

Cultivating a Friendly Mind 2.0

Unitarian Universalist Church of Concord NH

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Home Practice, Week Five: Steeping the Heart in Compassion (Karuna)

Compassion 2: Phrases and Categories

Compassion is unique among the Brahma Viharas in that it involves an empathic connection with another being. (The other practices are internal, focused on generating a mind state and offering it to others without any empathic engagement.) Compassion is therefore a little more complicated—it has some steps: first there is opening, not turning away from the difficult; then there is empathically opening to the suffering experience of another; and out of this (in real life though not in formal meditation) is the movement to help in some way. Sometimes the help we can offer is tangible; other times the help is simply being with someone, helping them by holding their suffering experience with balance and thereby—through their empathetic connection with us—helping them experience their suffering as more bearable.

Equanimity is what keeps Compassion balanced, keeps us from being overwhelmed. If we get overwhelmed, we become reactive—we move into fear, aversion, sadness. When this happens, it's time to step back, disconnect from the empathic connection, re-regulate our own emotions. We can step back by offering Compassion to an Easy Person, or into Metta practice.

Phrases: I care about your pain.

May you be free of pain and suffering.

Categories of Beings: (Modify phrases as necessary to make sense)

Easy Person

Self (I care about this pain)

Friend or Family member

Neutral Person

Difficult Person

All Beings (Simply “May all beings be free from pain and suffering.” Offering to all beings as one group, no distinctions. Don't start breaking down into sub-groups—too overwhelming!)

Formal practice: (With recording or on your own.) To practice on your own, try keeping written instructions in front of you and peek to remember the phrases and categories.)

Sit comfortably.

Bring up the mind state of Compassion—openness, willingness to empathically feel the pain of another, willingness to help them.

Choose an Easy Person—someone whose pain you can easily stay open to.

No need to visualize.

Offer the phrases at a relaxed pace that keeps you focused on the mind state of Compassion, and clear on your intention to offer it to this person.

There's no need to create any particular feeling state; just notice what arises.

Move through the Categories as you have time. Notice the differences in ease and clarity as the Categories get less easy. Return to the Easy Person as often as you need, to clarify and reconnect with the mind state of Compassion.

Watch out for the temptation to get lost in the story, and re-establish your own balance. If you find yourself getting overwhelmed by reactivity—fear, sadness, aversion—disconnect and return to the Easy person until you've re-established your own balance.

For All Beings, we let go of the empathic orientation. Offer your Compassion to all beings as a single group that includes everyone, not breaking it down into smaller sub-groups. Simply use the one phrase "May all beings be free of pain and suffering" and radiate that in all directions without distinction. Trying to be empathically open to all the suffering of all the specific beings and groups can be too overwhelming for one mind and heart.

Close by letting go of phrases, resting in open awareness or mindfulness of body & breath.

Formal practice: Practice daily with the recording, or feel free to guide yourself.

Informal practices: Compassion is the willingness to meet everything with openness and kindness, to not turn away from suffering states in oneself or in others. We'll have lots of opportunity!

—**Compassion for Others:** As you move through your day, experiment with activating the mind state of Compassion by silently offering a single phrase, "May you be free of pain and suffering" to people as you pass them. Notice how it shifts your sense of relationship with strangers to view them through the lens of compassion. Get familiar with how the world looks/feels through this view. Offer to help, when you can and it's clear what's needed. Recognize that sometimes the most powerful help is simply to be with another in their pain.

—**Compassion for Self:** Watch for when you pull back from being empathically touched by the painful experience of others, or when you steer away from something uncomfortable in your own experience. Notice this very pulling back with Compassion—when we can see clearly, we see that closing off and rejecting part of our experience itself is painful. Be especially attentive to offering yourself Compassion when you're habitually judging and criticizing yourself.