



Recognise - Appropriate response

07 - Compassion

There is the case where an individual keeps pervading the first direction - as well as the second, the third and the fourth - with an awareness imbued with compassion. Thus he keeps pervading above, below and all around, everywhere and in every respect the all-encompassing cosmos with an awareness imbued with compassion: abundant, expansive, immeasurable, free from hostility, free from ill will.

— Brahnavihāra Suttas (AN 4.125-126), translated by Thanissaro Bhikkhu

Meeting suffering with self-compassion

In the previous chapter, we began the first stage of our journey by confronting Gotama's (the Buddha's) first realisation - the inherent difficulty, unsatisfactoriness and pain that are part of our conditioned existence. We surveyed the challenging terrain of the dangerous shore we wish to leave behind. Clearly recognising this reality is essential preparation for building our raft.

But how do we respond to this recognition of pain, difficulties and disappointments? Seeing this suffering - our own and that of the world - can evoke many reactions: fear, anger, despair, aversion, denial. Gotama's sole motivation for sharing his insights was compassion, not a wish to win arguments or display knowledge, but to help us find freedom from suffering. The only truly wise and appropriate response to the reality of suffering is the heart's response of compassion.

Before we go further into compassion itself, it helps to introduce the set of qualities it belongs to. The foundational planks of our raft are the Five Gifts - our commitment to harmlessness. The ropes that bind our raft together, giving it resilience and integrity, are woven from the four Appropriate Responses, traditionally known as the four Brahnavihāras. These four boundless qualities of the heart help open us to a kind and caring wisdom towards our own suffering and the suffering in the world:

- 1 **Compassion:** responding to suffering - one's own and others' - with care, empathy and the wish to alleviate it.
- 2 **Friendliness:** wishing well-being and happiness for oneself and others.

- 3 **Appreciative joy:** feeling genuine gladness at the happiness and good fortune of oneself and others.
- 4 **Equanimity:** maintaining balance, impartiality and clarity even as life's circumstances change.

These four qualities are not only directed outwards; they are essential for our own inner well-being too, manifesting as self-compassion, self-kindness, self-appreciation and self-balance. Together they form the strong, flexible rope holding our raft together as we navigate difficult waters.

In this first stage of our journey, having recognised the reality of dukkha - pain, difficulties and disappointments - the appropriate response to bind our raft in the making is the rope of compassion. Why? Because responding to pain with aversion, fear or anger only adds another layer of suffering; it is like tightening a knot that is already causing pain. Denial prevents us from addressing our situation realistically, and despair paralyses us. Compassion, by contrast, allows us to acknowledge the reality of pain - "yes, this hurts", "yes, this is difficult" - without adding resistance or judgment. It opens the heart rather than closing it. It involves the courage to be with suffering, our own and others', and the aspiration to alleviate it where possible. Where suffering cannot be changed or resolved, compassion may simply mean being willing to stay present with it, without turning away or rushing to fix what cannot be fixed. It is the response that aligns with wisdom and kindness, motivating skilful action rather than reactivity.

Cultivating compassion, particularly self-compassion, is fundamental to our own movement from suffering to freedom. The human struggle with craving and avoidance often thrives in environments of harsh self-judgment, shame and isolation. Learning to meet our own struggles, mistakes and pain with the same kindness and understanding we might offer a dear friend is transformative. It allows us to hold the difficult reality of dukkha without being crushed by it. It also strengthens the foundational planks of the Five Gifts, fostering a kinder inner environment that makes it easier to act harmlessly. Compassion is the resilient binding that helps our raft withstand the inevitable waves of pain, difficulty and disappointment.

Gotama's teachings point to two distinct aspects of compassion: an instinctive empathy - a trembling of the heart in response to suffering - and an active compassion, or kindness in action, that responds to suffering with wisdom and care. The first allows us to recognise pain as a shared experience, fostering connection; the second motivates us to take action - practising self-compassion, supporting others, making choices that lead towards healing.

Compassion can be understood as the antidote to cruelty and indifference towards ourselves and others, and it works by widening our circle of concern. The eighth-century philosopher Śāntideva made this same point: suffering should be addressed simply because it is suffering, regardless of whose it happens to be. There is no meaningful difference, ultimately, between my pain and your pain -

there is only pain, met or unmet with care.

