

Devin Berry

*Metta and Karuna: Two Heart Practices to Cultivate in Meditation and Daily Life*

Week Three: “Compassion: Holding Others in Our Hearts”

December 17, 2022



Welcome back, everyone. In this session, I'll offer some brief reflections on holding others in our heart and compassion. At the end, I'll invite you to do a brief compassion practice with me. The invitation in this session is to explore how to begin to include others we meet or others that we don't know or perhaps even have a little charge with into our circles of compassion, widening our circles of compassion. Our shared sense of humanity and felt sense of each other allows us to send empathy and to sense love and generosity and to be able to extend that beyond our immediate circles of friends and family.

Some years ago, I had an opportunity to lead a program for 5- to 8-year-olds and offer informal lessons on empathy and compassion and gratitude, all in an effort to mitigate some of the fighting and hurt feelings that were going around in the classroom and on the playground in regards to sharing space and playing with toys and games and spending time with each other. At the beginning of the first week of that experiment, I had the kids write and talk about the experience of joy and happiness and talk about the experience of empathy and compassion in relation to each other. I was asking them to look at how to hold each other in the heart.

During the second week of this experiment, what I noticed was that more of the children were holding hands. Also, I had asked them to let me know if and when empathy and compassion ever seemed like it came to mind or to fruition. A few kids would remember, and they would run up to me and tell me how they felt when someone didn't have cookies in their lunch, or they would tell me when someone fell from the play structure or lost in a game or someone whose parent came to pick them up late. One of my favorite stories was a little one that ran up to tell me how they felt for this other little boy because he had four moms. One of them was named Jenna, and the others, the exes. In all of these situations, the kids wanted to know how they could help, or they had ideas of how they could support each other. They did all this by deep listening and deep feeling.

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I want to tell you something that I got back from that first week’s writing lesson. This is what one of the kids said: “If I win first place and somebody else gets second place, I’m happy for them.” Another kid said, “When I put myself in his shoes, that’s empathy. I get to feel what it’s like to have cooties, and I know he really does just want to be friends, so I’m willing to have cooties once.” Sometimes we have mixed motives.

The capacity to learn and hold each other in the heart and to have compassion can be directly cultivated and directly trained. It’s innate and naturally arising in our meditation practice, and we can water the seeds and watch them bloom over time. At the same time, there’s a shift of identity that happens from that me in first place being happy for you in second place, where the concern is me and what I need and how I’m doing, or that opening our hearts to the poor child with cooties by really putting ourselves in their shoes and sensing what that must be like to awakening together, to a sense of belonging, belonging to each other, cultivating a collaborative spirit, and helping, rooting for each other, holding each other through the joys and the sorrows, making our world a little bit smaller and connected by widening these circles of compassion.

Again, compassion training can begin with presence, letting ourselves recognize and be touched by the pain, ours and another’s, and responding with a heartfelt presence. I sometimes think of it as just breathing in and breathing out: that we breathe in and we let in this realness and rawness, and we breathe out the rawness of what’s here and we offer our care and our tenderness. There’s a great letting go and relief when we’re able to relinquish much of what we have held onto, much of what we’ve grasped tightly through our own conditioning and habits and patterns. This is what binds the heart. This is what binds the mind.

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At times we may feel overrun or overwhelmed by the pain of others, by the suffering of others, feeling a little bit thin skinned even, and we may feel that the vulnerability is too much. It's wise, of course, to be discerning and appropriate and use the appropriate grounding and resources that we need, perhaps at times turning our attention to something that's neutral in order to breathe in that moment, to ground and find space. And sometimes we underestimate our capacity and our resources. If we perceive ourselves as simply carrying all of the world's suffering, then of course there's not going to be the space needed to hold it all. But imagining ourselves in another's shoes as a part of a universe that is breathing in and out and expanding and contracting, we can be in the flow in the great spaciousness, and we can be the sky holding up all of the weather patterns and not just the dark clouds. From this place, we can experience a heart ready for anything, ready for action.

I'm going to read a quote by [American author and civil rights leader] Howard Thurman. “In the stillness of the quiet, if we listen, we can hear the whisper of the heart giving strength to weakness, courage to fear, hope to despair.”

I want to end this session by doing a little practice exploring the practice of widening our circles of compassion. This practice of bringing our hearts' presence to another can be done in a formal sitting. You can sit and bring to mind people that you care about and begin to get a sense in a very close and intimate way of what they might be living with or what they might be going through and open your hearts to their experience as best you can in this moment. Of course, this is going to be a brief meditation. This is something that you can extend and make quite a bit longer, but I'm just going to guide you briefly on this, and it's just an invitation.

I invite you to settle in as best you can in whatever posture that you're in. Maybe quickly notice your bottom on the cushion or your back on the chair, unclench the jaw, lower the shoulders, and

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take a couple of deep breaths. I invite you to come into stillness, closing your eyes if you're comfortable, and as you're ready, taking a few slow deep breaths, letting the breath ground you, arriving right here and right now.

Bring to mind someone in your life who's having difficulty, perhaps, someone that you care about. Still connected with breath and body, take a moment to sense the nature of their difficulty and what that might be like. If you were to use a scale of one to ten, I would encourage you to choose something at a two or three or four, not initially aiming for ten out of ten.

Taking a moment to sense the nature of their difficulty and what it might be like and what your normal way of relating to this person and their challenges has been. What would it be like to be in this person's shoes?

Now, sensing that you might step inside this person so that you can look at the world from this person's eyes, feeling with their heart, see if you can get a sense of what it's like from the inside, what it's like to be living in these circumstances. Staying connected to breath and body, now sensing that you might step inside this person so that you could be looking through their eyes and world and feeling with this person's heart. What's the hardest part for this person? What's most disappointing? What's hurtful or scary, perhaps? What's the most challenging piece that this person is living with?

Still connected to breath and body, sensing and feeling underneath the words. What's the belief here? That I'll never get what I want? That I'm failing? That I'm somehow unlovable? How does this person feel that experience in their heart? From the inside out, you might get a sense of what this place of vulnerability most needs or most wants.

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Now, coming back to your own presence, your own full presence, but still sensing that you can feel this person within you as you're breathing in and breathing out, contacting that vulnerability. Perhaps sensing with the outbreath you can offer a bit of what's needed. Perhaps that person is in need of being cared for, understood.

You might sense that you breathe in and breathe out the pain or the hurt and breathe in and breathe out and just offer your presence and tenderness. You might offer your care. You might offer words of tender care: “May you be held in the arms of compassion. May you be free of pain. May you be well.” Maybe simply offering “I’m sorry, and I love you.”

Feeling in your heart this vulnerability and sensing the possibility of now widening to include all of those that might be suffering in the same way, all of those that might be experiencing the same rejection, feelings of disappointment or failure. So you're breathing in for all of us that are suffering and allowing yourself to be touched by the current vulnerability and breathing out letting the heartbeat transform sorrows, offering it out to the heart space: “May all beings be free of suffering. May all beings be free of pain and sorrow. May all beings be well. May all beings be at peace.”

Feeling the heart space, recognizing awareness and whatever is moving through you right now, whether that's tenderness or numbness or tiredness, happiness, sadness. Just letting those feelings, those emotions arise and pass. Letting these feelings and emotions arise and pass like waves unfolding in this very tender and open heart.

May you be happy and peaceful. May you be safe and protected. May you live with ease and well-being. And may we all awaken and be free. Thank you. I hope you join me for our final

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session, which will be love in action, where we will explore the interplay of metta and karuna.

Until next time. Thank you.