

# Mindfulness, compassion, and language

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Compassion in arms

The English word compassion comes from the Latin *com* (with) plus *pati* (to suffer). Its short definition is something like, “the deep feeling of suffering with another that manifests in the desire to give aid or support.” This definition, however, makes it sound like just another emotion or capacity, hardly doing justice to its centrality within the Wisdom Traditions or its implications about our radical sameness and interdependence. In *The Wise Heart* (Bantam, 2008), Jack Kornfield makes it the second principle of Buddhist psychology: “Compassion is our deepest nature. It arises from our interconnection with all things.” He further says, “Buddhist texts describe compassion as the quivering of the heart in the face of pain, as the capacity to see our struggles with ‘kindly eyes.’ We need compassion, not anger, to help us be tender with our difficulties and not close them off in fear. This is how healing takes place.” In its broadest sense, as the quality of shared sympathetic connection among people that facilitates healing, it may become--by necessity-- the defining feature of the age we are entering, the center of a new way of life. This point was recently made in my little local newspaper, the Los Feliz Ledger, by Tom Hyams, the chair of the transportation committee of the Greater Griffith Park Neighborhood Council, which is currently experiencing a great deal of strife among its members. He says, “I believe we are witnessing the birth of a revolution, but this war will not be fought with weapons. This is a battle of consciousness. The time for selfishness has passed. The time for compassion is upon us. Ultimately, service is a subset of compassion. To truly have compassion requires selflessness. Selflessness can lead to service. Service can change the world.” He says this in the context of discussing the board members’ desire to serve the community and the need to overcome hostility in a particularly entrenched disagreement that they are having.



Nonviolent Communication Mandala

This points out something rather extraordinary about compassion, which I have been struggling with lately. No matter how intensely and unconditionally we think we might feel this for our fellow human beings, no matter how much our ideals about how human beings should treat one another are shaped by this feeling, to really live compassion, to have it inform our actions and our speech is incredibly difficult work that involves both learning how to become present to other people and unlearning some of our worst culturally formed habits that dehumanize them. (This means that practice is necessary and that mistakes and backsliding will inevitably occur). Some of the most insidious of these habits have become entrenched in our very language in a way that is really quite shocking when you first see it uncovered and even more shocking when you see how persistent the “anti-compassionate” patterns are. It is one thing to feel something common to all human beings. It is altogether another thing to change our basic attitudes, thought, and speech to reflect the values implicit in that feeling of connection.

The Buddhist concept of mindfulness might be described as a way of being present in the moment, without judgment or agenda, to what is (things, people, events, emotions, sensations), of accepting the present moment. As a human capacity, then, mindfulness is about being more present and cultivating greater awareness. It might be thought of as the prerequisite for informed and directed compassion. (You cannot connect to that which you don't regard, are distracted from, or is hidden from you). Practicing mindfulness in eating, for example, might include taking a meal alone, without conversation or distraction from television or radio, and slowing down the process of eating, concentrating on the texture and taste of the food, thinking about where it has come from and everything involved in its production and delivery until the point at which it reaches you. Recently, I have been reading Marshall B. Rosenberg's *Nonviolent Communication* (Puddle Dancer Press, 2003), which offers a way of practicing mindfulness of relationship through language that fosters compassionate connection. The components of nonviolent communication are relatively simple and straightforward. There is a four-part process that consists of 1) making an **observation**, 2) identifying any **feelings**, 3) expressing **needs**, and 4) making a life-affirming **request**. The other point of nonviolent communication is to express honestly and receive empathetically, creating a space in which direct, true, open-hearted, non-judgmental, non-confrontational communication can take place. If one has never really used this process before, reading the book is revelatory. And its importance is underlined when one puts the book down and enters into a real life dialogue where one tries to first employ its method, reverting unexpectedly to the very patterns of aggressive, defensive, judgmental, life-denying speech that it works so hard to improve on. Its ultimate objective is to create meaningful, honest, productive exchange between human beings who are (or are becoming) authentically open to one another. The core of it all is compassion.

