

TOUCHING THE COMPASSIONATE HEART: THE GROUND OF HEALING

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ABSTRACT

I am a psychiatrist, psychotherapist, secular mindfulness teacher and former university lecturer. Having conducted research in fields varying from laboratory molecular medicine to clinical applications of mindfulness, I took a two year sabbatical to focus on an inner search and healing. It was spent mostly in Plum Village: a Buddhist monastery in France in the tradition of Thich Nhat Hanh. I have recently returned to clinical work.

I found that it was not until I took a compassionate view of myself that I truly began to heal; and that following my heart was the only way I could negotiate the uncertainties of the path.

KEYWORDS: Healing, Mindfulness, Compassion

I recall pleading with a kindly former therapist, 'How can I help others heal, when I myself have not yet healed?' With a confidence born of her experience, she said, 'We, like our patients, are walking along this path. We see them, and turn and extend our hand. That is good enough.'

Looking back to my professional self, before I began walking along the path of healing, it was a case of the blind leading the blind. I hope that I am less blind now. I write as one grateful for how far he has come, yet humbled before the way ahead.

Along the way, I have been nourished by the guidance of innumerable loving friends and teachers, by psychotherapy, mindfulness and yoga practice and my training as a secular mindfulness teacher. I now see, that the 'learning' has in fact been hearing better the voice and the truth that was already inside me - the voice of the heart.

I found a clear intention of compassion to be essential soil that the seed of healing needed to grow. A compassion that is by nature universal: enveloping the carer first of all, even as it radiates out to others we may care for.

At times I have felt more on a tightrope than a path, with each step a delicate balancing act. At other times I was a ship tossed about in the dark with endless ocean all around. I have needed to have my eyes on the stars. My best chance at finding balance and navigating the vicissitudes, has been to follow my heart. There, dwells an ever-present and unbounded, compassion and wisdom.

May what I share inspire you in your own healing journey and bring you closer to your own heart.

A COMPASSIONATE INTENTION

When I was 12, the school principal asked my parents in and suggested that my mischievousness was a seeking for attention. Whether he was right or not, I saw a kernel of truth in his words. To the very sensitive child that I was, being liked by others was crucial; and popularity could come through mischief. Unfortunately I let his words water the already strong seed of self-judgment and perfectionism. Driving home from the meeting, there was born an intention, vivid in my memory to this day, to 'always do the right thing'. To do what I 'should' do and do it perfectly became my mission, and landed me in my twenties exhausted and suffering with low mood and high anxiety.

For much of my journey to heal I have sadly not seen that I was bringing these same 'shoulds' even into my therapy or spiritual practice. I needed compassion to not hear admonitions in the therapists' voices; or to allow me to practice meditation as an 'act of love', rather than with 'the subtle aggression of self-improvement', as Bob Sharples puts it.¹

The obverse of my perfectionism was an abandoned seeking after pleasure. As a reaction to the constant pressure to perform, it took often a reckless and dissipated quality. Even when I then took an antidepressant, the intention was not a compassionate one to heal or work through what was going on, but a self-pitying one driving for a predominance of pleasant emotions. The results were not good.

These days, when I am to prescribe an antidepressant, I encourage the patient to connect with a genuine self-compassion that is prepared to work hard and seeks deeper healing. When a patient still has the

wherewithal, I work with them first to establish a framework of healing into which the medication can fit: living in a nourishing way and beginning psychotherapy, for example.

My own seed of self-compassion has taken much watering from many sources to grow. I am very grateful to intimate friends and partners who met my pain with kindness rather than the hate, blame or ridicule that I would show myself. Along the mindfulness path I was lucky to find teachers, particularly Thich Nhat Hanh, who emphasized compassion as a necessary ingredient of cultivating healing awareness, and indeed of the entire spiritual project. In weekly meetings or residential retreats, the kindly energy of the mindfulness community has both been directly healing, and helped me see myself with compassionate eyes.