Compassion and wisdom are sometimes called the two wings of this path - warm wisdom and wise compassion - both needed together for the bird to fly at all. Many modern approaches to cultivating compassion begin with oneself before it can be genuinely extended to others: gentleness and patience are encouraged, instead of self-blame. By practising self-compassion, we soften our inner critic and recognise that imperfection is simply part of being human. And because all beings share the same fundamental wish to be free from suffering, compassion for others tends to arise naturally once we see this clearly - caring for others is never really separate from caring for ourselves.

One simple way to connect with others is the "just like me" reflection: this person, like me, wants to be happy; this person, like me, has known pain and loss; this person, like me, is doing their best. Held gently, this breaks down the barriers of judgment and strengthens forgiveness and patience.

Compassion and the pull of compulsive and reactive behaviours

Many of the patterns of escape and self-sabotage this workbook addresses arise from deep, if misguided, attempts to escape suffering - a way of numbing pain or seeking fleeting relief. Gotama taught that clinging to temporary pleasures leads to greater suffering in the long run. Rather than self-judgment, our path towards healing lies in compassionate awareness of the underlying pain itself. Shame and self-judgment fuel these patterns further, so replacing self-hatred with self-compassion allows for real change. Viewing our own patterns of escape and self-sabotage through the lens of suffering, rather than moral failure, is what breaks the cycle of shame and isolation. This support rarely happens alone - connection with others, not isolation, is what sustains the journey from bondage to freedom. No one completes it single-handed. Rather than treating cravings as enemies to be fought, compassion allows us to meet them with kindness, asking gently: what unmet need is behind this craving?

Living with compassion

To practise self-compassion, we recognise our own suffering without judgment. We can cultivate compassion through meditation, affirmations and aspirations and other practices. We deliberately let go of perfectionism and self-criticism. Kristin Neff, whose research on self-compassion we return to in Supporting material below, offers phrases of this kind for moments of distress: "this is a moment of suffering"; "suffering is part of life"; "may I be kind to myself in this moment"; "may I give myself the compassion I need." To cultivate compassion for others, we see our shared humanity - everyone struggles - and we respond to pain with understanding rather than judgment, supporting and being supported by each other along the way.

Compassion is not just a feeling; it is an active way of being that transforms suffering into connection and wisdom.

Practice - meeting difficulty with compassion

A short self-compassion pause (*skip this practice if you find it triggering*)

Find a comfortable posture, sitting or lying down. Allow your eyes to close gently, or hold a soft, unfocused gaze.

Take a few slightly deeper breaths, letting your body settle. Notice the points of contact between your body and the surface supporting you. Let go of any unnecessary tension you are holding.

Silently offer yourself one, some or all of the following phrases, like a whisper at the back of the mind:

- "May I be free of fear and danger."
- "May I be free of pain and sorrow."
- "May I hold myself with great care and compassion."
- "May I find peace and healing in this moment."

Alternative phrases:

- "This is a moment of suffering."
- "Suffering is part of life; many people feel this way."
- "May I be kind to myself in this moment."
- "May I meet this difficulty with compassion."
- "May I hold my pain with tenderness."
- "May I give myself the compassion I need."

Repeat whichever phrases resonate most, letting them settle gently, breathing softly. There is no need to force a particular feeling - simply offer the intention of kindness towards your own difficulty. Notice any subtle shifts in body or mind: perhaps a slight softening, a little more space around the difficulty. Even if nothing changes, the act of offering compassion is itself the practice.

Stay with this for a few more moments. When you feel ready, gently release the phrases, take another conscious breath or two, and bring your awareness back to your surroundings, opening your eyes if they are closed.

Self-reflections

Consider your typical responses when faced with difficulty or suffering, your own or others':

- 1 What is my habitual reaction to physical, mental or emotional pain? ([view card](#))
 - 2 When I see suffering in others, what feelings arise most strongly - examples include empathy, pity, aversion, overwhelm, a wish to help? ([view card](#))
 - 3 How do I typically react when I make a mistake or experience a setback? Is my inner voice harsh or kind? ([view card](#))
 - 4 What does self-compassion mean to me? Does it feel accessible, difficult, or unfamiliar? ([view card](#))
 - 5 Can I recall a time when responding to difficulty with compassion, from myself or someone else, made a real difference? Can I offer myself that same compassion? ([view card](#))
 - 6 If a close friend were in my position right now, what kind words would I offer them? Can I offer myself the same? ([view card](#))
 - 7 How can I be more present with someone else's pain - or my own - without immediately trying to fix it? ([view card](#))
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Journaling prompts

