



Spaceforsoul newsletter

March 2019

The way of compassion

It was late September 1978. My father, a man I loved deeply, was dying of lung cancer. I was sitting at his bedside in hospital when all of a sudden, he began to haemorrhage uncontrollably. The cancer had eaten into his pulmonary artery. I will never forget the fear I saw in his eyes, the overwhelming sense of powerlessness and despair I felt as his life was ebbing away in front of me.

I was ushered quickly out of the room as the doctors and nurses fought to control the bleeding. I found myself sitting alone on a cold, hard bench in the corridor, not knowing if I would ever see him alive again. I was fighting back the tears, desperate to hold it all together and feeling more alone than I had ever felt in my life. And then a young student nurse emerged from my father's room. She noticed my distress and I saw her hesitate for a moment before coming over to me. She sat down beside me, laid her hand on my shoulder and sat silently beside me as I wept for what seemed like a very long time. At one point, I looked up at her and saw that there were tears running down her face. Neither of us said a word. After a while as my tears began to subside, she squeezed my hand gently and quietly slipped away.

I wish I could thank her for the compassion she showed me that day. Over forty years later, the memory of it is still fresh in my mind. In his book, 'Compassion', the Catholic priest, Henri Nouwen spoke of those people 'who show their solidarity with us by willingly entering the dark, uncharted spaces of our lives'. This was certainly one of the darkest, uncharted spaces of my life and the simple gift of her presence with me in the darkness, even for a few minutes, was enough to bring me the comfort I so badly needed in that moment.

What then is compassion?

Compassion is a deeper, more profound emotion than sympathy or pity and speaks to me of a more



intimate solidarity with those who are suffering. The word 'compassion' is derived from the Latin words 'pati' and 'cum' which together mean 'to suffer with'. To be compassionate, therefore, means to enter into another's suffering, to suffer with that person. It goes beyond a simple awareness and understanding of or concern for the suffering of others to a willingness to be fully present with them in the pain they are experiencing.

It is about 'getting into the black pit' with them and simply being there as they find their way through the pain to a place of healing. The title of Sheila Cassidy's book 'Sharing the Darkness' expresses this very well. In it, she writes about the spirituality of the compassionate carer and describes it as 'a spirituality of presence, of being alongside, watchful, available; of being there'.

Compassion is of course an important concept and value in many world religions. For example, In his book, 'The Compassionate Life', the Dalai Lama speaks of compassion as 'the higher human value'. He also links it explicitly with loving kindness. Compassion and love, he says, are 'two aspects of the same thing: compassion is the wish for another to be free from suffering; love is wanting them to

have happiness.’ He argues that genuine compassion requires both loving kindness (a deep level of intimacy and empathy with the other) and wisdom (a deeper understanding the nature of suffering). There is such a strong emphasis on compassion within Buddhism, both as a central teaching and as a practice, that I believe it could justifiably be called ‘the Way of Compassion.’

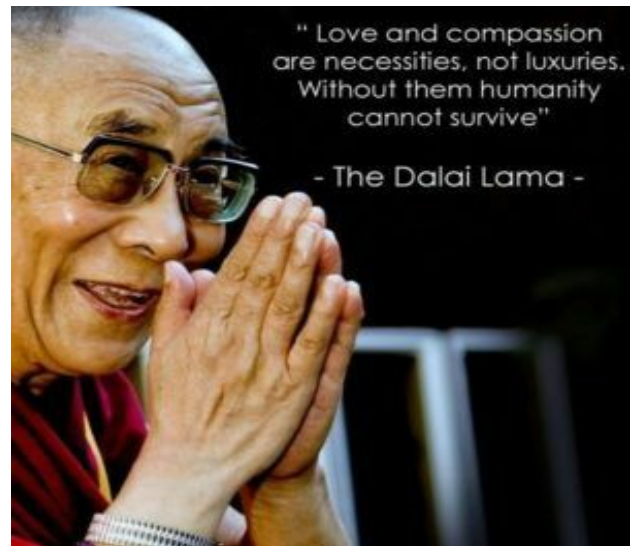
Similarly, in Hinduism, compassion is both a ‘noble virtue’ and an essential practice. The Sanskrit word for compassion is ‘karuna’ which means compassionate action and Brahman is considered to be a ‘karunamayi’, the very personification of compassion.

Compassion and mercy are also central concepts within Islamic philosophy and are referenced thousands of times both within the Qur’an and the Sunnah - the sayings of the Prophet, Muhammad. Furthermore, the name ‘al-Rahman’, the Compassionate One, is widely regarded as the most pre-eminent of the ninety nine names of Allah.

