

The Science and Practice of Compassion

A Dialogue with Dr. Kelly McGonigal and Acharya Fleet Maull

[0:00:08.5] Acharya Fleet Maull: Hi and welcome to day 5 of The Science of Meditation, today is dedicated to the science of compassion and altruism and I'm very happy to be here with Doctor Kelly McGonigal from Stanford University. Hi Kelly.

[0:00:23.1] Dr. Kelly McGonigal: Hi, it's so great to be with you.

[0:00:25.3] Acharya Fleet Maull: Yeah, well we're very excited to share your experience and wisdom with our audience today, and I'm going to say a little bit about you to begin with and then we'll waltz right in. Doctor Kelly McGonigal is a Health Psychologist at Stanford University, and teaches courses that are available to the public, which I understand is very very popular, in how to bring the discoveries of modern neurosciences as well as the age old contemplative traditions into our lives and really path the ways in order to live healthier and happier lives. In many ways compassion is innate to ourselves as human beings, we are feeling beings and we have hearts that are touched by our own suffering and the suffering of those that are around us, and so it's a natural capacity that we have and yet at the same time I think we are often too acutely aware of when we're not feeling so compassionate or sometimes hitting the edges of our compassion. But maybe we could start, if you could share something of what we know about compassion today from current science and from the research you've all been doing at Stanford?

[0:01:40.5] Dr. Kelly McGonigal: Yeah well, so let's start with the definition of compassion, the definition that we use at C-care at Stanford is that compassion begins with the awareness of suffering, maybe it's the suffering of someone you care about, or suffering in the world or even your own suffering, and as compassion unfolds that awareness of suffering gives rise to a little bit of distress, concern, you might even call it empathic distress, where you have a sense for a moment of sharing or being touched by suffering that you're aware of. As compassion continues to unfold it gives a sense of connection to the one who is suffering. Perhaps you see them as a fellow human being who just wants to be happy and free from suffering, perhaps you feel a sense of caring or affection, and that gives rise to a desire to relief that suffering or to respond to that suffering in some way, and hopefully that can lead to action, whether it's helping, or listening or being a voice for someone who doesn't have a voice and that is... we think of compassion as a process that unfolds in that way, and you know you mentioned that this is a basic instinct and it's one of our basic premises that almost every human being, unless we're talking about complete and utter sociopaths, have a very strong instinct toward compassion, but that process can collapse at each stage along the way depending on all sorts of factors, for example your own biases about other people or other groups, which might get in the way of even noticing suffering, let alone feeling distressed by it or seeing yourself in the one who's suffering. We know that compassion can collapse if you feel like you don't have the resources to respond, you might get as far as feeling for the suffering and wanting to do something and then you think "What am I going to do about refugees? I don't know" and in that case compassion can collapse into simply the distress of being aware of suffering, rather than action or response. Compassion can collapse for all sorts of reasons and one of the things that we're really interested in studying at Stanford is what can you do to strengthen that process so that when you find yourself say overwhelmed and not sure what to do, are there meditations that you can use? Or are there mind-sets that you can apply that allow you to stay engaged even if you're not sure what to do. Or if you become aware that your compassion is collapsing because of biases that you hold or because of fear that you have about another person or a group, what are things that you can do to overcome that very natural instinct, so I think if you sort of summarise what we know about compassion, you presented it very clearly that it's a natural instinct and it's competing

with other instincts like fear and the desire to avoid suffering and natural human biases and overwhelm and anger and other instincts that are equally human and what we know from the science of training compassion is there's nothing wrong with that, but that we often need to make a conscious choice to strengthen the instinct of compassion and develop it rather than allow those other instincts to really determine how we respond to suffering.

[0:04:55.6] Acharya Fleet Maull: It sounds like as you were defining compassion, there's a whole spectrum here, along with what you said there's many points where what we're calling compassion could collapse into distress of one kind or another, and it seems like that spectrum, you're including empathy in that, I know some clinicians and some teachers kind of separate them out, empathy being the awareness and sensitivity of suffering in others and then compassion being more that quality that we are able to work with it in a resilient way and move into caring and even empathy.

[0:05:26.0] Dr. Kelly McGonigal: Yeah, we think of empathy as being a precursor to compassion, we know for example that if somebody lacks empathy they actually can't experience compassion and there's some really interesting studies looking at how can you manipulate empathy to make compassion disappear, collapse, some studies even look at giving people pain killers or Botox that impairs your ability to have that empathic distress. So if you see someone else in pain and you've numbed your own pain system, you actually don't feel that empathy that gives rise to compassion, or if you have a lot of Botox in your face and you can't have that emotional mimicry that when you see someone sad then you start to feel sad or if you see someone happy and you start to get that contagious smiling, when that's impaired people don't feel empathy and then are less likely to help or have that whole process of compassion. So it's an important precursor, but in my experience a lot of people get confused and they think that empathy is sort of the end game and empathy, when we're talking about suffering you know not empathic joy but empathic distress, it doesn't feel good, it can be overwhelming and we often need skills to move forward from that empathic distress, where we are aware of the suffering and we feel grief or we feel anger or we feel sadness or we feel fear, but that's a precursor, and a lot of the traditional techniques for compassion training are about how do you use that empathic distress as a catalyst for this much bigger, more approach oriented and positive state of compassion, which transforms empathic distress into action and into courage. You might know that I teach compassion to physicians, and this is one group that has a lot of confusion around empathy and compassion and they've actually been trained to turn off their empathy, which actually limits their compassion, because the sense is that if my empathy is on, I'm going to be drained every time I come into contact with the suffering in my work, the suffering of patients and the suffering of their loved ones. And I think it's really important to distinguish between empathy and compassion and understand that we may need to train is so that compassion is available to us but you also need to be able to transform it rather than get stuck in that state of just I'm sharing your suffering right now.

