been practising this for some time now – but only after practising releasing all my own fears about the world for many years - and the more I have done it, the easier it has become. I have also noticed that cultivating compassion for terrorists seems to lessen my fear and anger when these ghastly attacks keep happening. In fact, I now find that I can stay just a little more centred and peaceful in the midst of all the collective fear and anger that arises when our society feels under any kind of attack.

My intention is that in a really, really small way, I contribute to the long term creation of a more peaceful world, rather than simply following the collective tendency to get more and more angry or fearful with each new atrocity. If you are shocked at the very idea of extending love to a suicide bomber - and I fully understand where you are coming from - please just take a few moments after you finish reading this message to contemplate on this quote from His Holiness the Dalai Lama:

I defeat my enemies when I make them my friends.

Peggy Jane Foster
July 2017