# Self-Compassion

Susie Harrington · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Three-Month Retreat (IMS 2012) · 57:18

In thinking about what to talk with you about tonight, I kept coming back to this fundamental part of our practice that you've heard many times: our practice is about our relationship to what's happening. That's what's most important. And a lot of what's happening is right here with us. There are a few things happening out there, but a lot of it's right here.

I want to read to you first a sutta, a very short sutta from the Buddha. This is the Bamboo Acrobat, the Sedaka Sutta.

Once upon a time, bhikkhus, a bamboo acrobat, setting himself upon his bamboo pole, addressed his assistant Medakathalika: "Come you, my dear Medakathalika, and climb up the bamboo pole, stand upon my shoulders."

"Okay, master," the assistant replied to the bamboo acrobat, and climbing up the bamboo pole, she stood on the master's shoulders.

So then the bamboo acrobat said to his assistant, "You look after me, my dear, and I'll look after you. Thus, with us looking after one another, guarding one another, we'll show off our craft, receive some payment, and safely climb down the bamboo pole."

This being said, the assistant said this to the bamboo acrobat: "This will not do at all, master. You look after yourself, master, and I will look after myself. Thus, with each of us looking after ourselves, guarding ourselves, we'll show off our craft, receive some payment, and safely climb down from the bamboo pole." That's the right way to do it.

And the Buddha, hearing this, said to his monks, "This is correct. Just like the assistant Medakathalika said to her master, 'I will look after myself,' so should you, bhikkhus, practice the establishment of mindfulness. You should also practice the establishment of mindfulness by saying, 'I will look after others.' Looking after oneself, one looks after others. Looking after others, one looks after oneself."

In the Pali dictionary, karuna or compassion is often defined as the aspiration to find a way to be truly helpful to oneself and others. I want to talk tonight specifically about this taking care of ourselves—this taking care of what's here, this relationship to what is arising in this moment right here.

I want to start with acknowledging and appreciating that we all want happiness. That's our basic desire, and it's a good desire. There's nothing wrong with it. St. Augustine in his book *On the Happy Life* says, "The desire for happiness is essential to man and woman. It is the motivator of all our acts. The most venerable,

clearly understood, enlightened and reliable constant in the world is not only that we want to be happy, but that we want only to be so. Our very nature requests it of us."

A more colloquial version of that I appreciate comes from John Lennon. He said, "When I was five years old, my mother always told me that happiness was the key to life. When I went to school, they asked me what I wanted to be when I grew up. I wrote down 'happy.' They told me I didn't understand the assignment, and I told them they didn't understand life."

In our attempts to be happy, we try many different strategies. It's natural—we're trying to figure out how to do it. One of the strategies our culture really supports, pushes on us, that we try really hard with—the bookstores are full of self-help books—is trying to improve our self-esteem. Self-esteem is very much based on what Sally was talking about a few nights ago: that mana, that conceit of comparing mind. We're constantly trying to compare, and it's so challenging because self-esteem requires that we be better than average.

I always laugh at Garrison Keillor's description of Lake Wobegon, where all the women are strong, all the men are good looking, and all the children are above average. How does that compute? But that's exactly what we think we need to be. We all think we have to be above average. We all think we have to be better.

There have been a lot of sociological studies done recently. I went to a scientific conference on compassion and found it really fascinating—all the different ways they were studying how we are compassionate to each other and ourselves, and what effects that has on us. One of the people who's done a lot of this study is Kristin Neff. She's worked particularly on self-compassion and has a wonderful book called *Self-Compas sion*, which I highly recommend. From some of the studies she participated in, 85% of students think that they're above average in getting along with other people.

94% of college faculty think they are better teachers than their colleagues. 90% of the people they asked think we're better drivers than the other people on the road, regardless of how many accidents we've had—not a factor.

And it's interesting because it's not just us culturally; we think we need to be better at certain things. But they did this as a cross-cultural study. They went and tested in some Asian countries, and what they discovered was that the figures were similar. 90% of the Asians in the countries where modesty was important thought they were more modest than their compatriots. Figure that out. And more self-sacrificing and more cooperative than anyone else. So it seems to be a very widespread tendency.

