



Compassionate leave

Practice compassion, forgiveness and unconditional love to free yourself from painful and negative thoughts. By Jill Lawson

Spend a few moments witnessing something unpleasant like watching the evening news and notice if your mind and body feel uneasy. When we see the aftermath of natural disasters, hear about people who have lost their jobs or get a glimpse of rioting, war and famine, uncomfortable feelings we would rather avoid are likely to ensue. Somewhere deep down we know better, yet some of us still let inner peace wilt in the face of disappointment. This reaction also manifests itself physically. Our shoulders hunch forward in a protective expression of vulnerability, our jaws tense to swallow or hide rage and our hearts race to the beat of anxious disbelief. In the meantime, we quickly search for something that will ease the pain, in an effort to mask the harsh reality going on around us.

This pain numbing, pleasure seeking vicious cycle hardens your heart and not only causes physical ailments, but also compromises your ability to be compassionate, forgive, and connect to unconditional love within yourself. Without compassion, forgiveness and love, we stay stuck in a whirlpool of pain and may find ourselves lashing out with the urge to retaliate. Attaching to painful emotions or grasping at short-lived pleasure only brings more agony. Until we learn how to be compassionate and accept the world – with all of its misery (and beauty) – we will not be free. To do this we must understand what it means to have compassion.

To be compassionate is to have enough courage to look pain and the frustration of fleeting pleasure in the eye and embrace them as temporary facts of life. Accepting their impermanence, however, is tricky. You may ask yourself why you should detach from pleasurable feelings, but what you are really letting go of is the disappointment when the pleasure subsides. Clutching to an emotion, pleasant or otherwise, is like trying to keep an ice cube from melting in a heat wave. Just as ice is a temporary entity on a warm day, emotions are fleeting in the heat of mindfulness. If you can imagine ice cubes as pleasure or pain, and heat as awareness and acceptance, you see that you can neutralise and balance your slushy and polar states of emotion. Rather than grasping at the highs and lows that do not last, you can focus on un-burying the ever-present core of unconditional love that exists within. When you allow the freezing qualities of attachment to melt, your heart will soften and enable you to practice compassion and feel forgiveness.

Having compassion for someone means feeling their pain or forgiving misaligned actions as if they were your own. This can be a dreadful and confusing experience if you haven't yet learned how to forgive and have compassion for yourself. You must understand that just like your own discomfort, someone else's does not have to drag you down, and there is no need to react or lash out in spite. If someone has done you

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harm, it is not uncommon to feel that if you forgive them, it makes their ill actions okay. We do not forgive someone for something they have done so they can feel relieved because we do not have authority over their feelings; we let it go for our peace of mind. The Buddha said: "Holding on to anger is like grasping a hot coal to throw at someone else, you are the one who gets burned".

How can we be more compassionate? Practicing yoga and spending a few good quality moments in meditation mysteriously unveil the truth that unconditional love and the ability to forgive and feel compassion already exist within us. Rather than masking these beautiful inner qualities with counterproductive means of coping or blaming, we can practice healthy ways to expose them. You must not ignore the pain or look for ways to avoid it; instead you must meet it face-to-face. The better you get at fearlessly meeting your discomfort head on, the quicker it melts right before your eyes. With patience, you can begin to release sturdy grudges and thaw icy feelings of resentment. Residual anguish from even the most dreadful violations can be relieved; you just need to resist the temptation to keep running from the pain.

The quote, "Forgiveness is the fragrance that the violet sheds after the heel has crushed it" by Mark Twain, brings light to this mindful art. Until you forgive yourself, others and the world's misfortunes, you are holding on to that which keeps you away from the sweet scent of inner peace.

Yoga poses that stimulate and open the heart chakra are especially helpful in supporting your ability to forgive and feel compassion. Poses that lift your heart, figuratively and literally, are back bending asana such as

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Wheel or Camel pose. These help to transform protected and bound hearts and turn them into hearts that celebrate ever-present unconditional love.

Buddhists practice Tonglen, a type of meditative breath work that involves breathing in the pain of others and breathing out peace and goodness. It is meant to teach you how to feel compassion by momentarily allowing you to relate with their suffering. By taking a deep breath, imagine you are taking in all the harmful feelings associated with someone's misfortune. After you digest it, detach and let it go by exhaling positive energy back toward that person. By practicing Tonglen meditation you realise that you can empathise with others, yet still be at peace and feel love within yourself. This love increases exponentially, breath after breath to awaken your heart at the core.

Practicing compassion, forgiveness and unconditional love is a life long endeavour. It requires a continuous effort and an openhearted approach. Yoga and Tonglen meditation are examples of ways we can soften the pain of running from, as Buddhist Pema Chodron calls, "the places that scare us". While you cannot avoid pain and suffering altogether, you can learn to face them head on, and mindfully melt the icebergs that keep you frozen in resentment, rage or disappointment. Let us all be more like the violet that sheds its fragrance after the heel crushes it and awaken to the sweet scent of a peaceful life.