

## Cultivation of Compassion: Fire, Earth, Metal, Water, Wood II

By Jessica Farley

*"From the Sun I learned this: when he goes down, overrich; he pours gold into the sea out of inexhaustible riches, so that even the poorest fisherman still rows with golden oars. For this I once saw and I did not tire of my tears as I watched it."*

-Nietzsche

There is a call for compassion in spiritual practices throughout the world. It is a common ground which diverse faiths build upon in their journeys towards ascension. In the Taoist Five Element system it inspires the natural and progressive cultivation of all other virtues, from Propriety to Faith to Righteousness to Wisdom. On the simplest level, compassion is about connecting to the suffering of others and desiring a remedy. It is about the processes of identification, understanding, and love. Compassion expands the mind and heart and often prompts us to change our behavior, beginning a cycle of growth. It is a place to which we can always return if we get lost, to replenish our perceptions and gain insight. True compassion always leads us closer to the True Heart and what is most essential and divine.

Compassion often begins as a basic and logical identification with pain: I feel pain and they feel pain too. We have similar sensations and therefore we sympathize. The word itself breaks down into the roots *com* and *passion*,

which translate to "to suffer with." We all share sensations of common pain, challenges, and desires. These are simple, primary observations. And, once we have reached this basic level of recognition, a bond forms. This bond is intrinsically based on a comprehension of mutual vulnerability. Our realizations may begin with only one person, but the more we accept a common fragility as fact, the more we will identify with others, resulting in a deeper experience of compassion as we learn that vulnerability is an invariable truth for all sentient beings. Our recognition of it leads past the façade and persona into the light to the possibility of love. It is an awareness of this vulnerability that creates an intimacy allowing us to see and connect with that beautiful "inner core." I think anyone who has tried to stand in another person's shoes understands what this means. When we see beyond the surface into the heart we realize that we all want love, warmth, and meaning. We begin to grasp that we have similar needs and wishes. So, compassion can be born from a limited correlation of shared negative experiences and open the door to a deep witnessing of the true heart. And thus the darkness of common suffering leads to a bright affinity with another soul. This is a beginning of love.

At first, we may only be able to sympathize with certain people that we consider to be "like us." We may not be able to understand or forgive someone who acts out of cruelty. We may not be able to relate the pain of an animal to that which we feel as humans. But, we all have the ability to develop and more fully comprehend the experience of others. Compassion grows when fertilized as we open our hearts to the unfamiliar. It flourishes when we move beyond the consumptive obsession of selfish desires. If one is so caught up in his egocentric problems, then he will never look long enough to notice other people's trials and his opinion of himself will be tainted by a false image of his place in the world, as

well as his inability to connect with others and his True Heart. We can try to deny it, but we all breathe the same air, walk the same earth, and share this life. We are essentially and beautifully defined by the world in which we live and the people to which we are linked. If we can understand others in their weakness and strength and realize our commonalities, then we will undoubtedly see ourselves more clearly and compassionately. We all have darkness and light within; acceptance of this fertilizes the soil from which springs forth love for others and ourselves. And, I think love, more than anything else, leads us closer to our true selves because it connects us with the sacred and essential. As professor and author Leo Buscaglia says, "love and the self are one and the discovery of either is the realization of both."

A fundamental grasp of karma is extremely useful in the cultivation of compassion as we strive to comprehend the darker side of human existence. This concept basically asserts a responsibility for the circumstances of life. To some, it may seem judgmental and perhaps cruel. However, karma implies a chain of events, a cause and effect that extends far beyond our knowing. A simple lesson of this concept is that we cannot really know the full history behind someone's actions or difficulties, or our own for that matter. We are all part of a cycle of interactions and behaviors arising from sources both traceable and mysterious. It is very useful to be able to look back and understand a person's psychology and see the patterns that are born from history, both personal and collective, by cultural norms, traumas, and coping mechanisms. Recognizing these can help us heal and foster greater compassion. However, our perspective remains partial even with the best analysis. Ultimately, we need to be able to accept the mystery of our circumstances and apply compassion in the face of the ineffable, with humility and conviction, working practically with a developing discernment.