In Christianity, compassion is both a core value and a calling. The Bible calls us to ‘clothe ourselves’ with compassion, to share each others’ burdens and to ‘Be compassionate as your Father is compassionate.’ In his book about compassion, Nouwen pointed out that the Greek word ‘splangchnizomai’ appears twelve times in the Gospels and means ‘to be moved with compassion’. Literally, it means ‘to be moved in the guts’, the centre within us from which our most powerful and intense emotions flow. It is related to the Hebrew word for compassion – ‘rachamim’ or tender, compassionate love – which in turn comes from the word ‘rechem’ meaning ‘womb’. Indeed, Nouwen described compassion

‘Compassion asks us to go where it hurts, to enter into the places of pain, to share in brokenness, fear, confusion, and anguish. Compassion challenges us to cry out with those in misery, to mourn with those who are lonely, to weep with those in tears. Compassion requires us to be weak with the weak, vulnerable with the vulnerable, and powerless with the powerless. Compassion means full immersion in the condition of being human.’

Henri Nouwen



rather beautifully as ‘a movement of the womb of God.’

What is true compassion?

As the Dalai Lama sees it, true compassion is not just an emotional response, but ‘a firm commitment founded on reason’. It is a deeper compassion that is not limited or distorted by our self-centredness, by our unhealthy attachments or desires or by our own emotional needs. It is not coloured by our own demands and expectations, but is based purely on the need of the other. It is unconditional. There is no alteration of concern for or discrimination against those who are behaving in ways we believe to be wrong. It is not selective. It applies equally to all living beings without exception. It is based on a sense of universal altruism which recognises that ‘all human beings are equal in both their desire for happiness and their right to obtain it.’

Genuine compassion flows from an awakened heart. It is deeply challenging. Cultivating it is possible but requires conviction, determination, conscious, concerted effort... and endless patience with ourselves. It begins when we truly recognise that there is need for us to change, not just our own need but the planet’s need. ‘Compassion, loving-kindness, altruism, and a sense of brotherhood and sisterhood are,’ says the Dalai Lama, ‘the keys not only to human development, but to planetary survival’.

And the need is ever more pressing...

Kaitlyn Steele

Progressive movements: The charter for compassion

www.charterforcompassion.org

In February 2008, religious scholar and bestselling author, Karen Armstrong, won the TED Prize - a \$1 million award given to leaders with bold, creative visions for bringing about global change. Her dream was that of creating and launching what she called 'a Charter for Compassion'.

Thousands of people of all faiths, nationalities and backgrounds submitted ideas on what the Charter should include before a multi-faith, multi-national group of religious thinkers and leaders met to craft the final document. In November 2009, the Charter she inspired was finally unveiled to the world.

Since then, the Charter has been translated into more than thirty languages and has been endorsed by more than two million individuals around the globe, including some of the world's foremost spiritual leaders such as Sister Joan Chittister, the Dalai Lama, Rabbi David Saperstein and Desmond Tutu.

The Charter's logo is based on the ancient symbol for infinity which is also a symbol for the concept of endless love. Its use of the symbol reflects its belief in 'the limitless potential of compassion to transform human relationships, institutions and communities.' With this in mind, the Charter has also developed a worldwide network of Compassionate Partnerships and Communities. Organisations, villages, hamlets, towns, townships, cities, neighbourhoods, states, provinces, counties, republics and countries all over the world have committed themselves to working to make the Charter's vision for a more compassionate world a reality.

'At their best, all religious, philosophical, and ethical traditions are based on the principle of compassion... no religious doctrine or practice can be authentic if it does not lead to practical compassion.'

Karen Armstrong



The Charter has also set up an Education Institute which offers a range of low cost courses exploring compassion from a number of different perspectives. These include 'The Essence of Compassion', 'The Science of Kindness and Compassion' and 'Creating a Compassionate Action Plan'. They also offer a number of courses designed to equip and support individuals, teams and organisations around the world who are engaged in varying forms of compassionate action within their communities.

Spaceforsoul is a Charter partner and is currently seeking to promote awareness and understanding of the Charter's work in the Bristol area. Please support us in this venture in whatever way you can. The Charter is currently campaigning to encourage one million more people to affirm its charter by November 12th 2019.

Signing the Charter is easy and there is no financial or time commitment. Click on the link below and scroll to the bottom of the page. Then click on 'Affirm and share the Charter'

<https://charterforcompassion.org/charter/charter-overview>

The Charter's mission

'The Charter for Compassion provides an umbrella for people to engage in collaborative partnerships worldwide. Our mission is to bring to life the principles articulated in the Charter for Compassion through concrete, practical action in a myriad of sectors.

Aware that our world is deeply troubled and polarized, the Charter for Compassion is committed to making the world a better place... We believe that a compassionate world is a peaceful world. We believe that a compassionate world is possible when every man, woman and child treats others as they wish to be treated - with dignity, equity and respect.'