The basic NVC process begins with **observing** without evaluating. This is because with evaluation people often hear criticism, which immediately puts them on the defensive. For example, we might say, “This month Tree spent \$350 on clothes, \$150 on groceries, and \$400 on rent,” rather than, “Tree spends too much money on clothes.” The second component is to express how we are **feeling** in relation to what we are observing, which means both taking responsibility for our feelings (not blaming others) and expressing feelings not thought. This would be to say, “I feel worried that Tree spent \$350 on clothes because I am fearful there isn't enough to cover the bills,” rather than, “I feel that Tree is irresponsibly spending too much money on nonessential items.” The third component is identifying the **needs** behind the feelings. This is an important step because, as Rosenberg says, “judgments, criticisms, diagnoses, and interpretations of others are all alienated expressions of our own needs.” “You hate me,” for example, which can't possibly even be something known by the speaker, might better be expressed as, “I need to feel a more loving connection from you.” This is a direct and honest expression of a need rather than an indirect expression, which will likely be taken as a criticism. Rosenberg points out, “Over and over again, it has been my experience that, from the moment people began talking about what they need rather than what's wrong with one another, the possibility of finding ways to meet everybody's needs is greatly increased.” He then goes on to list some of our basic human needs in various categories, which is worth repeating here (in a much abbreviated fashion).

**Autonomy** (to choose one's dreams, goals, and values)

**Celebration** (to celebrate dreams, the creation of life, loved ones)

**Integrity** (authenticity, creativity, meaning, self-worth)

**Interdependence** (acceptance, appreciation, community, love, support, understanding)

**Play** (fun, laughter)

**Spiritual Communion** (beauty, harmony, order, peace)

**Physical Nurturance** (air, food, shelter, protection from disease, touch, rest, sexual expression)

In the above case of Tree, for example, the need underlying the feeling of worry might be, “I am needing to bring more order to the monthly budget so we don't get behind on utilities payments.” The fourth component of NVC is to make a **request** (not a demand) that would enrich life. The most important thing to remember here is that it must be a genuine request, not something designed to obtain a specific change in behavior. Rosenberg says, “If our objective is only to change people and their behavior or get our way, then NVC is not an appropriate tool. The process is designed for those of us who would like others to change and respond, but only if they do so willingly and compassionately.” So, rather than saying to Tree, “You should stop spending so irresponsibly when we have these



Like so many things involving others, the kind of dialogue that NVC is committed to begins with the self. In order to make such compassionate connections, we must first be compassionate with ourselves. Just as the Buddhist *Metta* (Lovingkindness) meditation begins by recalling our own experiences of unconditional love and wishing for happiness, health, and ease of life for ourselves before extending desire for the same to various other individuals we are familiar with and, eventually, to all sentient beings, the kind of compassion that the NVC conversation is based in is probably most effectively given when we have spent some time becoming aware of our relationship to ourself, examining our habitual self-talk. One of the most important things to watch out for is any kind of self-aversion (a widespread problem in Western culture) behind our thought: "I'm not good enough," "I'm wrong," "That was a stupid thing to do." Shame lurks behind all these sorts of comments and, as Rosenberg says, "Shame is a form of self-hatred, and actions taken in reaction to shame are not free and joyful acts. Even if our intention is to behave with more kindness and sensitivity, if people sense shame or guilt behind our actions, they are less likely to appreciate what we do than if we are motivated purely by the human desire to contribute to life." In this respect, "should" is one of the worst words we can use in relation to ourselves: "I should have known better," "I should have done it a different way," "I should stop smoking," "I shouldn't eat so much." Rosenberg points out, "We were not meant to succumb to the dictates of 'should' and 'have to,' whether they come from outside or inside of ourselves. And if we do yield and submit to these demands, our actions arise from energy that is devoid of life-giving joy." Inner judgment, blame, and demand come from such evaluations and may be transformed by focusing on our needs, evaluating ourselves in a way that inspires change: "1) in the direction of where we would like to go, and b) out of respect and compassion for ourselves, rather than out of self-hatred, guilt, or shame." So, rather than saying to ourselves, "Oh my god, I screwed up again!" we can instead look for the unmet need expressed in the moralistic judgment. Connecting to the need we may come into contact with an emotion--sadness, disappointment, fear--that helps us mobilize our actions in the direction of that need. In the case of regret, rather than perpetually punishing ourselves, we can ask ourselves what need we were trying to meet when we behaved in a certain way. "An important aspect of self-compassion," Rosenberg says, "is to be able to empathically hold both parts of ourselves--the self that regrets a past action and the self that took the action in the first place." Finally, it is important to cultivate an awareness of the energy behind all of our actions and to make choices that are motivated out of joy and the desire to contribute to life, being wary of choices made for money, for approval, to escape punishment, to avoid shame, to avoid guilt, or out of duty.

Non-judgment, self-love, and self-respect may be the most difficult things to come by in our culture. They may, however, be the most important qualities to develop, for they determine our relationship to others. In that sense, the quality of our interconnectedness begins with the quality of our regard for our self and our ability to provide ourself with unconditional love. In turn, it is the unconditional love and compassion we freely give to others that is so important in forming their own relationship to their selves. We really are all in it together, inseparable, reflections of one another.

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