

Compassion: A Jewel on the Spiritual Path

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Charles Dickens begins his 1859 book “*A Tale of Two Cities*”

with the famous quote:

*“IT Was the best of times, it was the worst of times,
it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness,
it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity,
it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness,
it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair.”*

In a very similar way, today we are facing a time of intense hope and of crushing despair.

The recent collapse of the world markets,

the increasing understanding of the ever growing human caused climate changes,

the violent uprisings around the globe with constant threats of terrorism,

and our inability as humans to discover as of yet in our development

as a species to learn how to live non-violently with one another,

are just some examples of how we face our own time of despair.

Yet at the same time, similar to Dicken's time,

we are living in an incredible time,

of hope for changes in healing and positive directions for humanity:

**Mystics and spiritual leaders all over our planet,
are calling for a radical transformation
for how we, as humans live out our lives.
What is being asked of us is to change how we live,
so that we no longer just try “to fix” what is happening,
but resolve to, in the words of Andrew Harvey,
poet, mystic, translator, and spiritual teacher,
*radically transform the existing system, so that
we are no longer by our choices, threatening our lives
and the lives of millions of species.*¹**

**What we, dear friends, need during these dark and dangerous times,
is to develop within ourselves, our children, our communities,
internal spiritual resources that provide us with vision and hope,
as well as fill our hearts with peace and love,
as we worked to change what must be done to move humanity
to a new place of transformation where all life is viewed as precious,
all life is seen as sacred.**

**We best become like the man at the well in our children's story²
who cared for the dog – we can strive to help even those beings we dislike.
To enter into this transformational path,
we best let go of our preoccupations with our singular lives,**

1 Andrew Harvey. *The Hope: A Guide to Sacred Activism*. United States: Hay House, Inc., 2009. p. xix.

2 Marilyn McFarlane. *The Dog at the Well*. Adapted from a story by Mohammed.

and open ourselves up to the enormous needs and desperate callings

2.

**of beings on our earth who need for us to move out from a place of
self-cherishing to a spiritually healthier place of cherishing others.**

No one has taught me about this better than His Holiness, the XIV Dalai Lama.

I have been blessed, since 1999, to be one of his students,

when I took a fourteen day initiation from him on the Kalachakra,

which is a Tibetan Buddhist practice to generate world peace.

It is a very high Tibetan Buddhist practice,

that requires a commitment of six meditation sessions/day.

Since 1999 I regularly attend The Dalai Lama's

North American monastery in Ithaca, New York - Namgyal monastery,

where there currently is construction under way

to build the only Tibetan Buddhist monastery connected to his Holiness

outside of Tibet and Dharamsala, India.

His Holiness and his monks teach the spiritual values

of what we need around the world today

to create the kind of radical transformation so necessary in our world.

A main aspect of his teaching is about compassion -

a jewel on the spiritual path.

Compassion, the tender opening of the heart to pain and suffering,

invites us to see and acknowledge the true condition of others,

opening us to honestly face their pains.

**Compassion connects us with the feelings of others,
and provides a spiritual pathway where real satisfaction is possible.**

**3.
To make others happy through compassionate actions
brings a deeper sense of happiness that ever increases
the more we share such heart-felt actions.**

**Within our Western secular culture,
values such as sensitivity, gentleness, and compassion are often regarded as foolish.
Instead, we all know that secular values that lead to success
in the marketplace are highly esteemed.
However, within religious circles of both the Eastern and Western world,
spiritual adepts across cultures and times have taught
that it is through the light of love,
and the energy of compassion,
that a higher level of happiness can be achieved.**

**Eastern spiritual teachers are sometimes puzzled
by the lack in the West of teaching and training for our youth and ourselves
on how to develop positive emotions and states of mind.
Though we experience many years of schooling,
we are unlikely, here in the West,
to learn how to develop intentionally positive emotions-
-positive emotions which can benefit
our own happiness, relationships, and the well-being of society.³**

³ Lorne Ladner. The Lost Art of Compassion. San Francisco: Harper & Row. 2004.