Use your journal to explore compassion more deeply:

- 1 **Acknowledging your pain, difficulties and disappointments:** write about a specific difficulty you are currently experiencing. Try to describe it simply, without excessive judgment or storytelling. Then experiment with offering yourself a phrase of compassion, such as "this is really difficult right now - may I meet this with compassion." Write about how this feels.
- 2 **Compassion versus other responses:** think of a recent challenging situation. What was your initial reaction - compassion, or something else, such as anger, fear, self-pity or blame? How did that reaction affect the situation and your own well-being? How might responding with compassion have changed things?
- 3 **Obstacles to self-compassion:** what gets in the way of offering yourself compassion - beliefs such as "I don't deserve it" or "this is self-indulgent", fear of letting yourself off the hook, or habitual self-criticism? Explore these obstacles gently.
- 4 **The rope metaphor:** reflect on how compassion, especially self-compassion, could act as a rope binding your own efforts together on your path to freedom. How might it provide strength and flexibility when facing challenges, preventing your raft from falling apart under stress?

- 5 **Just like me:** choose someone you find difficult, and write the three "just like me" lines for them - they want to be happy, they have known pain and loss, they are doing their best. What shifts, if anything, as you write it?
 - 6 **Two wings:** where in your life do you notice more wisdom than warmth, or more warmth than wisdom? What would it look like to bring the other wing more fully into that part of your life?
 - 7 **An unmet need:** think of a recent craving or urge. Instead of treating it as an enemy, ask it gently: what unmet need are you pointing to? Write down whatever answer arises, without needing to act on it.
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Supporting material: scientific and philosophical perspectives on compassion

For those interested in the science and philosophy behind this practice, here is a brief overview.

- **Neuroscience:** research suggests that compassion involves distinct neural pathways from empathy alone. While empathy activates pain circuits (feeling with someone), compassion activates areas associated with reward, affiliation and readiness to help. Practices cultivating compassion, particularly self-compassion, are linked to increased heart rate variability and vagal tone - markers of better emotional regulation - and to reduced stress responses. Our brains appear to be wired for caregiving, and turning that inward seems to carry measurable benefits.
- **Psychology & Psychotherapy:** pioneering work by researchers such as Dr Kristin Neff has demonstrated significant mental health benefits associated with self-compassion, including reduced anxiety, depression and stress, and increased emotional resilience and life satisfaction - contrary to fears that self-compassion breeds complacency. Self-compassion is generally understood to involve three components: self-kindness (versus self-judgment), common humanity (recognising suffering as shared, versus isolation) and mindfulness (balanced awareness of difficult feelings, versus over-identification or avoidance). Therapeutic approaches such as Compassion-Focused Therapy (CFT) directly target shame and self-criticism by cultivating compassionate mind states.
- **Philosophy:** many ethical traditions place a high value on compassion. Buddhist philosophy sees it as an essential quality of an awakened mind, arising naturally from wisdom's understanding of our interconnectedness and universal suffering. In Western ethics, the "ethics of care" tradition emphasises relationality and compassionate response; Stoicism, while stressing acceptance, does not preclude compassionate action grounded in our shared humanity and reason. Compassion offers a powerful ethical motivation rooted in affective connection rather than abstract rules alone.

Remember to remember

Compassion, particularly self-compassion, is the first strand of the strong, resilient rope that binds our raft together. It is the wise, kind and appropriate response to the recognition of dukkha - the inherent pain, difficulties and disappointments of life laid bare by Gotama's first realisation. Instead of adding layers of resistance, judgment or despair, compassion allows us to meet suffering with an open heart and the intention to alleviate it.

Let this quality of compassion be your constant companion as we continue through the first stage of our journey. It is a powerful resource, always available, helping us hold the truth of our lives with courage and grace, and preparing us for the work of Abandoning that lies ahead.

*Unlike self-criticism, which asks if you're good enough,
self-compassion asks: what's good for you?*

— Kristin Neff, *Self-Compassion: The Proven Power of Being Kind to Yourself*
(2011)

Now that we have laid our foundational planks and bound them with the rope of compassion, we turn to the first of our four anchors, beginning with mindfulness of the body.

See the [Index of sutta references](#) (web, D8. The print books carry a consolidated sutta appendix instead.)

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