The Charter for Compassion

'The principle of compassion lies at the heart of all religious, ethical and spiritual traditions, calling us always to treat all others as we wish to be treated ourselves. Compassion impels us to work tirelessly to alleviate the suffering of our fellow creatures, to dethrone ourselves from the centre of our world and put another there, and to honour the inviolable sanctity of every single human being, treating everybody, without exception, with absolute justice, equity and respect.

It is also necessary in both public and private life to refrain consistently and empathically from inflicting pain. To act or speak violently out of spite, chauvinism, or self-interest, to impoverish, exploit or deny basic rights to anybody, and to incite hatred by denigrating others—even our enemies—is a denial of our common humanity. We acknowledge that we have failed to live compassionately and that some have even increased the sum of human misery in the name of religion.

We therefore call upon all men and women to restore compassion to the centre of morality and religion, to return to the ancient principle that any interpretation of scripture that breeds violence, hatred or disdain is illegitimate, to ensure that youth are given accurate and respectful information about other traditions, religions and cultures, to encourage a positive appreciation of cultural and religious diversity, to cultivate an informed empathy with the suffering of all human beings—even those regarded as enemies.

We urgently need to make compassion a clear, luminous and dynamic force in our polarized world. Rooted in a principled determination to transcend selfishness, compassion can break down political, dogmatic, ideological and religious boundaries. Born of our deep interdependence, compassion is essential to human relationships and to a fulfilled humanity. It is the path to enlightenment, and indispensable to the creation of a just economy and a peaceful global community.'

From the Charter's website

Compassion and the Golden Rule

'All faiths insist that compassion is the test of true spirituality and that it brings us into relation with the transcendence we call God, Brahman, Nirvana, or Dao. Each has formulated its own version of what is sometimes called the Golden Rule, "Do not treat others as you would not like them to treat you," or in its positive form, "Always treat others as you would wish to be treated yourself." Further, they all insist that you cannot confine your benevolence to your own group; you must have concern for everybody — even your enemies.'

Karen Armstrong



For a list of the various Golden Rule texts, follow this link:

<https://charterforcompassion.org/share-the-charter/golden-rule-texts>

The latest news...



Spaceforsoul is four years old!

On Sunday 3rd February, Spaceforsoul held its fourth AGM. One again, we have much to celebrate. Over the last year, we have continued to run our fortnightly Soulspace meetings, book club and spiritual journey groups and to produce our quarterly newsletters. Our educational arm, the CSEA, ran its first e-course for the second time and successfully launched a one year spiritual exploration course with a linked e-course programme called 'In Search of Soul'. We also ran two additional Spaceforsoul events - a Quiet Day at Llansor Mill and an art workshop with local artist, Emma Burleigh.

In addition, we have continued to develop our online presence by updating and expanding our Spaceforsoul website, starting a Facebook group and launching a separate website for the CSEA. We also became affiliated to the Bristol Multi Faith Forum and have been working to forge links with other faith traditions in the area. It has been another very good year!

Co-ordinating Group news

At the AGM, our five existing group members - Kaitlyn Steele, our Chair, Nicki Crabtree, our Treasurer, Julian Clover, our Book Club co-ordinator, Mandy Young, our Soulspace Co-ordinator and Nirma Phillips, our Membership Co-ordinator - were all re-elected. Another of our Spaceforsoul members, Richard Marsh, was also elected. We are delighted to welcome Richard to the group and are looking forward to continuing to work together over the coming year.

As a result of the recent significant expansion in the activities of our educational arm, the CSEA (Centre for Spiritual Exploration and Accompaniment), the Co-ordinating Group has also set up a separate small steering group for the Centre. Kaitlyn and Nicki are members of this group as is Sue Cater, another of our Spaceforsoul members. We are also hoping to set up a small steering group for Soulspace later this year.

Spaceforsoul membership: no need to renew

One of the decisions made at our AGM in February was that from now on there will be no need to renew SFS membership every year. One you have become a member, therefore, your membership will continue unless and until you decide to cancel it.

Exploring spiritual practice



The practice of compassion

Awakening our heart of compassion

Within Buddhism, there are a number of spiritual practices that are used to help us develop our loving kindness and compassion for others and for ourselves. The best known of these are the Buddhist practice of 'metta bhavana' (which literally means the cultivation of loving kindness) and the more difficult Tibetan Buddhist practice of 'tonglen' (which literally means 'giving and receiving').

Metta bhavana meditation: some basic guidelines

Loving-kindness meditation consists primarily of connecting with the intention to wish ourselves and others freedom from suffering, well-being and happiness.