As a person who trained for seven years in Western psychology,
and practiced as a child psychologist for over twenty five years,
I can attest to the bias in Western psychology to view people

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through a pathological lens, and not a wellness lens.

The medical model invites healers to work to repair what has been damaged,
rather than focus on promoting health or well being.

Lorne Ladner, a clinical psychologist and a Buddhist,
in his book *The Lost Art of Compassion*, published in 2004,
researched Western psychological literature
over the 100 years of psychology's existence here in the West.
He discovered a paucity of research on compassion..

As a culture, we thus have little means of intentionally developing qualities
such as compassion, that give life meaning, and can bring to us peace and joy.

Ladner sadly states that we are left, thus, as a people, *poor of heart*.⁴

Just think with me for a moment of His Holiness, the Dalai Lama's presence.

It is his smile, his laughter, his warm hardheartedness that attracts millions of his followers.

In contrast, a scarcity of heart may lead to dealing with people
through a lens of fear and punishment.

While fear of punishment can control people from harming others,
empathy and compassion are far more powerful ways to create positive social contexts.

4 Ibid, xvi.

Let me just mention three of many, many ways

that we as a nation currently are manifesting “poorness of heart.”

First, those of us fortunately to attend our General Assembly

in Phoenix, Arizona this past June

witnessed the infamous treatment of 2,000 immigrants who were being detained
5.

in Tent City by Sheriff Joe Arpaio and the State of Arizona.

To date over 427,000 inmates have gone through Tent City Jail

where people are crowded together on wooden planks in broiling heat in the summer
and freezing cold in the winter;

It is not surprising news to many of us as UUs

that our immigrant system needs radical transformation,
and is not based on any warm hearted or compassionate solution for those people seeking
refuge within our nation's borders.

A second way we on a national level are manifesting currently “poor heartedness”
is through our treatment of our own people within our prison systems.

Our solution to controlling people who make mistakes in life has been to lock them up.

We have as a nation 5% of the world's population,
and 25% of the world's incarcerated number of people!

Michelle Alexander, attorney and civil rights advocate asserts

*that the American system of law enforcement, prosecution and incarceration
disproportionately and adversely affects Americans of color*⁵

in her recent book *The New Jim Crow, Mass Incarceration in an Age of Colorblindness*.

Her book has been selected by our UUA as a common read for all of us.

I urge you to read it.

A third way we continue to remain stalled in fear rather than warm heartedness,

is how we as a nation are facing changes to the climate and its impact on our environment.

We have not, as a nation, allowed ourselves to really admit

5 UUA bookstore blurb. www.uua.org/bookstore.

**what is happening- the human caused factors impacting our climate -
clearly validated by almost all scientists,
climate change factors that we must immediately turn around
so that our children, and their children have a viable world to live within.
It is fear and anxiety of letting go of familiar ways
of providing fuel and energy for our homes and businesses
that keeps us as a nation from seriously looking at the effects
of what such holding onto the familiar is doing to our planet, and our future.**

6.

**It is fear of losing familiar ways of making money and being employed,
as well, that prevent us from looking at the true effects of holding onto
such a negative, destructive pattern to our earth.
Such fears prevent us as a nation from looking directly at what is being caused,
and how such lack of action is bringing more and more harm to people,
other living beings, and our planet as a whole.**

**To open our hearts to what is really happening,
means that we will feel a lot of pain at first.
To open our hearts requires that we look directly at the harms we have created.
To open our hearts means that we need to develop compassion-
warm heartedness – not only for those “others” out there
who have done these things, and many other things,
but we must also look at our own ways of colluding and going along with
ways of being that are based on fear, controlling others, and lack of compassion.
We need to develop warm heartedness for ourselves,
face our mistakes, and move forward to change our world
into one where compassion and warm heartedness
are the touchstone for what we do, not fear and anxiety.**

How do we do this?

How can we cultivate compassion and warm heartedness?

Buddhist teachings point us directly onto a spiritual path

that leads to cultivating compassion as a jewel to be treasured-
as the most significant factor in creating a happy and joyful existence.

Indeed, one of the great treasures of human existence
is this highly developed “Inner Science” from the East.⁶

When I say highly developed, I mean highly developed.