But this is challenging. We have these two versions of ourselves. One tells us we're better, we're doing it well, we're above average—primarily we try to choose the things that we're good at, and we aim towards those and we get good at those. And then on the other side, we have that self-judgment: You're not any good at it. You're not good enough. You should do it better. So we have these two conflicting things. I'm supposed to be better than average, and I'm not any good at it. What a confusing world to live inside of.

And this self-esteem that's so supported by the notion that we need it to establish our self-worth—that's where we are looking for it. But what is so fundamental to our happiness, what actually allows us to rest, is to realize that our worthiness is already here, that we don't have to go somewhere else.

The Buddha—you probably have heard this quote, it's misquoted in many ways—but he said, "Though in thought we range throughout the world, we'll nowhere find a thing or person more dear than self. So since others hold the self so dear, one who loves oneself should not injure none." We won't find anyone in the world more dear than ourselves. So to actually act from that place, to acknowledge that dearness, to come into a relationship of care and compassion with ourselves that reflects the worthiness, the beauty, the wholeness that's already here.

This involves making friends with ourselves, really making friends. One of the things I always say at the beginning of a retreat—to myself, or if I'm teaching, to others—is: all of you and all of me is welcome here. All aspects, whoever you are, all the parts and pieces, the places that we're proud of, the things in the closet—it's all welcome. There are so many parts of ourselves, the imperfect places, the places we make mistakes, just the ways we came out of the womb, that we tend to want to shove into hiding. And actually turning and looking at those and welcoming them into the room is such a relief.

I remember I was taking a course in college, a botany class. Part of the way it worked was we would walk around and the instructor would point out the plants and then she would spell these incredibly long, non-intuitive Latin names. Everybody would be there with their clipboards writing down the name. And I couldn't do it. She'd say the letters and I'd try to write them, and I would think, she has to go slower—the problem is she's going too fast. But I'd look around and everybody else seemed to be able to do it. I thought, what's going on?

So finally I would just cozy up to my friends and other people and look over their shoulder. As they wrote it down, I'd write it down. And pretty soon people would realize that when the Latin name was being spelled out, I needed to see someone. And it brings up emotion for me because the kindness just naturally arose. I'd be standing there and somebody would think, oh, she's going to spell, and they would just automatically move over to where I was so that I could see.

And of course at first it was just like, oh my God, I can't figure this out. But now I realize, wow, there's some set of neurons that doesn't fire for me the way other people's do. When somebody spells something over the phone, I have to ask them to be really slow. And it's wonderful, because it gives me so much clarity and understanding about this—oh, this doesn't work in me that well. I have great faculty with numbers. And when somebody else is confused about numbers, I think, oh yeah, I totally understand.

So letting that in—oh, I can't do this. This is hard for me. I don't have a faculty for it. And as you think about it, what part of yourself, what's hard for you that you keep tucked away somewhere, afraid to let in? Can you just welcome that and go, oh yeah, that's hard for me. That's hard for me.

One of the confusions that comes to us as we move towards this capacity for self-compassion, for caring for ourselves, is that we all get very afraid of self-indulgence. We think it's this self-criticism and this movement towards self-esteem that keeps us going. And yet what we're looking for isn't the normal things of indulgence—the sensual pleasures, the wanting of pleasant moments. Those are where we move towards indulgence. This is something else, this level of care.

Matthew Ricard puts it this way: what we're looking for is a deep sense of flourishing, not a mere pleasurable feeling, a fleeting emotion or mood, but an optimal state of being. Happiness is also a way of interpreting the world, since while it may be difficult to change the world—or I would add, ourselves—it is always possible to change the way we look at it, or look at ourselves.

At this compassion conference I went to, one of the papers presented an experiment where they tested people who said they were happy. So they started with a select group—that's a pretty select group in itself. These weren't people who had to be super happy, just people who basically said they were happy with their lives. And those people fell into two categories.

There were those who found their happiness through pleasures—they partied, they did things that gave them that kind of lift. They did the experiment in Florida, and I have a certain idea that pops into my head, but that may not be yours. They said specifically it was people who were partying, going out late, and had a lot of friends. And then they had another group who found support in more connecting activities, in meditation and other contemplative ways.

