



November 2002 Contemplation Theme

Compassion

The primary teaching of yoga is, “Your true identity is the Ever-Blissful Ultimate Reality.” Buddhism is based on the Four Noble Truths, which begin with, “Life is unending misery.” Though these seem contradictory at first glance, both are true. You experience misery as the theme of your life when you don’t recognize the truth of your own being. Moreover, when you are in pain, you are also hard on other people.

When you have just finished a yoga class, you are a more caring and compassionate person. You have noticed this by now. Compassion is a quality that arises when you are connected inside. It is part of living “inside out,” our contemplation theme from last month, which is the filling of yourself from the inner spaciousness and then living from this basis. Yoga clears away the inner clutter and eases you into the vast fullness of your own beingness. From this, all the divine qualities emerge in you, including compassion.

When you are not feeling compassionate, it is because you are hungry. This hunger is more complex than a simple hunger for food, though eating a meal does help. You are more kind and caring after you have eaten compared to before. This is one of the great joys of Thanksgiving. The primary feature of the day is the Great Feast, shared with family and friends. But food alone does not fill your deeper hunger, which thus gets projected outward into your life. It shows up in the push of your day — trying to get everything done. It shows up in your relationships — with you trying to make others in your life happy, or maybe you are trying to get them to want to make you happy (which is infinitely more complicated). This hunger or need shows up in your work — as you strive to succeed or to get ahead, or maybe you are just trying to survive the day.

Life is stressful. I wish we could blame it on technology and the modern age, but even one of the ancient Greeks complained of it! When you are stressed, you are not compassionate. You are as hard on others as you are on yourself. By now, you may be beginning to think that you can only be compassionate when you become an enlightened being. This is why it is so important to cultivate compassion now.

Patanjali gives us the practice of compassion in the Yoga Sutras, in an important section that explains that the experiences of pain, anxiety, and despair arise from your mind. Your mind either gets ensnared in the external phenomena or it gets ensnared in your inner churnings about the external phenomena. He offers a number of ways to untangle your mind from these snares and to turn it back to looking at the inner vastness of your own Self. One of these practices is to cultivate compassion in the face of misery. It is an interesting way of turning you inward — when you see anyone in misery, cultivate compassion, which will take you out of your own misery. Compassion cures pain.

Compassion is hard to define. I once attended a weekend conference on compassion, which included the Dalai Lama along with teachers and leaders from many other religions and meditative traditions. At a round-table discussion, they each attempted to define the word. Each one ended by saying, “Compassion is hard to define.” My definition of compassion starts with the word “passion” embedded in it. I understand passion, because I have always been a passionate person. I have lived my whole life by throwing myself into whatever I believe in. Even before I found yoga, I would give myself wholly to the thing I was trying at the time, hoping it would fill me. Sometimes that thing was a person,

sometimes it was a job, and sometimes it was my own vices. Yoga allows me to throw myself fully into it, and it gives me back even more than I give to it.

Passion is an extreme type of caring, mixed with a dependency or need that creates urgency that becomes painful. Passion leads to pain. Compassion is that same extreme caring, without the dependency or need. Compassion cures pain. Compassion includes the prefix com-, as in communication or in communion. It means that there is a connection or a coming together with the other person. It is often unspoken, with no external sign expressing it, but the inner feeling of compassion within one person affects both. This powerful form of caring frees both people from pain through the coming together in the caring. Notice that there is an important distinction here — this is coming together in the caring, not coming together in the pain.

Compassion is not pity. Compassion is free from the feeling of superiority that is inherent in pity. Compassion is not commiseration, which would be the same as taking on the other person's pain. It is not martyrdom. It is not sympathy or empathy. Compassion is free from the need to change things. Instead, it arises from an acceptance of the way things are. The first step is to see the other person as she or he truly is — without layering on your own agenda or your own pain. This first step is acceptance.

Acceptance is clear perception without reaction, without judging or analyzing, and without wishing that anything were different. Acceptance is like the space between the breaths: easy, silent and still. Acceptance has a neutral quality to it, but it is not distant. It is like listening to your own heartbeat, or feeling it. Place your hand on your heart for a minute — and you will find yourself settling into an easy quietude. Acceptance of another person feels the same way. It is like a boiling pot of water, when you turn the heat off from underneath it. It settles and cools. Only from acceptance can compassion arise.

Compassion is one step farther than mere acceptance. It is the caring that arises from your own inner feeling of coming together with the other person. This is an inner recognition. When you see someone in pain, you may even recognize that you used to be in that same pain, though you are not in it now. If you are in pain now, you don't experience compassion — that is called "shared misery." It is not the same thing. The recognition might be merely that you see the other person as a real human being, seeing past their pain to the whole being hidden within it. For your caring to become compassion, you must have both acceptance and recognition.

You can cultivate compassion inside yourself. This is Patanjali's recommendation. Don't wait until compassion arises spontaneously inside — work on it. When you see someone else's pain, cultivate compassion. Bring it up inside yourself. Why? Not because you want to change the other person. Remember, you already accepted them as they are, so your desire to change them is gone. The reason to do this is because it will change you. Yoga works on you — not on changing the world. Once you have experienced the inner transformation that yoga promises, you may be motivated to work on the world — great! But yoga works on you. Cultivate compassion for others as a way to cure your own pain. You can even learn to cultivate compassion toward your own pain — but that's a contemplation for another day. Do more yoga!

Namaste,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Rama". Above the signature is a small, simple line drawing of a heart.

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