Within Buddhism, there are over 84,000 ways to transform your mind.

7.

These ways are called “mind-trainings”

which are not about solely relaxing or clearing or focusing the mind.

Mind training teach people to decrease negative mind states,
and then increase positive mind states through a wide range of methods.

The historical Buddha taught such mind training
in his teaching on The Four Noble Truths,
with The Fourth Noble Truth being the way leading out of suffering.
A way of being The Buddha called The Noble Eight Fold Path.
One of the eight branches of this Noble Eight Fold Path is *Right Effort*.

Just to give us a taste of one way how we might cultivate compassion,
let's look at this ancient Buddhist teaching called *Right Effort*.
Applying this teaching to our own minds,
we can discern how we might work internally towards developing deeper states of compassion:

To prevent unarisen unwholesome mental states from arising;

To abandon unwholesome mental states that have already arisen;

To develop wholesome mental states that have not yet arisen;

To maintain and perfect wholesome mental states already arisen.

⁶ Ibid,

Let's take the first two lines-

*To prevent unarisen, unwholesome states from arising,
and to abandon unwholesome states that have arisen.*

**Thus, we need to become aware of our internal mind states that are destructive-
such as hatred, anxiety, addiction, fear.**

**We can then come to realize that our capacities
to become more compassionate
are greatly diminished if we hold onto such unwholesome mental states.**

**The Buddha taught that we can not see the truth of who we are
because our minds are caught in these negative mind states,**

8.

**which are like clouds that block the clear blue sky,
we do not see that beneath such negative mind states
we are, each of us, a Buddha in the making – just as the Buddha himself is.**

**We do not see the interconnectiveness of each of us with one another
and with all of creation.**

**The spiritual work is to clear away such clouds obscuring who
we truly are, so that we can see our vast connection with one another,
see the truth of how what we do may harm others, and actually, may harm ourselves.
It may take a lifetime or many lifetimes to clear away
such negative mind states, but without doing so,
we will most likely will continue to act as if we are disconnected from one another,
and continue to create harm inadvertently.**

Some of these mind states are quite subtle negative mind states.

**Even when we are attempting to be compassionate and helpful,
we may create harm, rather than being helpful.**

For example, perhaps we are holding onto a compulsive need to be liked.

We do acts of kindness for others that arises out of a need to be liked,

or from a fear of insecurity and low self-esteem, that we won't be liked,
if we do not do certain kindnesses.

Our actions, instead of arising from a true sense of compassion,
are arising from a fear of rejection, a negative mind state.

We can work to change such fear of rejection by letting go of it.
Hard to do, yet very possible.

This is *abandoning an unwholesome mental state that has arisen*.

Instead we can learn to choose to be helpful to those in need,
to be compassion in action,
because we genuinely want to help a person in need.

9.

We can *develop the wholesome mental state of compassion,*
and continue to work to maintain and perfect this mental state
over time.

The development of compassion within relationships is truly *a jewel like factor*.

Whether we are in conflict with beloveds, or members within our congregation,
or people in the world outside our congregations,
maintaining and perfecting the qualities of compassion in our lives
can help us work with conflict in ways that effect good, positive outcomes.

What is most important during conflictual times
is to remember to remain open, honest, and sincere,
as well as to stop ourselves from creating more harm through negative
words and actions.

Primarily, if we can focus on the person who is harming us,

either through their words or their actions,
and remember, remember, that he or she
is a human being like ourselves,
then we may be able to be compassionate towards that person.
If a person is creating great harm towards us,
it is appropriate to stop him or her from doing so.
But try not to label the person as “bad” or “terrible” -
it is their behavior we want to stop,
while inside, we continue to love them, care for them, value them,
as the precious beings they are.

10.

This Buddhist practice of *Right Effort* is one of many ways
that we can as individuals, as well as on a societal level,
transform our minds into more positive ways of being,
of developing deep compassion.

How do we know if a person is truly compassionate?