Begin the practice by sitting comfortably in a relaxed position. Breathe slowly and deeply three times, exhaling fully each time. Gently let go of any concerns or preoccupations that are distracting you. For a few minutes, feel or imagine your breath moving freely around your body and particularly in the area of the centre of your chest (the heart centre).

Then silently and slowly repeat to yourself the following (or similar) simple phrases:

May I be free from suffering. May I be well. May I be safe. May I be peaceful and at ease.

As you are doing so, allow yourself to become aware of the deeper intention they express. If feelings of warmth, love or compassion arise, connect to them and allow them to grow as you continue to repeat the phrases. As an aid to the meditation, you might want to hold an image of yourself in your mind's eye.

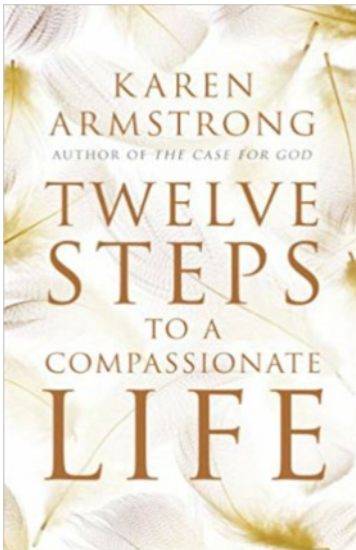
After a period of directing loving-kindness toward yourself, bring to mind a friend or someone in your life for whom you care deeply. Then slowly repeat the same phrases of loving-kindness toward them in the same way. Then focus your meditation on someone for whom your feelings are 'neutral' before moving onto someone you actively dislike or have difficulty with. You can either use the same phrases or choose other phrases that better reflect the feelings of loving-kindness you have towards them. Finally, extend your meditation further, embracing everyone around you, everyone in your neighbourhood, in your town, in your country, and throughout the world. Imagine waves of loving-kindness spreading from your heart to all beings everywhere. Then bring yourself slowly out of your meditation and draw the practice to a close.

Sometimes during loving-kindness meditation, difficult or painful feelings such as anger, grief, or sadness may arise. Try to accept and allow them to be. Take it as a sign that your heart is softening and opening up, revealing what has been suppressed within you. There is no need to judge yourself for having these normal feelings. With whatever patience, acceptance, and kindness you can find within yourself for such feelings, direct your loving-kindness also towards them.



If you want *others* to be **happy**, practice **compassion**. If you want to be **happy**, practice **compassion**. -Dalai Lama

Resources for the journey...



Karen Armstrong (2011) Twelve Steps to a Compassionate Life. The Bodley Head

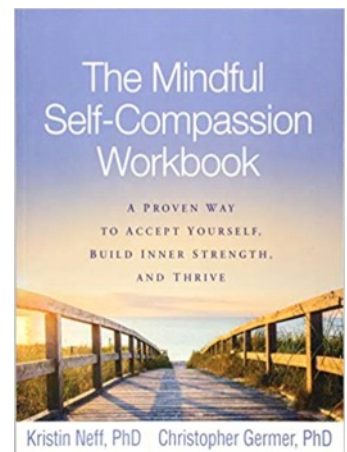
‘Drawing on a wide range of material - ranging from the spiritual character of the world religions to the findings of contemporary neuroscience - Karen Armstrong argues that compassion is hardwired into our brains, yet is constantly pushed back by our more primitive instincts for selfishness and survival. Since time immemorial religion has enhanced our altruistic tendencies: all faiths insist that the Golden Rule is the test of true spirituality - 'Always treat others as you wish to be treated yourself'. Taking as her starting point the teachings of the great world religions, Karen Armstrong demonstrates in twelve practical steps how we can bring compassion to the forefront of our lives.’

Extract from book cover

Kristin Neff and Christopher Germer (2018) The Mindful Self-Compassion Workbook’ Guilford Press

This science-based workbook offers a step-by-step approach to cultivating self-compassion. It is based on the authors' groundbreaking eight-week Mindful Self-Compassion (MSC) programme and is packed with guided meditations (including audio downloads), informal practices and exercises.

Kristin Neff has her own self-compassion website which you can find at: www.self-compassion.org



Free online resources

Twelve Steps Compassion Booklet <https://charterforcompassion.org/12-steps-compassion-booklet>
A summary of and reflection on Karen Armstrong’s book.

Compassion and the Real Meaning of the Golden Rule by Maria Popova
<https://charterforcompassion.org/share-the-charter/compassion-and-the-real-meaning-of-the-golden-rule>

Golden Rule texts: <https://charterforcompassion.org/share-the-charter/golden-rule-texts>

Quotes about compassion: <https://www.spaceforsoul.org.uk/inspiring-quotes>

Tara Brachs’ website: <https://www.tarabrach.com/> A very good resource for meditation practices including metta and tonglen meditation.