

Sharon Salzberg
Week 2, *Real Happiness at Work*
February 10th, 2014
“Compassion & Resilience”

This week we're going to discuss two companion qualities, that is: compassion and resilience. Compassion is defined in Buddhist psychology as the trembling or the quivering of our hearts in response to seeing pain or suffering. It's the movement towards a painful or difficult or challenging situation—to see if we can be of help. Not that we know that we'll be of help and not that we insist on being of help, but to see if we can be of help. The trembling or the quivering of our hearts in response to seeing pain or suffering, and the movement towards it to see if we can be of help.

So compassion is usually thought of as, first, based on seeing suffering as suffering; and that means re-interpreting our own minds and re-interpreting our world. If we see our own anger and fear and jealousy and greed, rather than calling those states bad and wrong and terrible—and thinking that we're weak or terrible people for having them—we see them as states of suffering. And so the response is this movement of the heart; rather than hatred or condemnation of parts of ourselves that we actually can't keep from arising. The idea isn't that we then get weak and we let ourselves just be taken over by these states, but it's actually exploring compassion as a power. Rather than seeing it as submission, as necessarily giving in to our own difficult states or to somebody else and their own difficult behavior—to see that there's strength in compassion, that there's a kind of broader picture that is available to us when we're feeling compassion.

When we're lost in certain reactive states, like anger—and this is different than simply feeling anger—this is being lost in anger. When we're lost in anger and especially when it's strong enough to drive us to action, then what happens actually is that we're lost in tunnel vision. Anger has that power of fixation. It has that nature, that texture. If you think about the last time you were really, really angry at yourself—I don't know how long ago that might have been, but bring it back. Let it fill you right now. What's it like? What's happening in your body? What's the nature of the mood?

Or look at the way it's affecting you. When you're really into that anger at yourself and you're going over and over that time this morning when you said that really stupid thing, perhaps, are you also thinking, “Well, you know, I said that stupid thing and I did five good things as well”? Unlikely. Those five good things, they've been wiped out by the fixating power of the anger. We just collapse. Our whole sense of who we are, and all that we will ever be, collapses into that stupid thing we said this morning.

So by trying to engender a sense of compassion, it means loosening the grip of that anger. It doesn't mean that you get all stupid. You know, like, you're not insisting, “Oh, wasn't

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that a brilliant and witty thing I said this morning at that meeting.” Maybe it was rather stupid and there are consequences for that, but that kind of solitary identification—
“That’s all that I am. That’s all that I will ever be”—that’s just destructive because then, first of all, we don’t have the energy to move on in a better way, and we don’t see the various options that are available to us for action.

So we say that we need to explore the nature of compassion and its strength—the fact that it’s a resource for us. It’s not going to make us submissive, passive, complacent, unable to take a stand, unable to improve ourselves, unable to draw boundaries. It’s not that at all.

And it’s a very complex issue, which brings us also to the nature of resilience. These days the common phrase is “compassion fatigue.” And in Asia it’s, like, I’ve been at presentations with the Dalai Lama where scientists have been presenting their research on meditation and the phrase “compassion fatigue” has come up, which he finds extremely amusing. And one of his translators actually suggested that perhaps instead of calling it “compassion fatigue” it be called “empathy fatigue,” because there is a distinction that one can make between empathy and compassion. Empathy being that resonance clearly with someone’s, let’s say, painful situation. It’s not imagining, “I know exactly what you must be feeling,” but it is a kind of resonance, you know? Especially when we have been mindful enough to open to our own painful experiences, then we have that kind of body memory.

And we can look at someone else going through perhaps something similar, and it’s almost this vibrational sense of like, “Oh, I can imagine what it might well be like for you because I remember when I was fired,” or “when I was overlooked,” or when this happened or that happened. Right? So we have that moment of empathy where we do tune into someone’s pain. And following that, there are many possibilities of how we’re going to respond or react. Maybe we sense someone’s pain and we’re frightened by that, and we think, “I’ll just run away.” Or we feel exhausted by that and we feel, “I can’t deal with this.” Or we blame someone for their situation, you know, “I gave you perfectly good advice a year-and-a-half ago about how you should live and then this wouldn’t have happened.” Right? Or we get into that funny kind of place of wanting to control, wanting to master it, like, “I know exactly what you need to do and here’s your list” and, you know, “If you do this by Tuesday, you can do that by Thursday.” And we feel like, “Oh, I’ve got to make the pain go away. I’ve got to be in charge in some way.”

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Or we can have a compassionate response and so the compassion—or the compassionate response—is one of many possibilities of how we will respond to that moment of genuine empathy. So it's essential to have empathy. Without that, you know, we're not going to connect to others in a really full-on way. It's important to develop the ability to have empathy, which will begin by being mindful enough of our own painful situations so that we can feel into the state of others.