**Our own prophet, Ralph Waldo Emerson said it isn't always easy to discern
who is really truly, compassionate when we look at their external behaviors solely:**

We have no pleasure in thinking of a benevolence that is only measured by its works. We know who is benevolent, by quite other means than the amount of subscriptions to Soup-Societies. It is only low merits that can be enumerated.

**I asked Geshe Dhargay, a Tibetan Teacher I spent two weeks with this summer
in retreat, how do we know those who are truly compassionate? Who have great compassion?**

He replied, “They cry a lot.”

We do know of people who show us the light of compassion.

We know it by the qualities of a person's heart.

The hearts of Gandhi, the Dalai Lama, Mother Teresa, Jesus, Mohammed,
Emily Dickinson, Rumi,

and many, many other, not so famous, but truly beings of great compassionate in our midst.

Such folks provide us with examples of how,

it is indeed humanly possible

to develop and maintain and perfect high states of compassion.

Indeed, these spiritual teachers hope that we will follow them,

and develop compassion in our hearts in deeper and deeper ways.

11.

What the great spiritual teachers of the East and West know well

is that it is not just the behavior a person manifests,

but the quality of the mind and heart that tells us

whether or not a person truly has great compassion.

I believe compassion is foundational to living an ethical life as a UU.

Our second principle calls each of us as Unitarian Universalists
to live compassionately.

We affirm and promote justice, equity, and compassion as a religious people.

We are called, through our liberal faith,

to bring compassion into each situation that needs it.

Compassion begins with ourselves.

We need to be kind and compassionate towards ourselves.

When we care for ourselves, we are then better able to care for others.

Gandhi, whose life was dedicated to alleviating others' suffering, understood this.

He said, *"I believe in the essential unity of all people*

and for that matter of all lives.

Therefore, I believe that if one person gains spiritually,

the whole world gains,

and if one person falls, the whole world falls, to some extent⁷.

**The spiritual path is one of working to transform ourselves
into becoming better instruments for positive change in the world.**

It is very hard work.

12.

Developing a compassionate heart is central to deepening ourselves.

**Through such deepening, we become better channels of help
for those who suffer around us.**

**My hope for a transformed and better future for our world
does indeed depend on we humans developing
more compassion, more kindness, more loving states of mind.**

**It is, as Charles Dickens wrote so long ago,
*the best of times and the worst of times.***

We have choices as humans as to how we want to proceed into our future.

My hope is that we learn to work with states of mind,

⁷ Ram Dass & Mirabai Bush. *Compassion In Action. Setting Out on the Path of Service.* Bell Tower: New York, p. 6.

such as compassion, and develop warm heartedness

as the peoples of our precious earth.

Let me end with this amazing personal story told by His Holiness, The Dalai Lama, in his own words, to illustrate the true value of great compassion:

Several years ago when I was in Bodh Gaya, India,

I fell ill from a chronic intestinal infection.

On the way to the hospital the pain in my abdomen was severe,

and I was sweating a great deal.

The car was passing through the area of Vulture Peak,

where Buddha once taught.

In general, Bihar State is poor, but this particular area even more so.

I did not even see children coming and going to school.

Just poverty and sickness.

13.

I have a very clear memory of a small boy with polio,

who had rusty metal braces on his legs and metal crutches up to his arm pits.

A little later on,

we drove past an old man at a tea shop,

wearing only a dirty piece of cloth, fallen to the ground,

left to lie there, with no one to take care of him.

Later, at the hospital, my thoughts kept circling on what I had seen,

reflecting on how sad it was that here I had people to take care of me,

but those poor people had no one.

That is where my thoughts went,

rather than to my own suffering.

In this way, though my body underwent a lot of pain

(a hole had opened in my intestinal wall),

my mind did not suffer any fear or discomfort.

My concern was elsewhere.

If I had concentrated on my own problems,

I would only have made the situation worse.

When your perspective includes the suffering of limitless beings,

your own suffering looks comparatively small.

Compassion strengthens your outlook, and with that courage,

you can become more relaxed.⁸

Peace and Love to you.

14.

⁸ His Holiness, the Dalai Lama. *How to be Compassionate*. Edited by Jeffrey Hopkins. New York: Simon & Schuster. 2011. p. 86.