[0:07:53.0] Acharya Fleet Maull: Yeah and one of the places that comes up, and you mentioned working with physicians, of the idea of compassion fatigue, I really found it first surface in a research around nursing, but it obviously applies to all kinds of clinical work and really anybody that's you know working with people in a stressful situation, but in some ways it could apply to modern life for all of us I mean just the news, we develop what we might call compassion fatigue just watching the six o'clock news, but some researchers and clinicians say it's more quantitative to say it's really empathy fatigue <inaudible 0:08:27.2> properly understood as a relief to that kind of burn out or fatigue, and I know for different people it works in different ways, but where I'm trying to help is so that we can get down to the meat of it here.

[0:08:38.9] Dr. Kelly McGonigal: I think so I'm one of those people who love nuances of language, but I also feel people should feel free to describe their direct experience. So I think what people get fatigued by is caring, in the absence of sensing compassion satisfaction. So they get fatigued either by the helping, so it could be helping fatigue, or they get fatigued of the empathic distress and if that is not held in a bigger container of "I know what I can do, I'm supported in doing that work, and I see the benefits of my giving or my helping or my responding that would lead to a real sense of compassion satisfaction" then people get burnt out, because the... sometimes I get nervous when I hear people say that true compassion could never lead to burn out, could never lead to exhaustion, could never lead to moral distress, because frankly I think the world is more complicated than that. And no matter how much you strengthen your own compassion you're going to find yourself in situations that go beyond the limits of what one human being can respond to skilfully and that even people who have dedicated their lives training in compassion, they find themselves in situations where they are temporarily overwhelmed by the suffering that they're encountering and the inability to fix it all or do it all, so I think that when I hear people describe sort of true compassion as never draining and never exhausting, I feel like it's just setting up a kind of compassion shame for people who are doing the work, I actually greatly appreciate the work of Joan Halifax, who has used something like compassion fatigue or empathy fatigue or burnout, as a signal to reengage with resources to support your continued compassion, but it's not necessarily a big sign like "You're doing compassion wrong, if it were real compassion, you'd just feel good." And I think that is actually one of the more interesting studies that I've seen, actually ask people how do you think compassion feels? And people describe things like "oh, compassion is calm, compassion is peaceful" and then they actually do a compassion induction that involves responding to someone else's suffering and people who say they actually felt compassion in that moment and then they describe what that compassion feels like, it's a much more mixed state, it's not particularly calm, it's a combination of calm and really strongly aroused and alert and activated, and it's a positive emotion that coincides with some negative emotion and distress, and again so to me anything that sounds like idealising compassion I want to run away from. But the distinction that you started with that there is a way of responding to compassion that is less exhausting. That is definitely true and that is part of what we're trying to train by strengthening compassion.

[0:11:34.9] Acharya Fleet Maull: Yeah, that's wonderful, I think it's really helpful to avoid any absolutism in language or any kind of idealism like that. You mentioned the term compassion satisfaction and that really caught my ear, kind of describe the components of it. I wonder if you could say something, and interesting now also just talking about people's description of something and an induction in compassion as being something that absolutely draws that forth and a part of that is arousal. So there clearly is some arousal involved in compassion, and then from there the compassion satisfaction. I wonder if you could talk a little bit about the neurobiology, we don't have to go too deep into it, but maybe talk a little bit about what we know about the neurobiology of that?

[0:12:14.1] Dr. Kelly McGonigal: Ok yeah, so let's just do that a little bit separately, let me just briefly say something about compassion satisfaction because it's one of those skills that was really missing from the literature in terms of training compassion, and was also nothing I learned, I didn't learn any particular practices for this in the Buddhist tradition, there may be them, but I never learned them in the western context that I was studying the practices. And it's something that we've brought into trainings because we saw how important it was as a psychological resource. So compassion satisfaction is basically a savouring in witnessing of compassion, and it involves both recognising what you've contributed, so if you've done something out of a compassionate intention and you've responded in some way, whether it was by listening, whether it was by helping, whether it was by offering a hug, whether it was by acting in some way, that you actually sense the

link between your intention and your action, so you honour that in yourself, and you look for the evidence that it mattered, that it made a difference, so you really take in any appreciation that you're given or you give it to yourself if that appreciation is silent in your community or your context. And it really is the practice of savouring, you have to do it, and one of the ways I train it is I have people tell compassion stories where they talk about something that they did, and they describe their intention, and they describe what it was like and they describe any positive consequence for themselves and for others, and the flipside of that for compassion satisfaction is also to become a witness to compassion in your community. One of the things that we know really protects against compassion fatigue or burnout is feeling like you're part of a compassionate community, that it's not all DIY, do it yourself, Fleet saving the world, all the compassion is on you right, it's you against the suffering in the world. When you're able to look around and like "Wow, I'm part of a community that cares about relieving the same suffering that I care about and actually this person in the community, they extended kindness, they gave me the benefit of the doubt, they supported me and I was the recipient of that compassion", that's a really big part of compassion satisfaction. That sort of compassion by definition is bigger than self, and so if you're only focused on what you do and the effect that it has, that can in some ways set yourself up for eventually compassion fatigue or collapse because you may feel like you have to do it all yourself and at some point you're going to hit that wall, but when you can look around and see the compassion that's available to you, see other people who care and you sense yourself as part of a compassion that is bigger than self, that also feels compassion satisfaction, and that is something that you often have to do so I will have people literally tell compassion stories, tell me about a time this week when you were the recipient of compassion and what that was like and to like bathe yourself in that awareness of the compassion that is available around you. So that's sort of one of the ways that I think about compassion satisfaction. Do you want to respond to that or do you want me to jump into the neuro-bio?