So we say, in terms of empathy and compassion: empathy is essential, but it's not sufficient. Right? There's both the moment of empathy and then there's the way we respond to it. So that is the training in compassion, and this, too, is considered a trainable element. And, if anything, mindfulness or concentration are considered trainings; well, that somehow seems more acceptable. It seems more conventional to us. But the idea that compassion can be trained is bizarre. I don't know if we think of it as, perhaps, cold or mechanistic, but, in fact, compassion can be trained because compassion also rests on how we pay attention. And that will be—we know attention can be trained.

And if we pay attention in a different way, we will find that compassion is like an emergent property. And that will lead to resilience. That will really allow the place of resilience to happen. First, because resilience is based on compassion for ourselves as well as compassion for others; and because resilience is born out of feeling that empathy, but not having some of those other reactions—feeling “I must fix it. I have to be the one. Here's the time-table,” or helpless, hopeless, overcome, exhausted.

Compassion, itself, is considered to have a kind of energy, a sense of sufficiency to it. It's like connecting to something bigger and so there's a lifting up of our spirits, even though we're dealing with some—dealing perhaps with some very difficult pain, our own or someone else's. And so that's why, from a certain point of view, compassion fatigue makes no sense because it's not a quality that leads itself to fatigue. But all those qualities that seem like compassion, but are not, are what lead to fatigue or burnout.

So there's this wonderful example I had riding in a taxi in New York City that I think of often when I think of resilience. So it was one of those, those of you in New York City know that when taxis are changing shift, right at that time often they will stop; they will drive up next to you and ask where you're going, because if your destination is close to where they need to drop off the taxi, then sometimes they're willing to take you as their last fare. So I was standing outside getting a taxi once, right at that shift-change time. I was on my way to hear Thich Nhat Hanh give a speech somewhat further uptown than

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where I was. And a taxi did just that: he was already off duty, but he pulled over, asked where I was going, I told him, and he said, “Okay, get in.”

So I got in the cab and we ended up being caught in the most incredible, awful, terrible traffic. I’d never seen anything like it. And we were just crawling along. So I felt really bad. First thing I thought was, “I’ll never make it to Thich Nhat Hanh. Okay. Let go of that.” But then I felt really bad for him, for the taxi driver. I wasn’t sure if he would get fined for turning in a taxi late—what the situation was. And I said to him finally, “I am so sorry. I’m so sorry. You were nice enough to stop for me, even though your shift was actually over; and I’ve never seen traffic like this. It’s just unbearable. I’m so sorry.” And he said to me, “Oh, madam, traffic is not your fault.” And then he said, “Nor is it mine.”

And at first I thought, “Whoa, I don’t need to get to Thich Nhat Hanh. I have an enlightened cab driver,” and then I thought, “Wow, look at that.” I especially liked the “nor is it mine.” Because I thought, “How many times a day is he blamed for something that is actually not his fault?” And how easy it is to incorporate that and take that to heart, and really judge yourself and really condemn yourself. And to just to be able to let it go, that’s resiliency, right? It’s, like, there’s a difficult situation: I’m dealing with it, but I’m not becoming it. I’m not allowing it to overtake me. So, “Madam, traffic is not your fault, nor is it mine,” has been like a wonderful reminder for me and I made it to Thich Nhat Hanh with ten seconds to spare.

So one of the ways we cultivate compassion—which will lead to resiliency—is through meditating on loving kindness. It’s the ability to include rather than exclude; to think of ourselves and think of others with a quality of kindness. Rather than taking this opportunity once again to list everybody’s faults, let’s just have that energy of caring as we extend it through the meditation. So let’s sit together now.

You can sit comfortably. Again close your eyes or not, however you feel most at ease.

And this time, instead of resting our attention on the feeling of the breath as that centering point, as home base, we’re going to rest our attention on the silent repetition of certain phrases.

That’s the way we are changing our attention—is through those phrases.

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The phrases need to be simple so that they can be offered to ourselves and to others. General, common phrases, beginning with ourselves, are things like, “May I be safe, be happy, be peaceful.”

You can find three or four phrases that make sense to you. This is an exercise in generosity. This is gift giving. We’re giving ourselves, and then others, this quality of attention.

May I be safe, be happy, be peaceful.

You don’t have to force any kind of feeling or emotion. The power of the practice comes in the complete, wholehearted gathering of our attention behind one phrase at a time.

Think of somebody who embodies the force of loving-kindness for you, someone who’s helped you. Maybe they’ve helped you directly, they’ve helped pick you up when you’ve fallen down. Or maybe you’ve never met them, but they’ve inspired you from afar. The texts say this is the one whom when you think of them you smile. So is there someone—adult, child, pet—who makes you smile? If so, you can bring them here, get an image of them, say their name to yourself, get a feeling for their presence and offer the phrases of loving-kindness to them: may you be safe, be happy, be peaceful.

And then a friend—the first friend who comes to mind.

A colleague, perhaps one whom you don’t know very well.

And we’ll just close with all beings, everywhere. Every form of life. All people, all creatures, all those in existence. May all beings be safe, be happy, be peaceful.

And when you feel ready, you can open your eyes; and see if you can bring some of this quality of attention into your day and into your week.