

Two Cups of Tea: Building Community through Self-Compassion

by Lea Seigen Shinraku

A poster hangs in the window of a preschool in my neighborhood, and I pass it several times each week. Across the top it reads, “How to Build Community.” It lists several suggested actions, ending with: “Know that no one is silent although many are not heard. Work to change this.” As a therapist, I often listen to the parts of my clients that they or others in their lives are not able to hear, including the not-silent parts that communicate through habits and unconscious actions, rather than in words. In supporting my clients to listen to their not-heard parts, I sometimes see my therapy work as internal community building.



photo by Ashley McNamara

Many people, particularly those of us who work in helping professions or as activists, find it challenging to listen to the not-silent, not-heard parts of ourselves. Yet, without self-compassion—a willingness to acknowledge and abide with all parts of oneself—actions and behaviors that seem generous and wholesome can actually perpetuate unconscious cycles of internal violence and oppression. In our dedication to relieving the suffering of others and working for social justice, many of us need to be reminded to listen to ourselves and give our own not-silent, not-heard parts a place at the table.

I first began to understand the importance of self-compassion when I was living at San Francisco Zen Center. I had been practicing residentially there for nearly a year, when I began a graduate program in counseling psychology and my schedule was rigorous—sitting zazen for many hours each week, working in the kitchen preparing meals for the community, a full load of coursework, writing papers, and studying. Although I had little free time, I did not question my many commitments. My life looked the way I thought it should, and I felt fully aligned with my values: I had a dedicated and community-supported spiritual practice, and I was on a path to right livelihood that would enable me to bring that spiritual practice into the world.

I was able to actually live this life for about a month. Then, one morning just before I sat down for zazen, I realized that I was about to faint. I made my way to the side door of the meditation hall, climbed five steps, and then fell like a domino.

Moments later, I came to, and a friend helped me back to my room. I rested for a few hours, decided that I did not need to call a doctor, and prepared a pot of peppermint tea. I set the teapot on my desk next to my notebook and pen. And then I did something rather unusual: I put out two cups. I had the feeling that my fainting was a signal that a not-heard part of me was speaking without words. In the same way that I might invite a friend to tea, I invited this not-heard part to tea. I let it know that I was now receptive to what it had to communicate. I filled each cup and sat quietly.

I sipped from one cup, and I put it down. I reached for the second cup, and I took a sip. I picked up my pen and wrote. What followed was a dialogue between my everyday self and this not-heard part. Through this process, I began to listen to what I had been ignoring.

Until then, I had made little space for any feelings or needs that conflicted with my vision of how my life should look. I had been unable to see that I was compromising parts of myself in the service of an idea of rightness. In listening to this not-heard part, I discovered that ignoring any one being—including myself—for the benefit of all beings does not work. I had to acknowledge that although my intention was to act compassionately and do no harm, I was leaving myself out.

Attending to this not-heard part helped me recognize that I needed rest, spontaneity, creativity, joy, and unstructured time if I was to sustain a life of compassionate action in my work as a therapist. I saw that I had been pushing myself too hard, unwilling to accept my limitations and reluctant to admit that I could not do everything myself. These needs were inconvenient at the time and did not fit neatly into my narrow view of how I thought my life should look, and yet, they were an undeniable part of me. In the days and weeks that followed, I found ways to open up my schedule and give myself the rest that I needed. Having tea with myself that day was a powerful experience of conscious self-compassion, and my understanding of its importance has deepened over time.

About a year later, in a class on Tibetan compassion practices, a professor told us that we could dedicate the merit of any experience—whether we perceived it as positive or negative—to the benefit of all beings. In particular, he encouraged us to celebrate our perceived shortcomings. At the end of the first day, as the class began filing out of the room, he smiled widely and shouted, “Don’t forget to celebrate your inadequacies!”

This suggestion felt playful and mischievous, and I began to experiment. The next time I noticed that I was criticizing myself for not working harder, I interrupted that habit pattern and said, “May my need for spontaneity and rest be of great benefit to many!” and then “May my not working harder be of great benefit to many!” and finally, “May my self-criticism be of great benefit to many!” It felt silly and liberating to take something that I had perceived to be a problem and open it up. I saw the practice as a way of taking

refuge in not-knowing. I might sometimes criticize myself and believe that I should work harder, but was that really true? Sometimes, the harder I worked, the less I got done. Dedicating merit in this way seemed to perplex my inner critic, and I found relief and a sense of spaciousness in that.

I was introduced to a third self-compassion practice several months later, when another teacher suggested that I could offer my unique moment-by-moment experience of suffering as a kind of container for the suffering of all beings. When we first discussed this practice, I think that I actually rolled my eyes. To the skeptic in me, this did not sound like self-compassion; it sounded like an exercise in emotional masochism. In that moment, I wondered what the benefit could be in taking on the suffering of everyone else in the world, in addition to my own, at a time when I already felt overwhelmed. But, the only way I know to find out what a practice might offer is to experiment, so I decided to try it and see what happened.

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The next time I noticed self-critical thoughts, I took a deep breath and said to myself, “May my self-criticism contain the self-criticism of all beings.” I paused, expecting to feel crushed by the emotional weight of the world’s self-criticism. But, instead of feeling burdened, I felt more enlivened and expansive. The felt experience of increased energy surprised me. This practice seemed to enable me to offer my experience as a resource for all beings, and it seemed to plug me in to what felt like a latent power grid of compassion—a community that does not need to be built so much as actively recognized and heard.

I also understood that a particularly painful aspect of suffering is the storytelling we can do about what suffering means: primarily, that it isolates us from other beings. This practice, then, is an affirmation of the first noble truth—that all beings suffer. It asks us to rewrite the stories we might unconsciously believe about suffering being analogous to separateness. Instead, we can experience our often-unacknowledged connection with others in the very places where we believe we are cut off.

When I told this teacher about my interest in self-compassion, she encouraged me to explore it further. “Self-compassion is the nature of mind,” she said. “You feel more energy because you are aligned with what is true.” Her observations struck me in their simplicity and insight, and they have profound implications about what it is to practice self-compassion.

These practices have shown me that to engage compassionately with oneself is to acknowledge that even the most challenging experiences can be workable and nourishing if we can first find a way to acknowledge and listen to our own suffering and then understand that we can experience it as a container for the not-silent, not-heard suffering of others. In this way, we can know community in any moment, both within ourselves and with all beings. ❖

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