[0:15:28.6] Acharya Fleet Maull: No, why don't you go ahead and jump right into the neurobiology of that? And at some point I would like us to come back to, we've been talking about compassion in terms of being aware of the suffering of others and our motivation to do something in response, but also I would like to talk about our own suffering, and talk about compassion for our own pain and suffering.

[0:15:51.1] Dr. Kelly McGonigal: Yeah. So for the neuro-bio of compassion, so this is an interesting one, one thing I'll say; with pretty much any brain imaging studies or any studies of what's happening in the brain, it's not completely speculative, there's a lot of studies done but I would say that nobody can say with confidence this is exactly what happens in the brain when every human being experiences what I'm calling compassion. So I'm going to describe to you some of the core findings that I think can give us a felt sense for what compassion is, and I like the neuroscience because I think it gives us sort of choice points, if that's what compassion is, that means I can choose to focus my attention in a certain way that promotes compassion, or I can be aware of certain states of mind or habits that might interfere with compassion and train around those to better allow compassion to flourish. So that's why I like the neuroscience of it, I think it actually gives us choice points about how to strengthen compassion. So when you look at people experiencing compassion, studies have been done looking at expert compassion meditators, people who have spent tens of thousands of hours training in compassion, all the way to people you pluck off the street and you're like "Hey, I'm going to show you a video of someone suffering, do you feel any compassion?" Right, so all the way from training the mind, you're an expert, to everyday experiences of compassion without necessarily any training involved. So it's sort of the whole spectrum has been done and you start to see some common threads, which is that compassion begins with a threat response, and that surprises a lot of people, particularly those who idealise compassion as

a state of total equanimity and calm, or only as a positive emotion like love, but compassion you see often in the brain the alarm system being triggered, like areas like the amygdala are areas of the brain that respond to empathic pain, areas that also process your own physical pain states, emotional pain or physical pain. That seems to be very important and in order for that stress response to begin in the brain... sorry, I should back up a little bit, the brain needs to be paying attention to whatever the suffering is, so there's some interesting work showing that if people are distracted, they're much less likely to have that empathic stress response when they're in the presence of someone suffering, or they're less likely to notice that someone needs help, whether they're distracted because they're looking at their phone, or they're just distracted because their mind is wandering and they're ruminating or they're thinking about something other than the present moment. So the first things you need for compassion is a brain that's paying attention, and then a stress response begins once awareness of suffering has taken place. And so right now you can describe that as not so much compassion as being this empathic distress that is the catalyst for compassion. And for that empathic distress to be transformed into compassion, you see areas of the reward system become activated, and the reward system as well as the caregiving systems of the brain, these are areas of the brain that make you want to approach something. So if you can imagine the last time you saw a baby and you wanted to pick it up, or a puppy and you were like "Puppy, puppy, I want to smell you", or maybe a piece of chocolate and you were like "Hmm, chocolate, I want to consume you", whatever it was, you know that feeling of I see something and I want to approach it and consume it, that part of the brain seems to be the thing that really... the systems of the brain that distinguishes compassion from sadness, grief or empathic distress, that what you have is the co-activation of distress areas of the brain with activation of reward and caregiving areas of the brain, and that really describes of what compassion is, that you're aware of suffering and you're feeling distress, but instead of shutting down, instead of immediately trying to regulate it down like "No no no, like I'm going to reappraise this, they're not really suffering that much, or it's not really my job to care about their suffering" you actually not completely dampening down the distress, but you're meeting it with a sense of wanting to approach, and then as compassion continues to unfold, you see action areas of the brain become engaged, areas of the brain that are important for driving behaviour, or you know we can talk in terms of neurochemicals too, like dopamine that drives approach and action, and oxytocin which also drives courage and hope and action and connection, but I think... Is that consistent with your experience of compassion? Sort of over the process that I described and sort of the holding of opposites?

[0:20:42.8] Acharya Fleet Maull: Yeah, I think so. I think so very much, there's always some kind of a challenge in some kind of a like responding to a call or something and then there's some really positive experiences when moving into that in a way and then there's some places where fear comes up and we're experiencing a kind of frozenness and so forth, but there's definitely something really going on relationally, right, and it's not that unsimilar to how we get in a relationship with anyone.

[0:21:24.8] Dr. Kelly McGonigal: Yes, and you what's interesting, there's been some comparisons of mindfulness training with compassion training, and it seems like... of course I think they belong together, like you should do both, mindfulness certainly supports compassion. But when people have trained only in mindfulness you see different types of responding to suffering, both one's own suffering and the suffering of others, that looks more like a dampening down of response. So the brain maybe looks calmer in response to people's, well, suffering and also positive emotions, there's more of that equanimity that you would expect to see, and compassion training doesn't create exactly the same kind of equanimity, it looks more like full-on, yes I'm triggered, yes there is a stress present, and something comes in to support holding that awareness instead of having to down regulate it to reach a certain sense of calm, you also see this in epi-