Illustration by Eric Collins

## A Journey in Compassion

My personal advent of compassion began with activism. It has been an ever-evolving process. I began with identification with suffering. This perspective expanded and became global in nature.

When I was fourteen I attended an assembly presented by the high school's chapter of Amnesty International, a human rights non-governmental organization. It campaigns for prisoners of conscience, those who have been imprisoned for their beliefs, politics, race, religion, or sexual orientation. A journalist and former prisoner came to speak at the event. And though I did not understand the political implications at the time, I was truly moved. There was a staged skit portraying an imprisonment of which I remember abduction, darkness, and a scream. It was the scream that captured my attention and remains with me to this day. Within this orchestrated cry was the sound of real voices, real people and prisoners, real suffering and a world unknown, yet felt. My latent compassion was awakened.

Most humans have an innate instinct to respond to a child's cry. We are all connected to that signal of need or distress. Likewise, I find it natural to respond to a scream from an adult or from any creature with similar urgency. It is an organic reaction.

By the time the next school year began, the two girls who had ran the chapter had graduated. I decided to start the chapter anew, without any idea of what I was doing or about what Amnesty International actually *did*. But, the memory of that scream propelled me, along with the exhilaration of doing something meaningful for others. I did not understand the politics or process of the organization. All I knew was I wanted to respond. I was incredulous as the alerts of human rights abuses poured in, surprised that the news filling my mailbox seemed more important and honest than that of the Washington Post. Thus began my career as an activist. As I learned more about the world, I became fixated on its problems. I decided to pursue a degree in International

Affairs with a concentration in Peace Studies. Each painful world event impacted me and I believed fully in its gravity. I was in fact, quite serious and took the world seriously. I had not accepted Buddha's First Noble Truth: life is suffering. This tenet of Buddhism may sound despondent to the unfamiliar ear. However, it is the acceptance of affliction in the world that allows compassion to come to its full fruition. It took me to a place where I was looking beyond and more deeply into the reality of human life: we suffer and we are given the opportunity to learn, to respond with our best or worst, to better understand others, and to find meaning in our suffering. This is true of all people and a comprehension of this leads to a comprehension of purpose and commonality. Most of us lose clarity from time to time. We may even get buried under the weight of our problems. However, when I eventually accepted these obstacles as part of the human experience, my perspective on life shifted and I realized that the work on Earth was about transcendence and growth. I became more capable of constructive action and less caught up in a sense of helplessness and overwhelming emotion.

*"There is that  
inner core in  
all of us which  
is simply  
beautiful."*

- Andrew Matthews

Guan Shi Yin is the bodhisattva of love and compassion. Her name also can be translated as "one who observes the sounds of the world." I spent years listening for those screams and I found them where I looked. I tried to puzzle out how to keep those shrieks at bay and figure out their source. I found causes individual and aberrant, systemic and institutional. I thought the pain of being human would vanish if this or that policy were enacted, if this or that law was stopped. I could not accept the suffering of the world.

Guan Yin, however, hears the cries but does not get lost in them. She realizes the intrinsic source of suffering and that so much of it lies in being caught up in the senses and the ephemeral. She also knows that we cannot heal someone's karma and circumvent the lessons they need to learn and the challenges they must face to grow. At the time, I couldn't conceive of the actions necessary to inspire and transform the heart. I was so focused on the material conditions that I lost sight of the work needed to really spark compassion and clear thinking. I also forgot the importance of positivity.

My search and spiritual practice finally led me to see causes within the human heart and mind, as well as personal and collective karma. My compassion grew with my

comprehension; I saw that we are all in this together and how easy it is to get confused. Through my understanding, love blossomed and I realized that offering something positive would be much more effective at relieving the weight of suffering. I wanted to build upon the eternal and essential elements revealed in my experience of shared vulnerability (the inner core), rather than be caught in the transient and relatively superficial conditions of pain. My Tao practice was a great outlet for developing empowered compassion because I could contribute to the elevation of consciousness and spirit of others, as the tools of this spiritual and energetic practice worked to reveal the Higher Self rather than fight off an external perpetrator.

