

The Seeds of Compassion

A Presentation with Acharya Gaylon Ferguson

Hello, welcome back to The Science of Meditation. I'm Gaylon Ferguson, and I'm going to introduce you to the practice of compassion this afternoon. My title is Acharya Gaylon Ferguson, Acharya means senior teacher and it's a teaching title I was given in the Shambhala Buddhist lineage. So our theme now is the practice of compassion, and many people ask why do we even think of practicing compassion or where does this even come from? And that's a good question, because the very thought that arises of might I be more compassionate, might I be more helpful, might I be more kind and of benefit to others, is a sign that there is something in our own nature, we might even say it's an aspect of human nature that we care, that we're concerned for others.

Compassion in the Buddhist tradition is sometimes described as a noble heart, that the Tibetan word *ninje* means "nin" means heart and "je" means noble and what's noble about this human heartedness is that it's concerned for more than ourselves. It's loving and kind toward ourselves, but it's also interested in others, and interested in lessening or alleviating the suffering of others. Now what the evolutionary science is pointing to, is that this is actually hardwired into us, that the human organism actually has genetically programmed in there a concern for others, for family, for community, for our friends, there is something in us that naturally empathises and feels the suffering of others, and wants to do something about it.

So it isn't just something that's just added on like an idea or a philosophy that someone thought up or like a religious dogma saying we should be good or we should be kind or we should be compassionate. The sense is that the impulse or the interest, the motivation to practice compassion and to cultivate and strengthen our own compassion genes you might say is something that arises naturally in us, it's of our essence, it's part of our basic being, it's in us, it is our heart, it is our human heartedness, we might say it's our humanity and this applies to how we up treat other human beings, you know we say that person was disrespectful or they didn't treat me quite like you should treat a human being, but it also applies to even how we treat other life forms, animals and other beings on the planet.

After all we have something called the humane society, and we have laws that certain ways of treating animals are inhumane and that means that these laws and these practices that we're going to explore today together are arising out of something very natural to us, very close to us in our own heart, it's our own humanity, our own human nature, our own awakened nature, my teacher called it soft spot, that everyone has a soft spot that we care about something or someone, some part where we're vulnerable and we feel and we care.

Nowadays in society the fact that we care often gets very mixed up with stress, one of the most popular forms of mindfulness meditation in this country is mindfulness based stress reduction. But this word stress, which to various degrees we all feel some kind of stress, the reason that we even feel stress is because we care, we're worried about our children or our ageing parents or our school system or our financial situation, health, whatever it might be and that care and that concern is completely natural to us.

It's not just a religious thing or a spiritual thing, it's not just that some people have this compassionate heart, everyone cares about something or someone. So that care is the basis, it's the ground of our having this conversation, this dialogue, this exploration and contemplation about the meaning of compassion and then going further than just talking about it, to begin to engage the practice so that we can embody and feel in a whole hearted way compassion.

So often the question arises, someone would say why does this view matter? We live in a society where there's a slogan; just do it. I just want to do this compassion practice and get on with it, why do I need to spend a moment, we're spending that moment here at the beginning thinking over and contemplating together, why does this approach in which it's something completely innate, it's our natural, it's our nature, it's our human heartedness is the basis of practicing. Why is that initial view important? It's important because the counterview is that compassion is something we need to get or acquire, I'm going to make myself compassionate by taking this or doing this, almost like an implantation or an injection of something foreign from outside.

It makes a world of difference that we start with this as our own enlightened genes, our own compassionate heart, as hard wired into our nature. It means that what we're cultivating is something close to us already, it's not something foreign or exotic or higher than we are that only a few people who have been saints in history, extraordinary beings, it's completely ordinary and natural that every day in fact, we already are expressing this compassionate nature, that we let someone else go first you know, we're rushing to work and driving but we realise they also are trying to get to their office for their appointment and so we, sometimes, we're generous, that act of generosity of giving to someone, helping someone, being patient with someone, that's a sign that this is already here and present with us.

So we aren't starting now from the point that we are somehow spiritually impoverished, there's something lacking in us, and maybe somehow if I work hard enough and I'm lucky it will happen and I will get this enlightened compassion. We're starting from the point of view that we're fundamentally full, we're fundamentally whole, we're fundamentally filled with compassion already and that we express this in an ordinary sense in our everyday life every day and so we're just going to increase and strengthen what's already here. That's a much more effective basis for practicing than starting on the kind of shaky ground of well, I'm kind of selfish and I'm kind of maybe something else but I really could get... Yes, we all have selfish tendencies and moments where we contract and it's me and me, but we also have something underneath that, underlying that, deeper than that, that's a fundamentally positive outlook, it's fundamentally generous and kind and loving and caring. So we're starting on that basis which allows us really to approach this in a more relaxed way, we're less desperate that I'm empty and this is going to fill me up. It's more like there are seeds here, there's something already shining if you will, something already warm in us and we're just going to increase that warmth, we're going to increase that caring capacity.