neuro physiology, but the rest of the nervous system responds to when one is experiencing compassion, people who have looked at what happened in the off and on nervous system and we found that compassion looks like a real balance activation of sympathetic and para-sympathetic nervous systems, so it's not relaxation, where you're primarily para-sympathetically activated, and you're at ease and you are conserving energy. Compassion is activated and it also is regulated with both being, it's a true co-activation, and what it feels like in my experience is you are centred, in martial sometimes the language of <inaudible 0:23:16.9> is used to describe a state I feel like is similar to compassion, you are both relaxed and alert and you're waiting to respond and I feel like that is kind of the physiology below the brain of compassion where often people's hearts are pounding to begin with, but then there comes a kind of grounding that allows you to feel centred, rather than completely activated, like fight or flight crisis mode, but you're also not relaxed. And I think when we're talking about compassion it can give us a sense of why certain activities that ask us to co-activate can strengthen compassion, like yoga, like a really active yoga practice, that asks you to breathe in a way and move in a way that leads to that kind of co-activation, like you're energised but you're also grounded and centred and relaxed while you're activated and one of the things I'm interested in is not just the neurophysiology of how you think, but also the physiology below the brain so that you have an embodied readiness for compassion.

[0:24:24.6] Acharya Fleet Maull: You know, many of the religious traditions have presented compassion as kind of an ideal, we think of people who've been described as saintly has been very compassionate and selfless in many ways, and for the rest of us life's pretty hard and pretty challenging and we're aware of so much suffering, I mean now we're aware of almost everything that happens in the whole world if we're paying any attention to the news, and the whole world is much more interconnected. So in some ways, why would we want to be more compassionate? I mean it doesn't necessarily always seem like a good deal. And it would be quite reasonable to want to limit what I'm exposing myself to, so is there some inner understanding in neurobiology that... is there some way that actually becoming more compassionate is in our own enlightened self-interest, even though it may seem really hard?

[0:25:21.5] Dr. Kelly McGonigal: Yes, I have so much to say about that, I mean one of the things I had to say initially is having spent time with people who are held up as exemplaries of compassion, I will say that life is also really hard for them and they experience challenges to compassion as well, I mean we all do, and that's another way that idealisation can get in the way, where we think there's some people for whom compassion is just easy and fun, like somehow they're bypassing the actual awareness and sharing in the suffering part, and I don't think anyone's bypassing that. So I just wanted to put that on the table, that instead they've chosen courage right, rather than it being just easy and pleasant. And in terms of why would we do this? Well, certainly if you think that compassion is only empathic distress, that doesn't make a lot of sense to want to deepen our strength in compassion, but when you think of what compassion is as a full process, whether you're thinking of it in the brain, in the body or just as a lived experience, one of the things we know about compassion itself is it seems very strongly connected to hope, that when you are experiencing compassion and you are relating to suffering, your own or others, from a place of compassion you have a very strong neural signature of hope, people record feeling emotions of hope and meaning and purpose and awe in being connected to something bigger than yourself. It's one of the most powerful ways to actually plug into what I think most people aspire to in life, which isn't just pleasure, but a deep sense of purpose and interconnectedness and I think it's tempting to think "Well, I could get that, but somehow without having to be, you know, touching the suffering stuff, that there must be a way to have all of that love and purpose and meaning and hope and yet never come into contact with suffering." And yet it seems like the most reliable way to

experience that purpose and meaning and connection is through the vehicle of suffering, but not at that level of just empathic distress, we have to think what does it mean? What is the benefit of training in compassion? And part of it is actually making sure that we're reflecting on the suffering of others, you're feeling compassion and not just distress. Just to give you an example, one of the very first exercises that we use in compassion training is to have people think about suffering and then consciously turn their attention to how much they care about the one who is suffering and a desire for that person to be free of suffering, and to begin to do something in their mind that you might imagine could relieve their suffering, such as sending them support through your out breath, and to mentally imagine that outbreath reaching them and bringing them relief and strength and hope and then to touch that place of compassion satisfaction, where you yourself feel encouraged and inspired and strengthened by the possibility that you're compassion relieved their suffering. And of course it's just you know when we do these meditations we're not saying it's magic and just by thinking about it that you did it, but you're actually training in the ability to attend different aspects of compassion so that when you really are helping someone that that ability to connect, to experience hope, to savour the helping, that that becomes part of your everyday experience of compassion and of suffering, and when people do that they experience some of the positive things I described, we also don't mean to be totally self-interested, there are dozens of studies showing that people who experience more compassion, who are caregivers in an informal, non-overwhelming capacity, people who volunteer, people who donate money, they live longer. So if you want to stick around compassion and altruism seem to be one of the best strategies, that and exercise, so go run a charity marathon.

[0:29:34.6] Acharya Fleet Maull: There does seem to be a lot of research saying that on some level this quality of compassion and really being in that flow of connection with our world is good for us.

[0:29:47.0] Dr. Kelly McGonigal: I want to say one other thing, and this is something that you know we keep on mentioning this thing of having to hold opposites, and I'm very reluctant to encourage people to be compassionate for selfish reasons, I know even the Dalai Lama says "No, it's fine, be compassionate to help yourself, it's all good", because I think he truly understands interdependence, that there really isn't something that you're doing for yourself it's... but anyways, but we know that one's motivation for compassion for motivation interacts with compassion to determine the outcomes. I just was looking at one study today that was just published, they found that if you're raising money for a charity that you believe in and you care about and you get a kickback, and even if other people don't know that you're getting a little bit of a commission or some other benefit, you're much less effective in raising money, we also know if you help others because you want others to see you as kind and caring, you don't receive the health benefits of volunteering. And there are all sorts of examples like this where if you're trying to be compassionate, but your primary focus is trying to manage your image, how people see you, or you're seeking a very concrete benefit for yourself, the whole thing just falls apart and so you know when the first practices that I tend to train people in is compassion intention, that part of what we're talking about compassion is you are abandoning the instinct to put your own interest first. So I had to bring that up because I feel like it's very popular nowadays to sell self-compassion as either a self-improvement project, or something to do in order to acquire things that you want like success or health, when really compassion isn't rooted in a bigger than self mind-set, it's not compassion and so you're not going to get any of those things that you're trying to get.