Learning about Nonviolent Communication² has showed me how a judgmental and blameful mind is *always* destructive and *never* called for; that what I ultimately want, be it from others or in myself, can only come through a compassionate intention. As Fulton puts it, describing his practice of Mindfulness Informed Psychotherapy, the key to healing is to aspire always to do what is kind and conducive to happiness.³

LETTING THE HEART LEAD

One of my now dearest friends and the force behind so much of my healing, is a colleague I met when I began my psychiatric training. She radiated a peace of mind and a grounded kindness that immediately caught my attention, rare as it was on the busy acute psychiatric ward we worked on. Unlike me, she had been a decades-long practitioner of yoga and meditation and had also benefited from psychotherapy. Nonetheless, she did not tell me to 'do this or that' so that I may heal, but simply to 'learn to hear the voice of my heart and trust enough to follow it'. The longer I spend on the path, the more I can see the wisdom in such counsel.

For healing to truly begin, I have had to begin living and healing not only from compassion but also a deep inner intuition. Pushing to find and work hard at the best therapy or spiritual practice, so that I may be 'the best I can', seemed efficient. Yet, the 'pushing' came from the same fear, harshness and guilt that went with trying to do what I 'should' do. The 'efficient' was the head that judged as good or bad, right or wrong and arrived at 'shoulds'. And so for many years on the path, and supposedly in the service of healing, I was watering the seeds of the very same painful feelings and destructive ways of being that I needed to transform.

As in daily life, so in healing. I aspire now to recognize when I act from fear: the fear especially of my own or others' judgment. I have had to learn to acknowledge and embrace the fear as a mother does a crying baby. My fear, anger and guilt are not evils to be destroyed, but parts of me that in their own, perhaps misguided or outdated way, are trying to tell me something.

Deep understanding can arise, when we can be with our unpleasant feelings with a compassionate smile, while standing firm and not impulsively acting them out. I have seen, for instance that my inner child's hunger for love and inclusion is often underneath these feelings. Once I could connect with these deep unsatisfied needs, the way to fulfill them naturally arose: I could intentionally touch and nurture a subtle embodied feeling of self-worth and belonging.

Painful emotions, particularly anger, tend often to trigger judgmental thinking, and vice versa. Taking care of them requires me *and* helps me to move my centre of gravity from the head to the heart. There, I find an intuitive wisdom, accessible through sensations in the body. I am grateful to Jon Kabat-Zinn for showing me how body-based practices such as yoga* are a necessary complement to sitting meditation or psychotherapy, were this downward movement from the head to occur.

I aspire to stop asking, 'What should I do?' and be thus mired in thinking and self-judgment. I remember instead, to ask questions that seek their answers from a deep, loving place: 'What is called for now?' or 'What would be nourishing now?'

When asked why he does walking meditation, Thich Nhat Hanh typically answers, 'because I like it'. Following the heart allows me to experience life as a series of steps that I *want* to take, rather than a drudgery of tasks I *should* do. Much energy is thus released, be it for listening deeply to a patient, or to myself as I sit in meditation. May I come to do it all out of love. Be it following my breath or answering an email, be they acts of love.

STORMY SEAS

Ram Das is quoted as saying that, from a distance, those who walk the path look as though they take a series of steps, then perform prostrations and proceed again. Closer in, one sees that these are not prostrations at all but messy, confused and often painful falls to the ground.

I have not found the path direct or clear. Nor have I found that I could confidently place one foot before the other knowing that I am always going forward. I have always suffered from doubt. When I have perceived, accurately or not, that I am not getting very far after years of effort, there has been a giving in to disappointment, frustration and bitterness.

I can see that being caught in the thoughts associated with these painful feelings holds me back, and a vicious circle can result. Worrying about not going forward leaves me stuck in the worrying and then, I have all the more cause to worry. Like a tightrope walker, the more relaxed I can be about the whole affair, the less likely am I to fall. I aspire to listen more to my 'heart' – the body's intuitive wisdom –, and be less caught in *thinking* about what I am doing.