Even though both groups said they were happy and scored similarly on the happiness tests, what they discovered was striking. The people whose happiness came from this high level of activity—when they tested them biologically, they found lots of indicators of stress. But the other people, their body systems were relaxed and not in a state of stress at all.

So there's a deeper kind of happiness where the whole system is relaxed and open. And I think that's what we so deeply want. In our effort to move towards happiness, this self-critical aspect, this fear of indulgence—we're so afraid of letting go of that and settling into ourselves.

Kristin Neff says it this way: if you always criticize yourself, you may not be willing to take a good look at yourself and see where you need to change, because you'll be too afraid of the consequences—that you'll hit yourself over the head with an emotional hammer if you recognize your shortcomings. In contrast, self-compassion should provide the emotional safety needed to see yourself clearly, so that you are actually better able to identify needed areas of change and growth. In this case, one's motivation would not stem from the need to escape harsh criticism, but from the compassionate desire to create health and well-being for oneself.

We think we have to motivate ourselves through criticism. And in fact, it's through care and compassion that we are most motivated. They actually tested this in various ways and showed that people who were

given lots of encouragement, told they were okay, and given compassionate practices were actually more motivated in their lives.

One of the ways of understanding this, I think, is shifting from goals and ideas of who we're supposed to be to the experience we're having right now. We often wander around with this version of ourselves somewhere over here that is the ideal me—if I just get up in the morning and do it all right, I'm going to end up like this. If not today, maybe tomorrow, but it's going to look like this. And we're constantly trying to compare ourselves to this ideal.

Instead, we have the possibility and the option to simply ask: what's here right now? What does this person really look like? Who am I?

When we do things from that point of view, it's quite different. I'm someone who has a lot of push, a lot of ideas about who I should be and how I should be better. At least that's been my pattern—it's wearing a little thin now. But not long ago, I took up trying to play the guitar. It was wonderful. I don't have much faculty here—and that other thing might be related. I can't really tell if notes are on pitch or off pitch. It really makes tuning a guitar easy, as long as nobody else is in the room. And it's really fun.

I pick it up, play for a little while, then wander away. I'm never going to be good at this. I don't really care if I am. And I have so much fun.

I have a friend who's an artist, and she is the most prolific person I know. She draws and paints on scraps of paper, on fabric. She's constantly creating. She dresses herself like she's an ongoing piece of artwork. I mean, it's unbelievable. It's just happening, happening, happening. It's not for any purpose. It's just this expression.

When we shift from the idea that we're supposed to be this other person, this other being, and we come to here, then we have the possibility of turning towards our imperfections, our mistakes, toward where it's hard for us, where things don't go well, and actually acknowledging that and touching it.

I know for myself—and some others might have this experience—food has long been a struggle for me. I have this idea that somehow food will make me feel better. It's like that thing about the second piece of chocolate cake that was told the other day: I should have the second piece of chocolate cake. And then you have the second piece of chocolate cake, and you go, who was that who told me to have the second piece of cake? I'm really familiar with that. And yet, slowly, as time has gone on, I can see instead: what will actually be the kindest thing here? How can I speak to myself in a way, in this moment, that says—whether I do or I don't, or I had or I didn't have the piece of chocolate cake—it's okay?

Kristin Neff did a study about food. As part of the study—I think they did it all with women at the University of Austin where she is, somewhere in Texas—they had all of the women eat a chocolate or a glazed donut. They were told it was part of a taste-testing thing. Then to half of the women, they said, "Well, several people have told me that they feel bad about eating donuts in this study. So I hope you won't

be hard on yourself. Everyone eats unhealthily sometimes. And everyone in this study eats this stuff. So I don't think there's any reason to feel really bad about it."

They said that to half the people. The other half they didn't say that to. The half that didn't receive those words were so busy beating themselves up about eating the glazed donut that later in the study, when chocolate and a bunch of candies were put out and they were told they could eat as much as they wanted, the ones on a diet especially ate a lot. The ones who had received this compassionate feedback about eating the glazed donut weren't caught in the loop and didn't eat the candy.

Isn't that interesting? Once we start into this loop of "I'm a failure," we start feeling hopeless and helpless. But if we interrupt—if we make a mistake or we fall in some way, but we respond to ourselves with compassion, with "oh, well, this happens"—then it's not so bad. We can pick ourselves up and carry on.