The lesson of positivity was akin to a lesson of big and small compassion. Small compassion seeks short-term results and maintains a superficial view of suffering. Big compassion focuses on the long-term, and most crucially a profound essence of existence. It is not provoked by a concern over inconvenience or temporary difficulty. For example, a parent might have to deal with a child who cries because he can't have ice cream for dinner. The parent's love extends beyond the immediate into the future with a genuine concern for long-term health. It is not compassionate to respond to tantrums and to fear the child's minor discomfort to the degree that we forgo what really matters. Small compassion, though important, serves a smaller self. Yet, sometimes we must shower people with love and let them know we care about their small pangs and problems. This is because it helps them to feel less alone and it also allows them to get to a more manageable state from which they can move past the storm of karma. The vital thing is to keep your eyes on the prize: the True Heart and the true potential, and always see that through the suffering.

My experience with activism took me through one round of the Five Element cycle. It began with a basic, almost primal compassion catalyzed by the sound of a scream. Propriety came as I took appropriate action and began a chapter of Amnesty International changed my behavior. Faith quickly followed as my conviction strengthened through my work as an activist. My dedication resulted in further action, and led me through a stage of Justice or Righteousness; I pursued a degree in International Affairs & Peace Studies, paving the way for a career as I became involved in a variety of organizations, taking on more responsibility on a deeper level in a larger context. Through these experiences I gained Wisdom and I realized that taking on the problems of the world led to a sense of despair and helplessness without a deeper perspective and positive foundation. I also came to accept and understand the First Noble Truth. This wisdom then informed my compassion. I reached the beginning of a new cycle! My compassion had changed and I began to apply it to a fresh worldview and the new context of my

spiritual practice in which Propriety and Faith would take on entirely different forms as well. The point here is not that my particular path is the right one. The point is that it illustrates how the development and experience of one virtue leads to another and why the compassion I began with and compassion I ended up with (although there really is no end to this cycle) were so very different!

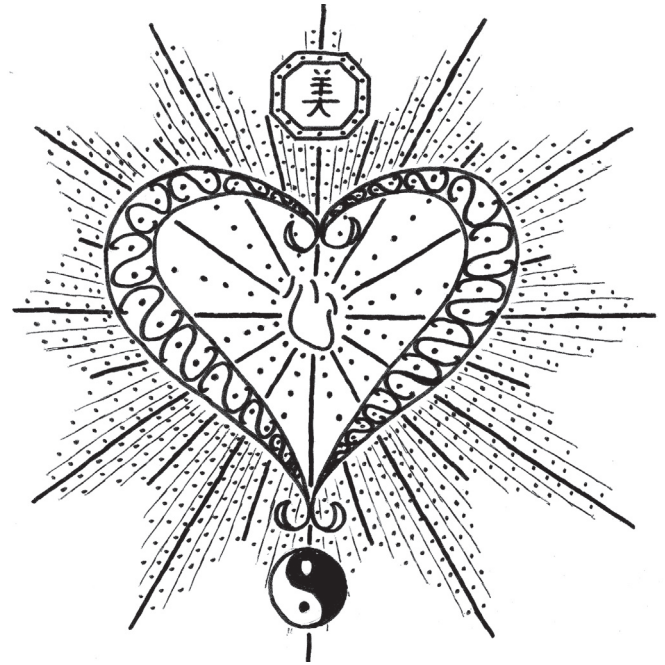


Illustration by Ian Carroll

### Compassion as love:

As previously mentioned, compassion provides a foundation for the development of other virtues. It is a foundation because it is practical. We can practice compassion in our lives beginning at whatever stage we are at. We are not static beings and are always capable of further development and unexpected insight. Being vegetarian is an awesome way to put a higher degree of compassion into action. Its benefits are both energetic and spiritual, which naturally leads to greater development. Take a minute to think about how you can really put compassion into action. There are countless opportunities both large and small. You can change the way you talk to people, how you listen and how you eat. You can also change what kind of products you buy, by thinking about your impact on the environment and other people. You can cultivate compassion by simply looking at people with more openness. Any move towards empowered compassion is for your benefit as well as those receiving it. Being kind and loving to others and ourselves creates patterns that produce exponential results energetically and physiologically. Furthermore, the closer we become to our True Heart, the more compassion we will develop. This is

because compassion and love are natural, and they express something real and true about being human. In the words of Ann Frank, “despite everything, I believe that people are really good at heart.”

