

Seven Factors of Compassion (1 of 5)

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mindfulness, investigation, discernment, compassion fatigue, suffering, light, heavy, duty, fear, ego

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I am returning to the topic of compassion this week. I will be building on the series, Aspects of Compassion, from three weeks ago.

Last week, the topic was different ways of being aware. This is important for compassion because if we only have one way to be aware, that mode of awareness might not be the best and healthiest way for us to be present for the suffering in ourselves and others. For example, someone might be mostly aware through their feelings. If the vehicle of feelings is the only way they know how to be aware, some of the suffering in the world might feel too much for them. Their own suffering might feel too much.

It's important to feel, but it's also important to find an awareness that allows us to be present for something where we're not weighed down by what the experience is. For instance, someone who feels a lot might be able to shift slightly into an observing mode, observing from a little bit of distance maybe. Or they might have a clear mental recognition of what's happening rather than mostly an awareness of feelings. The feelings are still there, but coming into the mode of recognition they know, "Oh, this is pain, this is someone's sadness," and then it might be easier to be present for it and to find a light touch with it.

Being present in this way has a certain degree of ease or lightness in the awareness itself. The lightness, ease, or calmness around how we're aware can then make room for compassion to arise rather than distress, fear, or alarm. So the mode in which we're aware can affect how we have compassion.

Also, the mode in which we're aware and relate to things can affect how we enact compassion. Our mode of awareness can affect how we live from compassion such that the compassion is not so heavy, or comes from a sense of duty, or is mixed up with fear or ego.

This week, I offer what I'm calling the seven factors of compassion. They are similar to the common Buddhist list of the Seven Factors of Awakening. The seven factors of compassion are the mindfulness factor of compassion, the investigation factor of compassion, the effort factor of compassion, the joy factor of compassion, the tranquility factor of compassion, the concentration factor of compassion, and the equanimity factor of compassion.

It is lovely that when we live from compassion, the Seven Factors of Awakening follow along. Coming from a compassionate place, responding to things compassionately, brings with it mindfulness. Mindfulness comes along without really having to work at it.

When people only practice mindfulness, there are times when it kind of works. They feel like they are being mindful: "Okay, I've drifted off. I have to come back. I have to do it again." But when compassion is at the forefront, there's a way in which mindfulness can follow effortlessly. It's not like we have to work at being mindful. It is also the same with the other factors of compassion.

I would like to use the example of a school playground. Let's say you're visiting a playground and a 5 or 6-year-old child is having fun playing on the playground. The child, who is wearing shorts, trips, and her knee scrapes against the asphalt. Her knee is dirty with bits of gravel. She's quite stunned and shocked. She was having so much fun, and now suddenly, she's confused, upset, and in pain. This is a relatively common schoolyard injury.

Next, she comes running to you. You feel her distress and see that she has a wound. You have experienced this common playground injury yourself. You know that she is going to be fine. What she needs is someone who will care for her and be present in a calm way.

As she calms down, you decide with compassion and care to clean her wound of the grit. Touching the wound, even with a flow of water, hurts her, so you get a soft, moist cotton ball and very lightly tap the wound to pick out the dirt. You don't want to hurt her. You care about her and want to settle her. You don't want to agitate her.

There is love and concern to do this as carefully as possible, and you bring your attention to that. You very carefully pay attention to see what her response is when we gently touch the wound so that you can quickly pull back if it stings her too much. You are very careful about how quickly you do it and the amount of pressure you put on the wound. There's a lot of attention, and what's driving that attention is compassion, the care for the child.

What follows in the wake of that care is a lot of mindfulness, a lot of attention – to really be present, to take in the situation. No one needs to tell you, “Be aware, pay attention, be mindful, come back to the present moment.” That just follows along with your deep motivation to care for her and be attentive in a way that does not cause more pain.

Not only is there a lot of awareness and attention, but there is also what in Buddhism is called investigation, which is to be very discerning about what causes more pain and what causes less pain. What supports her and what doesn't support her. What tone of voice to use and what not to use, taking in cues from her as you are speaking. There's a lot of care not only in being present, but also in making distinctions between what is useful here and what is not useful. And the compassion takes the lead.

This consideration of what's going to hurt her more and what's going to hurt her less is somewhat effortless. It's obvious that if you want to carefully care for her wound – clean and bandage it – then of course, you're going to pay attention to how you're doing it so that it causes her the least amount of pain and distress. You're tuning in to all these factors of what's useful and not useful. And what's in the lead here is the compassion.

So one way to develop mindfulness is to be compassionate. One way to be compassionate is to be mindful – to develop our capacity to be aware in a light, calm, and open way so that the tenderness and warmth of our hearts have room to be there. When we're aware in a heavy or strong way, or if there is also anger, the anger doesn't give much room. If we're full of desire or fear, there's not much room for anything else to arise in the field of awareness.

If we can learn the art of having a light touch – an easeful mindfulness – then even with fear, anger, or distress there, we might find that there's a little more space to have care, love, compassion, and kindness for the difficulties others have and the distress we may have. Then once compassion is there, we let that be in the forefront – to act on that compassion, to live that way – but maybe not in a way that everyone knows we're being compassionate. That might be a little too much for some people.

As you bring care and kindness to people and events, can you notice the easeful way in which you are mindful? Can you notice the obvious, matter-of-fact way in which you're investigating – making distinctions between what supports the situation and what doesn't, what's helpful and what's not helpful? This compassion is wise.

When we act on compassion or live motivated by it, compassion brings along a lot of different factors that support it, without even sometimes needing to think about it. This is provided we don't get locked in with the compassion; or become alarmed, fearful, or dutiful; or the compassion doesn't become heavy. When there's a lot of suffering in the world, we might feel obligated: “I have to be heavy. I have to be serious. My compassion has to be strong now.”

The paradox is that the best form of compassion is not strong or heavy but rather a light compassion. It's calm compassion. It's compassion that has lots of room for things, including lots of room for yourself. That kind of compassion brings along attentiveness, mindfulness, and discernment about what's helpful and not helpful. Discernment is looking and seeing, “What here is helpful.”

All of that is with a light touch, which is sustainable for compassion over a long time. One of the things we're looking for in compassion is sustainable compassion. A compassion that is heavy, strong, tight, or connected with our other challenges may become “compassion fatigue.” We may become exhausted very quickly. But that is not so with this light compassion. Maybe think of living a life of compassion as more like a marathon than a sprint. In a marathon, you also start with a light run.

So, the seven factors of compassion that follow along or are built on compassion. Today I mentioned two factors: mindfulness, and discernment or investigation. As you go about today, you might try to have a light touch with your awareness and have a light compassion, care, love, or kindness that allows room for awareness of what is happening in this field of compassion. Maybe you will start seeing how mindfulness can follow compassion, how discernment can follow compassion, and see how those work together. You may find it's easier to be mindful if it's guided by compassion rather than out of a sense that mindfulness is good for you. Thank you.