Many times people ask if this is our own nature, if we could start a compassion practice basing it on some basic goodness, some fundamental caring nature that's just an aspect of being human, then how is it that the world ended up in the shape that it's in with war and greed and exploitation and all the things that we hear about every day on the internet or newspapers, magazines, you know all the messages of terrible suffering and things that are caused in the world by people, by human beings doing things against, to harm other human beings and then if we widen it out, ways that we are causing environmental destruction and humanly caused climate change and so forth. If we're basically enlightened beings with some sane, wise, compassionate nature, how is it that we've ended up almost destroying life on the planet and killing so many of each other's, right, the millions of human beings in wars, suicide bombs, terrorism attacks, drone attacks, all these ways that don't seem to be consonant with this fundamentally compassionate nature?

So we need to think about that of how could it both be true, how could it be true that we are basically compassionate beings hardwired for caring for others, altruistic in some way that it actually makes us happy to care for others, the scientific experiments now that are

being done about in happiness classes, positive psychology classes where students are told on the weekend, just do things that will bring pleasure to yourself, versus comparative studies with people who do something this weekend that helps others, that's kindness or a gesture of helping others, and when they compare the two groups almost always people feel more fulfilled, more satisfied, more happiness, having done something to help others.

So that's a sign that we are in some way fulfilling our own nature, satisfying our own nature by engaging in that way, looking outward and caring for others. So what happens it seems is that through fear or pain, we contract from that, from that compassionate caring, that oh oh, I'd better look out for me, other people don't seem to be looking out for me, or trauma or various things that may have been done to us and we develop habits of a kind of selfishness, of not caring, of numbing out. I mean here everything from actual substance abuse to binge watching television to all the ways that we actually buffer this vulnerable caring heart, so that we don't feel what's going on around us.

We sometimes feel bombarded, talking about the news and television and media, we feel bombarded by all the messages of suffering that there is in the world, what could I do about Syrian refugees? What can I do about suicide bombers in London or something? So that bombardment in a strange way we actually sometimes feel like we turn off, I don't actually feel more sympathy for what's going on there, I don't feel more bravery like yes I could engage, I could do something, I could bring more kindness into my life, we sometimes feel like oh, I'd better just retreat into a cocoon. And we develop habits of cocooning, whatever that means in our lives, ways that we buffer ourselves and enclose ourselves and keep this caringness in a sense kind of bottled up and those habits can go on day after week after month after year.

We can actually find ourselves that, sometimes to our surprise, that oh I've actually hardened my heart, I've actually numbed myself so that I actually, I'm out of touch. One of my teachers says we find ourselves disconnected from nature, so to speak anesthetised, we're not actually feeling nature and that's why environmental destruction. We find ourselves cut off from other human beings and other life forms so that we're disconnected socially and alienated, and then we find that we've actually disconnected from ourselves, we've actually numbed, so if someone were to say to us; so what do you actually feel? We might have to pause a minute and well, sort of I think I feel or I used to... So this kind of numbing is quite common in our society, I think there are just more and more ways of numbing ourselves to feeling human, to being human.

So strangely enough, something that's completely innate and intrinsic to us, we can lose touch with it, almost like if my hand is that vulnerable, caring tender heartedness, I somehow can... my attention can drift away from it so that I lose touch with my own basic being, my human beingness, my human heartedness and then of course if I lose touch of it within myself, I'm more doubtful of its presence in others, I think well, it's just a doggy dog world, it's every dog for himself or herself. The great philosopher Hobbes said society can be a war of all against all, everybody's just out for themselves, we say it's a cut-throat world and so forth.

So we don't recognise others' humanity at that point either, everybody's just trying to cut everybody off in the morning getting to work, because we're just focused on... But generally actually, my own experience in living in different places on the Westcoast in the United States, East Coast and now living here in Colorado, is that actually people are somewhat generous with each other, you know even with the pressure of everybody's trying to get to work and get done what they need to get done, people are fairly decent and generous with each other, and that's a sign that even with whatever patterns of greediness and jealousy and envy and speed that there are in our society, in our culture and those are definitely there, we can one click get all kinds of evidence of people you

know being snarky and mean to each other and all kinds of things going on, but underneath that there does seem to be some positive humanity.

So our practice involves a confidence, a trust in that basic humanness that's there, often as I was just saying encrusted or crusted over, like we've covered it over, like we've covered it up with various things, but it is possible through practice in a sense to peel away some of those layers of what's come to cover over our own living heartiness or human heartedness.