Here we are on retreat, and you probably often have this experience: "Oh, I took that nap, and it ruined my concentration all afternoon. How was I supposed to know I shouldn't take the nap? Oh, I should have taken a nap. I would have felt better. I should eat dinner. No, I don't think I should eat dinner. I think I should walk now. No, I should stay and sit more."

It's pretty confusing, isn't it, sometimes? What am I supposed to do? How am I supposed to know what to do?

Maybe you're not. Maybe you're not supposed to have it all figured out. How would that be?

To paraphrase a Zen Roshi: My life is an endless series of mistakes, and there's no problem.

So how do we actually engage these components of self-compassion? How do we actually touch in there? How do we activate this?

Well, the Buddha had a lot to say about that. The first noble truth, for instance. He said the first thing we have to do is feel our suffering. There is suffering, and to know that is the first step in compassion. We can't skip over it.

The Dalai Lama said, if you can't practice when you are suffering because of what it does to your mind, and you can't practice when you're happy because of your attachment to your happiness, then there will never be a time when you can practice.

So recognizing the suffering and being willing to be with it—we've talked about this. That's the R in RAIN.

I remember quite a few years ago I was practicing at the Forest Refuge, and at that time there was one comfortable couch in the entire complex. I don't know if it's changed since then. There was no Room 200—very sad. This couch was in the dining room, and you could hear the kitchen from there. So I would go in really early in the morning before there was any activity and practice there. I really liked being there.

But then a couple of times I'd go in really early and somebody would be in the kitchen banging around pots and making all this noise. And I'd be sitting there doing metta. "May I be safe, may I be happy—what are they doing in the kitchen?—may I be safe, may I be happy." I would just go on like that while my whole system was boiling with aversion to the noise, and I would just keep going with my little phrases. Finally, one morning I was doing this, and I realized—oh, I'm suffering. Oh, that's what's really happening right now. I had completely missed it. I was so convinced about what I was supposed to be doing that I hadn't even noticed my own suffering in that moment.

Have you done that? Just chugging along and then finally it bubbles up from underneath and you go, "Oh yeah, that's what's really going on."

A lot of the imperfections of the world and ourselves we glaze over, trying to pretend that they're not there, because to actually feel them, somehow to admit that something isn't perfect, feels very awkward and unpleasant.

Kristin Neff puts it this way. She says, "Excuse me, there's been some error. I signed up for the 'everything will go swimmingly until the day I die' plan. Can I speak to the management, please?" That's what we're hoping for.

Norman Fischer has this wonderful passage I want to share. He says, "It's hard being a human being. There's a lot to it. There really is. So I want to say, let's all agree to accept the reality that we are not going to be able to do a very good job of this. There's too much to do. Isn't it a relief to know that it's not going to work out? And you can just forget about that to start with. So you're not going to get it right. You're not going to get it perfect."

The worst possible outcome of my saying these things today would be for everybody to walk out of this room and think, "Oh God, now I have to be compassionate to myself. Now I have to not only balance the seven factors, watch my breath, have open awareness, watch the elements. Oh yeah, and then there's impermanence. And then there's vicāra, vitakka. Oh yeah, sukha, pīti—I've got to keep track of that. Oh, and I'm not supposed to think about any of it. And I've got to brush my teeth every day. I've got to remember which day is laundry day. And besides, when I get home, I've got to take care of my children, my aging parents. I'm aging—oh yeah, there's that too. And now I've got to do all of this. I've got to meditate. Oh, and when I'm walking, I even have to take care of it."

Well, don't worry. You're not going to be able to get it all done. There's no hope.

You're not going to be able to do it. It's not going to work out. But the important thing—the important thing—is that despite this, recognizing and embracing this reality, you don't have to worry about finishing the job or doing it perfectly, because it's not going to happen. But start. You see, start and continue. This is the thing. You can really trust that if you will start, and if you will continue with commitment, that will be enough. That will be enough.

We're not going to get it done. We're not going to get it right. If we can really take that in. Can you just for a moment take that in? Do you feel any sense of relief? This whole meditation thing that we've been talking about, that you've been doing for four weeks—not going to get it right. Now you're probably going to be upset with me. I've told you you can't get it right. There is no right.

