

SELF-COMPASSION

I'd like to explore the essential place of compassion in our lives in a very simple way. As human beings we have a conscious awareness that is open to what is. Our very nature is openness. On a feeling level this openness shows up as sensitivity, tenderness, rawness, as an exquisite receptivity and responsiveness. As a consequence of this delicacy, we are also easily hurt. It's like the softness of our skin—which is easily bruised, yet allows us to experience a wide range of subtle textures and temperatures.

As a young child we are completely defenseless, we don't even have teeth. And we don't have the capacity—a fully developed nervous system—to fully process our emotional experience. So to protect ourselves from being hurt, we have to tighten up, to harden a shell around us and our sensitivity. In creating a shell, we start to build a whole defense system—contracting, tightening, withdrawing, avoiding, pulling back. And this disconnects us from our heart. In shielding our heart, we are imitating how the adults in our world have learned to cope. That is how it is on this planet. We wind up stuffing our pain and sensitivity because it's just too much, and we don't know how to handle it.

Stuffing our pain and contracting against it is the root of all our psychological wounding. It also creates a spiritual wound because we turn against our true nature, seeing our openness as a nuisance, a problem, a

source of pain. In this way, turning against our nature sows the seeds of self-hatred and self-alienation. There is also a hatred of our defenses, because the defenses cause us further pain—the pain of being uptight and disconnected.

You can see this happening everywhere in our culture. We have to show the world we're tough. So we refuse to let ourselves *feel*. And in hardening against feeling, we suffer the pain of a loss of heart. And that fuels further despair and self-alienation.

As adults we inevitably come to a choice-point in our lives: We can keep on fortifying our defenses, so that nothing can get through. Or we can start to open to our core sensitivity, which is our very heart. In another sense, though, we don't have a choice to avoid pain in our lives. Either we feel the pain of being raw and vulnerable or else we feel the pain of disconnecting from our heart and our very being.

So we might as well make friends with pain, for this allows us to reclaim our heart and brings us back to life. It opens the door to self-love and self-compassion, and helps us develop a new relationship with our basic openness. This starts to restore what has been lost: kindness, gentleness, warmth and caring for the pain in our lives, instead of dismissing it, stuffing it, hating it.

Real compassion can only arise out of being willing to feel pain. As long as we refuse to feel pain, we won't be able to feel any real compassion for ourselves or others. *Compassion* literally means "suffering with" — being a friend and companion to the pain that's involved in being human.

So it's essentially quite simple: At the root of every psychological problem is a place where our sensitivity has been hurt, a place where we feel an "ouch." All the complexity of our emotional reactions boils down to some "ouch" that needs to be uncovered, met, and treated with love and compassion.

This kind of acknowledgment and guidance is what we didn't get to begin with—which is why we froze up around our pain. Meeting and touching our pain with the warmth of the heart allows our frozen defenses to melt. This melting plays a central role not only in emotional healing, but also in spiritual development, for it reveals our very nature as openness.

If you find yourself intensely resisting your pain, this doesn't need to be a problem. You can simply turn toward the resistance itself, and feel *that*. Feeling the resistance to feeling starts to bring compassion along.

Acknowledging the felt presence of the resistance is the first step in making friends with it: "Ok, there is resistance— part of me is resisting what I feel. This part of me doesn't want to feel. It doesn't trust feelings. It's afraid of losing control. Poor thing—it wants to be the grand Wizard of Oz and escape from its ordinary humanness." In this way, gently feeling and acknowledging the suffering of disconnection can touch our heart and give rise to self-compassion.

Yet if we just remain stuck in resistance, or try to push it away, we only get swallowed up by it . It sticks to us like the tar baby or fly paper. What you resist persists.

The place to start is to notice the bodily sensations of how you presently feel. This brings you back to your

immediate experience. Often people feel concerned that their feelings— such as “heaviness,” “tightness,” or “vulnerability”— will swallow them up. But it is not the feelings or sensations that will engulf you. Rather, what is overwhelming are the stories you invent about *what the feelings mean about you*. (“These feelings of depression mean that I’m no good.” “These fearful feelings mean that I’m a coward.”) Yet the truth is much simpler: Your bodily felt experience is just the flow of life moving through you. And compassion for the hurt places inside will melt you and help you enter this flow.

Thus separating your feelings from your stories about them is an important step in freeing yourself from their grip. Then you can look further into your resistance with kind understanding, caring for the hurt places inside that are getting activated by your current situation.

Generating compassion is a practice. Just like meditation, it takes some intention and effort at first. Even great spiritual masters have had their own struggles with being compassionate. So a good practice would be to affirm our intention by regularly reminding ourselves: “Even though I have a hard time opening to my pain, my intention is to meet it with love and compassion.”