

~ *Empathy and Compassion* ~

What's the Difference?

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What is the difference between empathy and compassion?

Sometimes in modern culture, some people talk about “compassion fatigue” — that if you are compassionate, at a certain level you get others’ pain, burn out, and feel hopeless and trapped. But, actually, compassion does not cause you to feel trapped, overwhelmed, or burned out. What will lead to burnout is empathy.

Empathy is when you feel what others feel and sense others’ suffering. And there is not really a will or readiness to help. Of course you are sad, but you just feel that, and that becomes very difficult at a certain level.

What is compassion? We wish, “May you be free from suffering and the causes of suffering.” At the same time, there is a readiness to help. Maybe a wish to help. There is a will.

For example, when we begin to meditate, we always develop a compassionate motivation. “Why I am practicing meditation is because I want to help others. I want to help other beings to be free from suffering and to have happiness. For that reason, I am going to meditate. Then, at the end of the meditation, you dedicate your meditation for happiness and freedom from suffering for all beings.

These two [compassion and empathy] are different, and there is a lot of scientific research about that. It is said that even the areas of the brain related to these are different. Only empathy/sympathy can sometimes lead to burnout, a lot of stress, and be overwhelming. But compassion has a lot of courage, and it is not too much about the self. Empathy has a lot of self in it. *You* feel and *others* feel.

Of course, based on empathy we can develop compassion. That is totally the way. But compassion is not too egoistic or self-centric. Of course there is a self — what we call a “healthy sense of self.” That self has courage, openness, and a will [to help].

So, how to develop love and compassion? Of course, first it could be based on empathy. Especially, we need to understand that everybody, on a fundamental level, is the same. In our tradition, we need to connect with basic goodness. Everybody has a wonderful nature. At their essence, everybody has awareness, love and compassion, and wisdom. But, of course sometimes we are lost in emotional disturbances, kleshas, ignorance, aversion, and attachment. We are lost. But at a deeper level, we are still perfect. We are not broken. Our true nature is complete. So know that everybody has a wonderful nature, but that we are lost. Wish “I want to help others,” and eventually extend that to all beings. “May all beings be free from suffering and connect with their true, innate qualities. May all beings have happiness and the causes of happiness.”

Normally, in the beginning, we can choose someone we like. I chose my grandmother. She is really kind and caring. I understand that my grandmother has a wonderful nature, but that she has a lot of struggles and problems too, and I wish, “May she be free from suffering and the causes of suffering. May she have happiness and the causes of happiness.” I do this practice, and it really helps.

You can try it with someone easy, then expand to neutral people, and then to all beings. Then, you will eventually develop compassion.

After we have compassion, we can transform compassion and integrate it more with wisdom, meaning we develop compassion but do not get too attached to it. And when you want to help others, also do not get too tight about the result of helping. Because everything is impermanent. Life is like the stock market, going up and down. Your life is like the stock market, and other people’s lives are like the stock market. Everything changes and changes. So sometimes you can help, and sometimes you cannot help. What is important is to try your best, but without your mind being too tight about the result. Accept impermanence, and meditate on ups and downs. That is wisdom, also.

And then there is ultimate wisdom. If you know emptiness, that is the best. Actually, suffering is emptiness, and everything in the entire universe is emptiness. But emptiness does not mean nothing. Because of emptiness, the universe exists. Yet, it is not really fixed like what we perceive now — narrow, tight, fixed, with partiality and divisions. We create that. So actually there is no suffering for me or all beings, but we do not know that. All of us create real suffering.

So you see that suffering is not real yet appears to be real. Then compassion eventually becomes the union of nonconceptuality and compassion. Sometimes we call it “compassion in union with nonconceptuality,” and sometimes we call it “compassion in union with emptiness.” That compassion becomes really vast and strong. The more you have wisdom and compassion together, the more genuine, powerful, and authentic compassion becomes.