There's an alternate set of forgiveness phrases which I really like, which point to this. And they are: I offer myself forgiveness for being imperfect. I offer myself forgiveness for making mistakes. I offer myself forgiveness for being a learner in this life. I feel those are so helpful. So helpful to really acknowledge that.

As we contact our suffering, as we touch in and acknowledge it and stop resisting, then we can start to respond to it. We can connect with it. And one of the ways that we can respond is a kind of internal sīla, a kind of internal care for this environment in here, doing it as an act of compassion for ourselves.

One of the ways we can do this is through wise intention. Wise intention is divided into several categories, and one is renunciation. So there are a few things that we can renounce that are really helpful. Carol spoke at length last night about views and opinions and the renouncing of being right. I'm going to read you an excerpt from the New York Times. You can feel the being right in it and how we build up and suffer in this way.

What follows is a transcript of the actual radio conversation between a US naval ship and the Canadian authorities off the coast of Newfoundland.

Canadians: Please divert your course fifteen degrees to the south to avoid a collision.

Americans: Recommend you divert your course fifteen degrees to the north to avoid a collision.

Canadians: Negative. You will have to divert your course fifteen degrees to the south to avoid a collision.

Americans: This is the captain of a US Navy ship. I say again, divert your course.

Canadians: No, I say again, you divert your course.

Americans: This is the aircraft carrier USS Lincoln, the second largest ship in the United States Atlantic Fleet. We are accompanied by three destroyers, three cruisers, and numerous support vessels. I demand that you change your course fifteen degrees north. I say again, that's one-five degrees north, or countermeasures will be undertaken to ensure the safety of this ship.

Canadians: This is a lighthouse. Your call.

How many times do we get ourselves all wound up? All wound up. If we are willing to let go of that being right and instead be compassionate to ourselves—say, well, I might be right, I might be wrong, I'm not sure, I guess I'll wait and see. Or even: I think I'm right. Ooh, that feels really painful. Do I really want to be right? Would I rather be right, or would I rather be nice to myself? Would I rather care about my state of mind?

One of the ways we can also practice renunciation is letting go of the idea that our life is somehow going wrong. This is one of the ways we avoid touching into our suffering—we get the idea that it should be better, that it should be right. Really, that's what Norman Fischer and Kristin Neff were talking about: letting go of those ideas. Even letting go of the ideas that the world should be different.

There's one Indian teacher, Swami Prajnanpad, who said that idealism is an act of violence. Trying to live up to an ideal instead of being authentically where you are can become a form of inner violence if it splits you into two and pits one side against the other. When we use spiritual practice to be good and to ward off an underlying sense of deficiency or unworthiness, then it turns into a sort of crusade. That's a quote from John Welwood. This ideal world—it's another way we have the virtual me as compared to the actual me, and then we have the ideal world that we're in opposition with.

I love the feeling of the phrase: contentment is giving up all hope of a better future. This is it, staying right here. Even if it's imperfect, can I be with this one?

How do we meet the challenges with this sense of goodwill, this kindness? By practicing it over and over again.

There was a time I had a back injury. I was in my house, on the floor, trying to do a stretch or something, and something happened—I couldn't get up off the floor. I was lying there, and at first I was in a state of panic. This was horrible. And then I thought, well, I'm on the floor in my house. The rug's pretty comfortable. Either something will change and I'll be able to get up, or somebody will be home in a while and I'll be here when they get here. And I was like, oh, okay. I'll be all right. This isn't perfect, but I'm okay. I was there for a while and then something shifted again and I was able to get up. Oh, okay. That's the way it is right now. It's the best I could do.

I had a friend who had MS, and she drove, but it was quite hard for her. I remember she had to back down a long driveway to where we were having a meeting, and she came in. I said, you know, how was that? Because I could see her sort of working at it. And she said, oh, it's pretty hard. But it's okay. Some people climb mountains. I back the car down the driveway. It was like, that's what's happening for me.

A big part of how we express our self-compassion, the way we care for ourselves, is in our internal dialogue, what we say to ourselves. I know for myself, it was a big shift. For a long time, I would say very supportive, encouraging things. I would be like, this is fine, you're going to be okay, you're doing great. And I know that, for instance, your back is... but it's going to be better. And besides, this is all for the best. I had all sorts of these responses. And finally I discovered it was kind of an avoidance strategy for actually being willing to feel my suffering. I was making up a whole story around how everything was okay.

