

BOOK REVIEW

HEARTWORK. THE PATH OF SELF-COMPASSION

BY RADHULE WEININGER, MD, PHD

Boulder, Colorado: Shambala Publications, Inc.; 2017

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Radhule Weininger has written a wonderful book on compassion and self-compassion. It is wonderful first of all because Radhule herself comes across so authentically. We learn about her difficult early childhood experiences, her car accidents as a medical student, and her apparently serendipitous discovery of Buddhism and mindfulness in Sri Lanka. We get a sense of how her own mindfulness and compassion have spread out from there to encompass herself, other people, other sentient beings and the planet. Normally I would have had a hard time enlarging compassion quite so far (trees and the whole planet?) but transmitted as it is in this book through the author's combination of personal stories and targeted exercises I begin to feel a sense of the power of this all encompassing compassion. This is a book that opens your heart.

The book has three main sections: "My Story" in which the author relates her personal experiences that led to the birth of her compassionate practice; "Nine Practices for Cultivating Compassion" in which she outlines, gives detailed prescriptions for, and tells relevant stories to illustrate 9 practices for operationalizing compassion; and "Stories" in which she tells 9 stories that depict compassionate practice in different kinds of challenging situations. All three parts of the book are essential and fit together into a very effective whole. Being a person who is allergic to step-wise prescriptions I at first found the section on the nine practices difficult to face but once I had started I found it extremely rewarding and helpful. It is true

I sometimes alternated between chapters on one of the practices and one of the stories at the end of the book and that is one of the book's strengths. It allows for a non-linear alternation between different sections rather than demanding a strict beginning to end progress.

The central idea in the book is that compassion and mindfulness are interrelated and synergistic ways of relating to the world and that both can be improved by practice. The two essential exercises on which the rest of the book expands and elaborates are "The mindful pause practice" and "The loving-kindness practice". That sounds simple but in elaborating on these simple exercises with different suggested practices for many different situations and illustrated with relevant stories the book provides exactly what is needed for anyone interested in bringing compassion into every aspect of their lived experience.

Having read other excellent books on mindfulness and compassion this book stood out in 3 ways: first, it really did open my heart in a way that books focused primarily on mindfulness have not done; second, although tied to Buddhist theory and practice it never came across as sounding like Buddhist dogma; and finally, everything in the book is geared to a contemporary context and the kinds of problems we all face day to day. There is no cultural dissonance between the world of this book and the world in which most of us live. Buy and read Weininger's book because it will change your life and if enough of us read it the world may change. ■