[0:31:54.4] Acharya Fleet Maull: Well, I think there's a middle ground there somewhere, that certainly you don't want to idealise it too much you know that you have to be in a kind of absolute selflessness sort of capacity...

[0:32:06.0] Dr. Kelly McGonigal: No, it isn't, that's why you know I like the word bigger than self, because you're not excluding yourself, you are the recipient of your own compassion, that is absolutely true. When you are in a state of compassion the very first recipient is you, whether it's the benefits to your immune system that happen when you're in a state of compassion or the warm glow that you get from helping others, you're the first recipient of it, no doubt. But I think there's a difference between being that sort of selfless ideal, which people often hear as you can't take care of yourself and there are no benefits to yourself. Bigger than self is truly that mind sort of interdependence where you've kind of abandoned that dichotomy. It's just a different way of thinking about what you value and who you are.

[0:32:59.9] Acharya Fleet Maull: Yeah, Dan Siebel's been talking about, I don't know if it will catch on, but he's talking about we often talk about moving from me to we, he's saying well we can't leave me behind so we're going to talk about moue, I don't know if moue is going to catch on, it doesn't quite roll off the tongue, but...

[0:33:14.8] Dr. Kelly McGonigal: No, but I think that is a perfect verbalisation of this bigger than self mind-set, you aren't leaving me behind.

[0:33:24.1] Acharya Fleet Maull: Yeah wonderful, well maybe on the flipside a little bit, because I really want to dig into this so people can explore their own territory with all this, you know, I think experiencing empathic distress is inevitable right, we're living, being human beings, we're going to experience some empathic distress, there's kind of a choice as to whether to find ways to dampen that down, or to say I want to find ways, healthy ways of working with it, being with it, and I think what we're saying is that that leads to greater fulfilment in life in lots of ways, and it's probably also good for the planet because we're all caring about each other. But what's the cost of dampening it down? We do know there's a lot of cost to ourselves as well as to the world when we dampen it down.

[0:34:14.4] Dr. Kelly McGonigal: Yeah, so one of the things that happen if you choose to dampen down empathic distress is you are shutting down the biology of social connection, so as soon as you feel empathic distress, if your resources go to trying to feel less, then the way you might do it is reappraisal, I'm going to think about this differently so that I don't... I imagine that that suffering is not as real as it feels right now, or attentional deployment, I'm going to think about something else now, I'm going to click off this website so I don't have to know about this, I'm not going to watch the video, I'm going to leave the room, right, situation selection, or I'm going to get drunk because I don't want to feel all of this anymore. All of those are really they're avoidant coping strategies and what we know about avoidant coping strategies is they provide a sort of temporary relief, but at the same time they cut you off from the resources that would provide greater resilience, it's not just for other people's suffering, it's for your own suffering as well, that if you decide your goal is to not think about something or not feel something or not remember something, and you're always turning your attention away or you're always trying to numb it down, you get temporary relief sometimes, sometimes it just doesn't work and it backfires, but even if it does work you get this temporary relief, but you don't get the resources that are built when you engage with suffering in an intentional and caring way and that's true whether it's your own suffering or other's suffering, that the ability to turn towards suffering and to think of it as a catalyst for making meaning, making sense, for acting in a way that strengthens relationships, strengthens communities, as a reminder to take good care of yourself and think about what you really need, not just what would bring temporary relief, that empathic distress again it's the trigger for those things and if you only want to turn it down, you don't get that resilience, you don't get the compassion satisfaction, you often lose meaning. You know I still remember one young man saying why isn't it better just not to care? He was firmly convinced that the solution to happiness in

life was to not care, because caring was so distressing. And I think you can probably imagine the root that not caring goes on which is towards depression and alienation and isolation, not caring doesn't take you to pleasure and peace.

[0:36:50.4] Acharya Fleet Maull: I have two more questions and then I'm going to ask you to lead a compassion meditation for our audience, but the two... one just came up, you mentioned the word resilience, so I think we're all kind of aware that our capacity for caring and compassion kind of it moves around or up and down, and I suspect that has a lot to do with our current state of physical resilience, emotional resilience, mental even spiritual resilience, so I wonder if you can draw a connection between compassion and resilience, that's the first question.

[0:37:25.1] Dr. Kelly McGonigal: Yeah, well so my definition of resilience is the ability to grow from stress or suffering, and I think that... so what you're talking about is resources, because we need resources both to be resilient and to be compassionate, actually compassion is bigger than resources, but resilience is sort of even bigger than compassion, that resilience is often an outcome or a process that requires compassion to take place. Your ability to transform stress or suffering into something you value like personal growth or insight, deeper relationships, meaning, that's my definition of resilience, and actually compassion is serving that rather than requiring it, what I think compassion requires is resources, physical energy, a sense of being part of a community that would support you if you were weak or needed a rest bit, that is what we need to pay very careful attention to when we start to feel our own compassionate energy declining, is we need to look at whatever resources might be available to you, whether it's a teacher or a mentor, whether it's getting enough sleep, whether it's turning into inspiring literature, whether it's going back to church on Sundays instead of using Sundays to help someone else, like do it for yourself, so a lot of thinking about what feeds your compassionate energy, and that fuel's compassionate action, which then fuels resilience, compassion is really, it's one of those processes that like intentional reflection and meaning making supports resilience.