And it was so useful to me when I actually settled back and said, well, actually, this is kind of hard. This is a challenge. I'm okay, but this is a challenge. I even went so far at one point that I realized there was a huge voice in me that went off many, many times a day saying, "I don't want to"—to all sorts of things that

I'd never even heard before. And I started just paying attention to it.

"I don't want to." "I don't want to get out of bed in the morning."

I listened to this voice, and I'd respond, "Oh, okay. So getting out of bed is hard for you." And then what I noticed was that I'd get out of bed anyway. It wasn't like I had to pretend that it was great getting out of bed. It was cold. It was dark. I wasn't interested. But it was okay.

So in our movement towards self-compassion, towards caring, first we have to recognize what compassion actually is—versus self-indulgence, versus moving towards self-esteem. We have to realize that this compassion is different. It's actually feeling what's happening, being willing to contact the truth, being present with what's here. And then, after we contact and actually are with what's here, it's responding to it with kindness—actually giving ourselves the same offering we'd give to a friend, to someone we love.

The last part of compassion for ourselves is very important. It's realizing that we're not alone, that what we're experiencing is not just me. One of the most painful parts of suffering is that we get involved in a vicious cycle where, by suffering, we feel isolated, and then our isolation leads to more suffering, and we continue in this loop. So it's really important to break out of that loop, and we can do this. Sometimes it happens automatically, but we can do it intentionally.

I had a friend who was on retreat, and she was quite worried about her son, who was off on an extreme expedition in a remote jungle and was not going to be contacting her for a long time. She felt the stress of a mother in that unknown. We can all feel that—when somebody we love and care about is two hours late, five hours late. Well, what if you don't get to hear from them for thirty or forty days, even if something goes wrong?

She really stayed with the experience, and the experience spread. She started to feel the connection to all mothers, all mothers everywhere, of all beings—all fathers, all those connected to those that they love. Realizing that she was so not alone, that this was such a human and even beyond-human experience, became one of the profound openings in her practice.

I remember being on retreat at Spirit Rock and having an injury, sort of stumbling around and making my regular trips to the ice packs in the freezer. One day I was standing on a grassy knoll looking out, just over the little town of Woodacre, and I thought: how many people in this little town, at this retreat, just right here, are struggling with some aspect of their body? It's hard to be a person. It's hard to be a person.

Sukhne Rinpoche says that after the self dissolves, the expression of that realization is compassion. When we drop out of our movie, stop being the star of our movie as Sally was talking about, compassion is the natural reaction—here and elsewhere.

What we say to ourselves matters. "I care about myself. I care about my suffering. I can see this is difficult." And I have to say, my favorite is "It's hard to be a person." I say that to myself often. And when

we realize that other people too have these difficult experiences—very helpful.

This sense of caring for ourselves allows us to expand and care for others as well. This is what the Buddha was pointing toward. When we care for ourselves, we care for others. When we care for others, we care for ourselves. When we realize we are not so different—just as we are imperfect, they too; just as it is hard for us, just as we have challenges—so too for others.

Pema Chödrön says, "The only reason we don't open our hearts and minds to other people is that they trigger confusion in us that we don't feel brave enough or sane enough to deal with. To the degree that we look clearly and compassionately at ourselves, we feel confident and fearless about looking into someone else's eyes."

Look clearly and compassionately at ourselves. Then we can look at others.

In Tibetan, the word *tsewa*, translated as compassion, makes no distinction between compassion for self and compassion for others.

I'm going to end with a short reading from Jo Coudert, from a little booklet of hers titled *Advice from a Failure*:

"It is rewarding to find someone whom you like, but it is essential to like yourself. It is quickening to recognize that someone is a good and decent human being, but it is indispensable to view yourself as acceptable."

It is a delight to discover people who are worthy of respect and admiration and love. But it is vital to believe yourself worthy of these things. For you cannot live in someone else. You cannot find yourself in someone else. You cannot be given a life by someone else. Of all the people you will know in a lifetime, you are the only one you will never leave or lose. To the question of your life, you are the only answer. To the problems of your life, you are the only solution.

So let us sit together for a moment.

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