This virtue also serves as a foundation which allows us to remain empowered when faced with personal struggles. We all experience challenges and make mistakes and we must cultivate compassion for ourselves as well as others. When the day is done, an empowered compassion can lead you back to your own heart just as compassion can offer insight into and connect you with others. It is not possible to be truly compassionate without practicing love and compassion for yourself. I used to think that I could torture and mistreat myself and give fully to others. But I had an incredibly limited view of what I actually had to give. I did give and I still had compassion, but it was a mere spectre of what I’m capable. Opening up to self-love is like clearing the clouds away from the Sun, allowing it to shine down, *overrich* in its bounty.

Violence towards yourself, which includes negative thought patterns, harming your body, and ignoring your needs and wishes, is not useful. It leads to warped perceptions and egoism. Compassion, that acknowledges the fundamental value of each spirit, should include *you*. Everyone talks about self-love and its importance so I expect that you have heard this before. I’ve heard it a million times, but it is an evolving lesson. I am always learning and maturing in my quest for self-love. When you are having a difficult time and trouble acting with virtue, or propriety, you can always come back to cultivating compassion for yourself. We all falter, and compassion for ourselves allows us to relax enough to be

able to move forward, see beyond the minute, return to what’s important, and care for others.

*“The extent to which you know yourself- and we are all more alike than different- you can know others. When you love yourself, you will love others.”* -Leo Buscaglia

**Cultivating compassion:**  
*When you’ve lost that lovin’ feelin’*

Wisdom is the precursor to compassion in the Five Element cycle. Just to review it goes like this: Compassion→Propriety→Faith→Righteousness→Wisdom→Compassion2 (“2” indicates the next level of development) → the cycle repeated again and again ever moving upward. Therefore, it is the second tier of compassion that is informed by wisdom. It takes a certain degree of understanding to ripen in self-love and love for others. It takes a degree of experience to be able to transform negative associations into love. This experience comes during the development of Propriety and Righteousness and they lead to Wisdom. It is impossible to know what it would be like to reach these higher stages before you have actually done so, as they all build upon each other. We may feel stuck, like we keep hitting a brick wall, but if we’re earnestly seeking and committed to growth that wall will shatter as we break through to the other side.

When I was working with Amnesty International, I wanted to reach out to my fellow classmates and fuel the flame of compassion. I was shocked and inspired by my new knowledge about the world. I remember conversations

with a friend who grew tired of my invitations to attend club meetings. She told me she knew the world was full of problems but she could not motivate herself to care about them. Her response surprised me and seemed tragic. However, years later she became vegetarian and an environmentalist, teaching children how to protect ecosystems. She cultivated herself and changed.

The point is this: compassion may come more naturally to some, but it can be deepened and developed from a mere desire to do so. My friend in high school had a powerful thought: “I wish I could care.” She wanted to be able to identify with others, to see beyond herself. She wanted to develop compassion, and she did. Within her, aspiration was the seed of love. Compassion can be cultivated through our interactions, behaviors, ideas, and experiences. Compassion is a simple beginning. It concerns our ability to relate and identify with others. An intention towards greater empathy reveals the reality of our connectedness. That is why it is helpful to actually cultivate compassion: the results arise because they are based on something very real. We can learn compassion like one learns to read. At first, we don’t even know what the letters represent. Everything is foreign. Yet, with time we can build sentences and then move on to explore great works of brilliance, continuously learning and rediscovering the meaning and depth of our literacy. □

*“We are one, after all, you and I. Together we suffer, together exist, and forever will recreate each other.”*

-Teilhard de Chardin