[0:39:18.2] Acharya Fleet Maull: Great, what are those reservoirs of some kind of strength or capacity or energy that we have? It seems to have a lot to do with our ability both to feel and act on compassion at any given moment.

[0:39:34.6] Dr. Kelly McGonigal: And I do that, one thing that's interesting, I talk to a lot of people who are involved with social justice and service, and it's interesting that you can have different sources of energy that can sustain on at sort of different rates and intensities and durations, and a lot of the time when people first start to feel their compassionate energy decline, rather than think "How do I restore this? I need care, I need to be around beauty, I need something that lifts my spirits, I need a nap." Instead of turning to that and restoring compassionate energy, they turn to a more readily available source of energy like anger "I'm going to just charge myself up about the injustices in the world, or how unfair certain injustices are and I'm going to run on that because it feels available now." That energy, that is like a sugar rush, and I think that you can see something similar in caregiving. When people start to sense their own caregiving energy being depleted, rather than necessarily thinking I need help with this, I need a support group, I need to turn to something that's going to inspire me, rather than that they turn to something like guilt or obligation as a kind of energy that might push them, I have to do this, I can't take a break, just a little bit more. And again, you know, guilt and obligation is also a source of energy that will push you a little bit but cannot carry you all the way, and so it's a good point of reflection to think when you start to feel depleted where are you turning to energy? And are there things that might feel self-indulgent that actually are going to be a much better source of compassion energy than things that will get you through the next burst.

[0:41:30.8] Acharya Fleet Maull: Yeah I think we're all going to need to find, especially people involved in caregiving and really any kind of challenging or stressful activities or personal caregiving, but all of us in modern life are going to need to find ways to recharge our batteries from time to time in healthy ways.

[0:41:46.3] Dr. Kelly McGonigal: I know, for me I like to listen to teachers who inspire me and dancing is one of the things that gives me extra compassion energy and that like on its face has nothing to do with compassion, but the joy of it fuels my compassion energy as well as the wisdom of listening to people who have a lot of insight and experience, and I've learned through experience those are two things, if I don't do those on almost a daily basis, my compassion energy isn't available. And I think it really varies, some people have told me nature is their key source of compassion energy, people really need to figure it out for themselves and then commit and view it as a way of strengthening their compassionate... their supply of compassion and restoring it.

[0:42:34.6] Acharya Fleet Maull: You mentioned mindfulness and the connection between mindfulness training and compassion training, I also think that one of the benefits of integrating the two is that when we're involved in caregiving or whatever activity we're involved in there's some expression of compassion, our ability to do that in a more embodied way and a more mindful way is less depleting, in my own experience.

[0:42:57.4] Dr. Kelly McGonigal: Yes, in fact there was a study, and I wish I could remember who did the study, it just came out last year, showing that people who scored higher in different facets of mindfulness have a different experience when they help others, that different facets of mindfulness like paying attention to the present moment and also not resisting in our experiences, that those facets predicted both the positive emotions one feels while helping others, and also was associated with the less of the kind of emotions that can make us avoid helping like disgust or the desire to avoid suffering, and so I think that, I mean mindfulness is absolutely foundational, it's almost impossible to imagine what it could even look like to try to strengthen compassion without a foundation of mindfulness, because how do you know what your mind is doing? And how you work with difficult inner experiences without that mindfulness? And I feel like what compassion training does is it reminds you of what your intention is too. Look it's great to be able to work with attention, and it's great to be able to work with inner experiences and compassion training comes in and it's like hey, remember what your values are? Ok, let's harness that attention and your own ability to hold different experiences, now let's point that in the direction of values and service and caring.

[0:44:24.3] Acharya Fleet Maull: Ok, well my last question has to do, I mentioned before, the notion of compassion for others and the awareness to be with the suffering of others and then compassion for ourselves. So are they the same, is there a connection, and how does that work?

[0:44:40.1] Dr. Kelly McGonigal: Well, this is a good question, one thing that I will say is it is a myth that you cannot feel compassion for others if you don't feel compassion for yourself. This is a scientific point of view, I mean there are studies showing almost zero correlation between self-compassion and compassion for others, but also this comes from understanding what compassion is as an instinct. It is an instinct that social animals have to support strengthening communities and caring for the vulnerable, and that's sort of bigger than self-survival. And because of that it is actually much easier to feel compassion for someone else than for yourself, because we have a different set of survival instincts when it's our suffering. Our core survival instincts for our own suffering are shame, fear, anger, grief, stress, compassion is not part of that core repertoire and I think it's really important for people to understand that. That doesn't mean, you know so when you hear people from non-western context saying "How can you not be self-compassionate?" When

