

WISDOM CIRCLES

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Compassion

What Does It Mean To Be A Compassionate Person?

The British religion scholar Karen Armstrong, after a lifetime of studying all of the world's great religions has concluded that cultivating compassion is the core of all of them. Every single one of them has some version of what we call "the golden rule", "Treat others as you would wish to be treated." Actually this is most often expressed in a negative form similar to the words of Rabbi Hillel, a contemporary of Jesus: "That which you would find hurtful, do not do to others." This makes sense because the way one person would like to be treated can vary significantly from the way another person might wish to be treated. But no human being wants to be lied to, betrayed, violently harmed or spoken to unkindly.

If all the world's religions teach compassion and the golden rule, then why is it so difficult for human beings to practice compassion? Why do some religious leaders teach hatred, intolerance and even murder of those who disagree with them? Armstrong writes that the answer lies in our evolutionary history. We human first evolved a purely instinctual brain, also called a reptilian brain, because it is similar to the brains of snakes and lizards. This is the part of the brain that is concerned with what scientist called the "four f's"; feeding, fighting, fleeing and, er, mating. Luckily we have evolved a higher brain that is added to the reptilian brain, a mammalian brain. This part of our brain makes us want to connect with others and to care for our young. It makes it possible for us to live with others of our kind. And finally, there evolved the upper cortex, the distinctly human part of the brain, which allows reason and empathy. This is the part of the brain that allows us to practice the golden rule. What the religious traditions have realized is that the instinctual part of us, while necessary for our survival, cannot be allowed to dictate our entire behavior. They have also realized that those higher human functions like compassion must be nurtured, taught, and cultivated.

In her book [Twelve Steps to a Compassionate Life](#), Armstrong has developed a program to develop compassion based on the teachings of the world's religions. These steps include learning about compassion, having compassion for ourselves, developing empathy, learning how we should speak with one another, and even loving our enemies.

Spiritual Exercise

This exercise comes from Twelve Steps to a Compassionate Life.

When you hear or read a news story, look behind the headlines to the ordinary people who are affected by the crisis. “Remember that they did not choose to be born into that part of the world. Like you they simply found themselves in a particular situation and may have been forced to conduct their whole lives in a context of violence, deprivation and despair...”

Think about those people, on all sides of a conflict, the “good guys” and the “bad guys.” What might have caused them to be in the situation they were in? What reasons might they have for acting the way they do? How has their history shaped them? What must life be like for them? Try to empathically feel what their reality might be.

Questions for Reflection

What is it in your life that keeps you from being able to never do to others what you would find hurtful yourself?

How might it be possible to love one’s enemies?

Cultivating compassion is a life-long journey. What is your next step in that journey?

Words of Wisdom

All faiths insist that compassion is the test of true spirituality and that it brings us into relation with the transcendence we call God, Brahman, Nirvana, or Dao. Each has formulated its own version of what is sometimes called the Golden Rule, “Do not treat others as you would not like them to treat you.”Further, they all insist that you cannot confine your benevolence to your own group; you must have concern for everybody—even your enemies Karen Armstrong
In many ways compassion is alien to our modern way of life. The capitalist economy is intensely competitive and individualistic, and goes out of its way to encourage us to put ourselves first.

~ Karen Armstrong

“Who is mighty,” the rabbis asked. “He who turns an enemy into a friend.”

Love is patient and kind; it is never boastful, never conceited, and never rude. Love is never envious or quick to take offence. Love keeps no score of wrongs and takes no pleasure in the wrongdoing of others.

~ Paul the Apostle

We are already one. But we imagine that we are not. And what we have to recover is our original unity. What we have to be is what we are.

~ Thomas Merton

Sometimes we think that to develop an open heart, to be truly loving and compassionate, means that we need to be passive, to allow others to abuse us, to smile and let anyone do what they want with us. Yet this is not what is meant by compassion. Quite the contrary. Compassion is not at all weak. It is the strength that arises out of seeing the true nature of suffering in the world. Compassion allows us to bear witness to that suffering, whether it is in ourselves or others, without fear; it allows us to name injustice without hesitation, and to act strongly, with all the skill at our disposal. To develop this mind state of compassion ... is to learn to live, as the Buddha put it, with sympathy for all living beings, without exception.

~ Sharon Salzberg

May all beings be happy! Weak and strong, of high, middle or low estate, small and great, visible and invisible, near and far away, alive or still to be born—May they all be perfectly happy!

Let nobody lie to anybody or despise any single being anywhere.

May nobody wish harm to any single creature out of anger or hatred!

Let us cherish all creatures as a mother her only child!

May our loving thoughts fill the whole world, above, below, across—without limit; our love will know no obstacles—a boundless goodwill toward the whole world, free of hatred or enmity.

Whether we are standing or walking, sitting or lying down, as long as we are awake we should cultivate this love in our heart. This is the noblest way of living.

~ Early Buddhist poem