

Making Friends with Ourselves

A Presentation by Acharya Judith Simmer-Brown

Good morning everyone and welcome to Shambhala Mountain Centre's Science of Meditation Summit. I'm Judith Simmer-Brown, Acharya of Shambhala and also professor of religious studies at Naropa University, and today our topic self-compassion and loving kindness. I'm delighted to talk about this topic because the compassion movement is growing in the United States and there's greater interest in bringing compassion into secular settings of all kinds and it's extremely important to begin with looking at self-compassion specifically.

There are a lot of misunderstandings about compassion in our world. I was talking a few days ago to Sharon Salzberg who said that when she first began to teach compassion practices, she really received from everybody the notion that compassion is all about weakness and vulnerability and passivity and that there's not a sense of dignity and strength in compassion.

And similarly there's misunderstanding about compassion for oneself. We live in a society which has so much harshness toward everyone but especially toward ourselves and there are very fascinating conversations that happen with our Asian Buddhist teachers as they talk about compassion practices in Asia. There, when self-compassion practices are taught it's no big deal, it's simply part of the flow of compassion practices that are taught that one spends a moment on self-compassion practices and then builds to a sense of compassion for others. And as the Dalai Lama has so often said, you can't really have compassion for others without having first compassion for yourself, but as these teachers have come to the West, there's been a real surprise on their part, that we as westerners have a special challenge in being compassionate toward ourselves.

There are many views about why this could be, and one of the views is that from our Abrahamic context there's a sense that there's something fundamentally flawed about who we are, some notion of original sin or some fundamental fallenness about who humans really are, but at least in my life in religious studies, since I've talked to people who are in Christianity and Judaism and Islam, there's a very strong sense that that is a kind of heresy, the core of Abrahamic religions is a belief in human goodness, very similar to our Shambhala view, that there is a fundamental sense of grace and beauty and wholeness at the core of who we are, but through a variety of historical accidents, particularly Christianity has emphasised original sin and basic human badness and this has entered popular culture in a way that it has become the norm that people feel bad about themselves. There's a quality of harshness that people carry with them toward themselves, a sense that they must behave in a particular way, perform in a particular way, succeed in a particular way, to be worthy of love and care.

So I remember seeing a video of the Dalai Lama hearing from his students about how hard it was to have compassion for themselves, and as he listened to them at a certain point he broke down and began to weep, it was so shocking and surprising. One of the beautiful things about the Shambhala teachings is that Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche had a really deep understanding of the difficulties his students had, having compassion for themselves. And the way he addressed this was through his fundamental Shambhala teachings of basic goodness. When he began to teach about basic goodness, there was a part of us who said "Yeah, yeah" and went ahead being harsh and difficult with ourselves, but as the Shambhala teachings unfolded, we've come to understand that this particular view which is so core in the Buddhist teachings and in the spiritual teachings all across the world and in the teachings in basic humanity, these are the absolute medicine that we need as western practitioners in order to reverse this tendency of incredible harshness toward ourselves.

So this day of discussion of self-compassion is extremely important. Without this it's very difficult to really deepen in our spiritual practice of any kind. It may be that we won't even really allow ourselves to sit in meditation, much less in compassion practices to allow ourselves a little time on the cushion just getting to know ourselves, being present with our immediate experience and feeling what we feel. This requires a certain amount of respect and appreciation for our immediate experience.

And for this reason self-compassion practices can really reveal to us the extent to which we're willing to be open to the dignity and wholeness of our own experience, the authenticity of our experience and the importance of honouring that experience in order to go deeply into our practice as Shambhala Buddhists, as Buddhist practitioners, as secular practitioners of mindfulness, whatever it is. If we do not have some kind of personal regard at the core of all of this it's very difficult to proceed further.

I teach a compassion course at Naropa University, it's a course for undergraduates, it includes the science of compassion, it's really a course on the neuroscience, the social science and humanities of compassion and the core practices. Each week I teach a different compassion practice to my students. And when I begin with my students it's very difficult for them to begin with self-compassion, so I begin the first week with a very simple practice of just placing their hands on their hearts and saying, I am basically good, just repeating, I am basically good. So for the first week of practice, that is the practice that they do, they contemplate this and they write in their journals, share with me their experience and for so many of them they sit with tears running down their cheeks of enormous relief of contemplating this, this is not something they've been told in their culture and even if they've been deeply loved in their families they have still received subliminal messages that there's something fundamentally wrong with them, that they need to achieve something, they need to work hard, they need to be exceptional, better than average in order to be loveable, it's about what they do not who they are.

And a little later today you'll hear about Kristin-Neff's work and the importance of really beginning to understand the difference between self-compassion and self-esteem. We are willing to care for others rather quickly just for their being who they are, but for ourselves it's often so difficult for us just to honour our own immediate experience, to feel that we are deserving of love and care just for who we are, without trying to change ourselves, without trying to fix ourselves but being just completely present with who we are, with a sense of sympathy and really cutting ourselves some slack and a little sense of humour doesn't hurt either. Part of self-compassion is really developing a kind of appreciation and a gentle sense of humour about ourselves of oh, there I go again. And you know in practicing meditation, just there I go again and then come back to the breathing that we are placing our attention on. So self-compassion is a core aspect of becoming a contemplative practitioner of any kind, and it's really crucial that we develop this.

There are a variety of tricks to help us get into self-compassion when we have difficulty doing this on our own. I've learned several methods from different sources. One approach that I work with myself and also with my students, is to take a photograph of myself as a young child and to look at myself in the photograph and to contemplate myself and to wish my own happiness, my own safety, my own health, my own ease, and my students have found this a very powerful way to be able to get into a fresh way of looking at themselves.

Another way is to identify a time of tremendous difficulty and pain and to go back to that in our mind's eye and reflect on that and hold ourselves in that crisis and really feel the vulnerability and to just feel care and to give ourselves a kind of hug in our practice.

Another way is to begin to see a benefactor or someone who unconditionally loves us and supports us and to visualise that person and to allow ourselves to receive their love and

care as a way to open our hearts to ourselves so that we can receive our own love more naturally.

All of these ways are ways to begin to overcome the kind of cultural message of harshness and the need to impress ourselves or to prove something to ourselves, to do something in order to earn our own love for ourselves. And these are benchmarks we can never actually fully meet, we never feel satisfied or complete if we go the self-esteem route. This is a powerful way to begin to look in a very immediate sense at whatever practice we do and to find a way to settle, open our hearts and relax.

So this is a very important module of the Science of Meditation Summit, I'm delighted you've been able to join us today and I'm sure that this day and its presentations will lead to some very interesting discussions with you and your friends and fellow practitioners wherever you are. Such an important topic in our development as true and full human beings. Thank you.