you actually ask them about it you'll learn that what they really mean, they're talking about self-interest, and they're talking about the fundamental desire to be happy and free from suffering. That desire to be happy and free from suffering and that everything you do is in service of that, that's what they mean by self-compassion, I'm not even sure that it is self-compassion. When we think about what compassion is, it actually is being able to hold your own suffering in a way that allows you to respond skilfully and to not feel isolated by that suffering or overwhelmed by that suffering and I believe that that is a skill we really need to train in, that self-interest, and the desire to be happy may be instinctive, but that's not the same thing as compassion. And in my experience, the thing that unlocks the availability of self-compassion is to become a really good witness to your own suffering while also being a witness to the suffering of others. And a simple example of that is I'm someone who experience chronic pain, so when I'm in pain, I have to be willing to feel it and to notice that there's a lot of me who would like to be in pain right now, but at the same time to think about and hold in my awareness how many other people are in physical pain right now. Right, simple awareness, but being able to hold both at the same time, it somehow allows that compassionate instinct that is really there to respond to other people's suffering, it's like get reflected back on my own pain. So when you ask are self-compassion and compassion for others related, I think that it's very difficult to cultivate self-compassion if you are not at the same time endeavouring to strengthen compassion for others, and that there's something that Kristin Neff calls the common humanity element of self-compassion, that unlocks our ability to care for ourselves and not be completely isolated and demoralised and despairing when we're suffering, but it's not as simple as just being like "I love you Kelly", you know it really requires being a particular kind of witness to your suffering.

[0:48:18.4] Acharya Fleet Maull: Well I'd like to begin you said a capacity for hold <inaudible 0:48:26.3> and to respond in a skilful manner.

[0:48:29.0] Dr. Kelly McGonigal: Yeah, and again that's why mindfulness is such an important foundation, again I can't even begin to imagine what self-compassion could be like without mindfulness because you'd be too busy to stuff down or run away from or argue with your suffering, or overwhelmed by it, we all are sometimes, the other interesting thing about all this stuff is it seems like you people describe self-compassion as if you could bypass the distress and suffering part of it, like somehow what self-compassion is is just loving yourself and feeling good and caring for yourself and doing nice things for yourself, and just like compassion for others, self-compassion is going to often involve the pain of your own suffering and feeling it and it has to be met with something else that provides the whole and the self-mentorship, the willingness to ask for help or to do something kind for yourself, but you know just like with regular compassion that you can just bypass and get to feeling good about yourself.

[0:49:30.9] Acharya Fleet Maull: Yeah, we're clearly not talking about any kind of transcendental beauty or something about actually being willing just to be in this mess called being a human being and swim with it better, we become better swimmers I think in some way.

[0:49:43.8] Dr. Kelly McGonigal: Yeah and I think you know the word that I use, and I know we have limited time, we're going to shift to a practice now, the language that I use, the framework I use is transforming suffering. Compassion isn't just being with suffering and it's also not just responding to suffering, it's not just witnessing suffering, it's not just feeling suffering, it is about transforming suffering, and I think self-compassion is that way too, you can't just pay attention to your suffering, there has to be a sense of responsibility that the suffering could be a catalyst for connecting with others, you know feeling purpose or meaning, cultivating my own strength, the suffering is in service of something and you are able to make that leap so that you create that transformation. So I thought I would

lead us in a practice of <inaudible 0:50:35.0>, which is one of the traditional practices for transforming suffering and I'll lead us in a minute, but in case people are listening and want to partake in this, I think it's important to tell people what they're going to be doing with their minds before they do it, so it's not just like "Wait, what? I didn't know we were going to be going there." So what this practice is, is I will ask you to connect to some mindful awareness of your breath and your body and then to also connect to compassionate intention and compassionate awareness, and then from that place I'll ask you to think about someone who's suffering, maybe a group who's suffering in the world that you feel connected to, that you kind of wish you could do something about. And then from that place to imagine that your breath could be a kind of transformative agent, so that as you breathe in that suffering, your own breath and your own compassion and your own heart could transform that suffering into whatever you wish you could offer the one who's suffering, it might be hope, it might be strength, it might be relief from pain, it might be love, it might be faith, just something that you would like them to have in this moment of suffering, and you imagine that your breath is actually transforming this suffering into what you want to offer, and you imagine breathing that back out, so that's going to be the practice that you could participate in. And again the key idea here is one of transformation, and this practice of <inaudible 0:52:13.6> is thought to transform not just suffering, but to transform our basic human instinct to avoid suffering, so it is both self-transformational as well as operating on the idea that it's possible to transform suffering, so when you do this practice, you yourself are transformed and that's another way to think about this practice, because it is asking you to turn towards suffering rather than deny or avoid or run away from suffering, so it's sort of a dually transformational practice. And before I lead it, any sort of thoughts on that? I know you have experience with this practice.

[0:52:56.3] Acharya Fleet Maull: No, I think that's a great description of it, a very straightforward and simple description of it, I think where sometimes people will struggle is you know we breathe in, we take something in, and then what was that thing that happened in there that allows it not to be a part of ourselves and I think you're describing it as that transformation that can happen on the heave of the breath and it's a... we experience it in the practice by doing it, we realise something actually does change, and it is the transformative breath.

[0:53:32.4] Dr. Kelly McGonigal: And at the same time people hear about this practice and they try it and they're like oh, breathing in suffering, I don't want the suffering, what if it gets stuck in my lungs? I don't mean to be... I'm serious, I know that's a real concern. In a way, if you have that concern with this practice, it points to even more the transformational power of this practice. I almost don't even like to argue with it because of course you're not actually breathing in the suffering, it's not actually settling into your lungs, no matter how good you are at the symmetry, that is not going to happen, but I feel like if it activates that concern, you're doing this practice exactly right because you are challenging your own tendency to want to avoid suffering and sort of the illusion that you could actually protect yourself from it like you could go out in the universe and put a breathing mask on that would protect you from suffering if you just do life right. So in another way you could intellectually argue that no, the transformation is happening, but you know if you can imagine breathing in suffering and a part of you constricts like "I can't breathe right now, because I just imagined breathing in suffering" then actually, in a way that is the practice all settled, to notice how that feels and then go back to your compassionate intention, it's one of the totally great things about this practice, is what it brings out.

