

Love Is Compassion in Action by Thich Nhat Hanh

October 5, 2011 at 9:55am



Love is a mind that brings peace, joy, and happiness to another person. Compassion is a mind that removes the suffering that is present in the other. We all have the seeds of love and compassion in our minds, and we can develop these fine and wonderful sources of energy. We can nurture the unconditional love that does not expect anything in return and therefore does not lead to anxiety and sorrow. The essence of love and compassion is understanding, the ability to recognize the physical, material, and psychological suffering of others, to put ourselves "inside the skin" of the other. We go "inside" their body, feelings, and mental formations, and witness for ourselves their suffering. Shallow observation as an outsider is not enough to see their suffering. We must become one with the object of our observation. When we are in contact with another's suffering, a feeling of compassion is born in us. Compassion means, literally, "to suffer with."

We begin by choosing as the object of our meditation someone who is undergoing physical or material suffering, someone who is weak or easily ill, poor or oppressed, or has no protection. This kind of suffering is easy to see. After that, we can practice being in contact with more subtle forms of suffering. Sometimes the other person does not seem to be suffering at all, but we may notice that he has sorrows which have left their marks in hidden ways.

People with more than enough material comforts can also suffer. We look deeply at the person who is the object of our meditation on compassion, both during sitting meditation and when we are actually in contact with him. We must allow enough time to be in deep contact with his suffering. We continue to observe him until compassion arises and penetrates our being.

When we observe deeply in this way, the fruit of our meditation will naturally transform into some kind of action. We will not just say, "I love him very much," but instead, "I will do something so that he will suffer less." The mind of compassion is truly present when it is effective in removing another person's suffering.

We have to find ways to nourish and express our compassion. When we come into contact with the other person, our thoughts and actions should express our mind of compassion, even if that person says and does things that are not easy to accept. We practice in this way until we see clearly that our love is not contingent upon the other person being lovable. Then we can know that our mind of compassion is firm and authentic. We ourselves will be more at ease, and the person who has been the object of our meditation will also benefit eventually. His suffering will slowly diminish, and his life will gradually be brighter and more joyful as a result of our compassion.

We can also meditate on the suffering of those who cause us to suffer. Anyone who has made us suffer is undoubtedly suffering too. We only need to follow our breathing and look deeply, and naturally we will see his suffering. A part of his difficulties and sorrows may have been brought about by his parents' lack of skill when he was still young. But his parents themselves have been victims of their parents; the suffering has been transmitted from generation to generation and been reborn in him. If we see that, we will no longer blame him for making us suffer, because we know that is also a victim. To look deeply is to understand. Once we understand the reasons he has acted badly, our bitterness toward him will vanish, and we will long for him to suffer less. We will feel cool and light, and we can smile. We do not need the other person to be present in order to bring about reconciliation. When we look deeply, we become reconciled with ourselves, and, for us, the problem no longer exists. Sooner or later, he will see our attitude and will share in the freshness of the stream of love which is flowing naturally from our heart.

Excerpted from *Peace Is Every Step* by Thich Nhat Hanh.