A DYNAMIC BALANCE

An extreme ascetic for many years, the Buddha took a bowl of rice one day, and is said to have soon after been liberated from unnecessary or self-created suffering. He urges us to follow a 'Middle Way', if we are to journey towards lasting happiness and clarity of mind. This takes neither mortifying nor indulging the body to be sure, but the invitation is in fact to avoid being caught in any extremes. Staying the course has, for me, entailed a subtle balancing act:

Gently committing to growth

- Acknowledging how I am right now and seeing myself, with the eyes of unconditional love, as somehow perfect and complete in this ephemeral moment *while* remaining motivated to make efforts towards healing, growing and thus in some ways changing over the course of time;
- Accepting healing as an ongoing, never-ending, process, practice and way of being *while* taking heart and finding direction in the lightly held 'goal' of freedom from unnecessary or self-inflicted suffering;
- Seeing the path as a gentle one of love and compassion that builds peace and joy *while* mustering some degree of effort and discipline and taking responsibility for my healing, as well as my resistance or laziness;
- Trusting my own intuitive sense of what heals *while* being prepared to follow a therapist or guide, at times even with an attitude of, 'I don't have to like it, I just have to do it.';
- Aligning everything with my intention to heal – how I think, speak and act, what I eat, read and watch, and how I treat my body; in other words, aspiring to live every moment with a compassionate awareness *while* living the journey lightly and letting go of a hypochondriacal tension or self-improvement obsession;

Giving healing room

- Lessening my load or even at times entirely withdrawing from the workaday life in the service of healing *while* knowing that ultimately I want to heal where I am; that it is often not as if, 'I have to heal before I can love and work', but that, 'I have to love and work so that I can heal';
- Spending intentional time on healing activities such as therapy, sitting meditation or yoga *while* knowing that doing wholesome, satisfying things in the world also effect healing and growth;

- Taking care of myself without apology or hesitation *while* knowing that much energy that sustains my healing and happiness is released when I am there for others out of compassion.

Remembering joy and gratitude

- Giving my day to day sufferings the time of day and recognising and kindly embracing them *while* also attending to, savouring, and nurturing what is positive, beautiful or joyous in each moment; lest I come to feel oppressed by a life misperceived as a mass of problems and difficulties;
- Relishing gratitude for my luck to have so many pleasant and nourishing things, from eyes that can still see to the certainty of a next meal *while* nurturing my compassion, *and not guilt*, as I remember that many others have much less.

ALLOWING THE RIVER

What lies ahead? I hope to feel more as one carried effortlessly by the river of life, than he who, sweating from exertion, clears a path forward. My intention to heal has come more to mean letting go into the flow and gliding around the rocks and snags than charging ahead as fast as I can.

I would like to cultivate more and more lightness in how I live: to somehow 'take it easy' in both life and healing; to let go of a deeply held, often unconscious view that everything is so very important; that to not 'get it right' will be somehow disastrous. Though committed to working through and learning from difficulties, I want more often to ask, 'Can I smile and see the humour in this, and *just not worry about it?*'

And if I do keep worrying and find myself stuck in fear? I hope to remember that whatever seemingly insurmountable, world-stopping problem I fancy myself faced with, I'll be better able to take care of it once I am calm and even somehow happy; once I have faced and embraced the fear that, yes, the sky may fall in; and once I have let go of the tightness of trying to work it out and fix it.

When problems are not so earth-shatteringly important, well then maybe I can give myself an inner break. When I go for that walk on a Sunday afternoon maybe I can really be there, and really enjoy it. Maybe I can let myself have true leisure: not some activity that I think I should do to have 'work-life balance', but living spaciouly enough to sometimes do just what takes my heart's fancy. And when I want to be productive, if all the emails I think I 'have' to answer are not so important, then maybe I can let myself do more of what brings me alive. 'Hell, I've always wanted to learn philosophy. I might just pull out from the shelf, this book that's been pulling at me for years.'

*Yoga as taught in most studios, is in my experience to some degree devoid of its spiritual underpinnings and less focused on listening compassionately to the body than subjecting it to the dictates of ideas about ideal forms. ■

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