[0:54:56.4] Acharya Fleet Maull: We're then coming to that edge, you know, when we go "Oh, I'm not... Maybe not" but we're right there you know, we're right in the reality of working with the kind of boundaries of my heart and...

[0:55:06.4] Dr. Kelly McGonigal: And I know that there are meditation programs that have changed the fundamental premise of <inaudible 0:55:13.8> so that you breathe in good stuff and breathe out bad stuff, particularly for this reason, because people were being challenged by it and so it's been changed to just breathe in good stuff and breathe out bad stuff. Yeah, so I'm more a fan of the original.

[0:55:31.8] Acharya Fleet Maull: <inaudible>

[0:55:32.8] Dr. Kelly McGonigal: Let's do it. Yeah. Ok so this will be you know a short practice, five minutes long. Okay, so I'm going to encourage you to actually close your eyes or drop your gaze, there's going to be nothing visually important or interesting happening, and closing your eyes or dropping your gaze might give you a better chance of really connecting to the imagery of this meditation. So making a conscious choice about how you're sitting right now, and allowing your body to come into some kind of stillness that doesn't feel forced. It's not like you're putting on a suit of armour and you're not allowed to move, but an invitation to the body to settle and an invitation to the mind to settle. And an invitation to your mind to settle on the breath and to notice how it feels to breathe in and breathe out. Noticing how it feels to breathe in, how it feels to breathe out. I invite you to place both hands on your chest, somewhere around your heart and lungs. Or you could simply place your attention on that part of your body and begin to sense the movement of your heart and lungs as you breathe. When you breathe in there's a true physical quality of expansion, and as you breathe out you can sense that expansion dissolving. Sensing the expansion of your heart as you breathe in, and that expansion dissolving as you breathe out. If your hand is on your chest, return it to your lap, and for a few breaths imagine that you could breathe directly into your heart and lungs through the centre of your chest as if there were a doorway for the breath at your heart. Almost as if your nostrils were relocated to the centre of your chest. It's just imagery, but imagine that you were breathing directly into the centre of the chest and nourishing the heart with the breath, and imagine that you could breathe out directly from the heart. Imagine the breath nourishing and energising your heart. And I invite you to sense or remember or imagine that there is a compassion bigger than you that you can tap into. Whatever that means for you, a bigger than self compassion, it might be the compassion that's in your community, compassion as an energy that you can tap into, compassionate source that is bigger than you. Compassionate self. And for a few breaths I want you to sense or remember or imagine that you could actually allow your heart to be nourished by this bigger than self compassion, that you could actually breathe in and draw from this bigger than self compassion to let it expand and nourish your heart. Remembering or sensing or imagining that there is a compassion that is inexhaustible, that is bigger than you, and through awareness and intention you can tap into it. Now I invite you to bring to mind someone or some group who is suffering, or even some abstract kind of suffering, pain, poverty, fear. Bring to mind some kind of suffering that you feel called to relieve, that you aspire to see relieved in the world. And as you bring the suffering, whether it's small suffering or big suffering, as you bring it to mind, allow your heart to be touched by your awareness of the suffering. Perhaps sensing your own desire to relieve the suffering. And now imagine that this suffering, that it could take the form of a cloud or smoke or fog, that is right in front of you, it's right in front of your heart, and that you could actually breathe in the suffering into this open heart space that you created. Just see if you can imagine it, imagine that the suffering it takes the form of a cloud or smoke or fog and that you could breathe it into your heart space, this heart space that is nourished and energised by a compassion that is bigger than you and that when you breathe the suffering, the smoke into your heart space, that compassion is so spacious, is so big that that suffering dissolves, and that you could breathe out whatever you wish to offer those who are suffering. See if you can find an imagery of this kind of transformation that you're breathing in the suffering and as it enters your heart space it is touched by compassion

and is transformed into whatever you wish to breathe out, hope, strength, love, courage, change, peace, and for the next several breaths, find a version of this that you can connect to. Breathing in awareness of suffering or breathing in that smoke, and breathing out your offering to whoever it is that is suffering, and imagine the out breath reaching the one or the ones who are suffering, imagine that it actually is carried to them by winds, and imagine them breathing it in, imagine them receiving your offering and it bringing some relief some of their suffering and let your own heart be energised and nourished by this imagery or idea that your out breath is relieving their suffering. And for a moment before we close this practice, I invite you to sense or remember or imagine that there are countless other people right now, who are sending out into the world hope and compassion and strength and courage and love, it's actually available for you to breathe in as well, and if there's something that you yourself need, sense, remember, imagine it as available, that you could breathe it in right now. That this is the true nature of compassion, that it is available for us to offer and it is available for us to receive, in every moment. And now, bringing your attention back, just how it feels to breathe, noticing what's present as we conclude the practice. And then making a conscious choice to reengage with this present moment and the rest of your day.

[1:06:37.5] Acharya Fleet Maull: Well, thank you so much, thank you so much Kelly. Doctor Kelly McGonigal, author, health psychologist, compassion and altruism researcher at Stanford University, it's been a real pleasure and I know that our audience has gotten a lot to work with here and I'm excited to see what dialogue comes up around all of this.

[1:06:54.8] Dr. Kelly McGonigal: Thank you for the conversation.