

The Practice of Natural Compassion: Taking Difficulties onto the Path

Step One: Lean In

Challenging outer situations or uncomfortable inner states that spontaneously present themselves are the perfect conditions to apply this practice. In these moments, instead of trying to fix, avoid or escape the state you are in, experiment with *leaning in* to the state through the following steps.

- **Pause:** When you experience a challenge or difficulty, pause. If you are practicing on the cushion, you may need to ‘bring up’ the challenge or difficulty through remembering what is raw or fresh for you at this time or your life, or this week or this day. You can do this by remembering the situation, the images, the place (s), the people, the thoughts and emotions that pertain to this difficulty. Then, once you have brought up the difficulty, or experienced it naturally in life, take a sacred pause.
- **Bear witness:** Once this spontaneous experience of feeling or emotion occurs and you have paused, bear witness. Notice the nature of this feeling that you are experiencing. How does your body feel? How does your mind feel? Is there a cognitive story that goes with this experience?. How does the feeling or emotion express itself in your body and mind? Is there a heaviness? A lightness? A location? The step of bearing witness is a moment of sacred pause. In the sacred pause, notice the quality of your immediate experience. For this step, it can help to detach briefly from the story, the cognitive accompaniment to the feeling, and witness the quality of the feeling itself. At this step, it may be that a label for this feeling is suddenly apparent—fear, anger, frustration, sadness. If a label arises, bear witness to that, simply noticing.
- **Relax:** Relax around the feeling. “Relaxing around the feeling” means to let go of resistance to the feeling or emotion. Take a few slow, deep breaths, breathing right into the feeling or emotion as it manifests in your body. Make no effort to push the feeling away. Instead, allow the *resistance* to the emotion dissolve. Let go of the urge to escape or rid yourself of this suffering. Let go of the impulse to struggle with it. See if you can relax deeply right within the feeling or emotion. Cradle the feeling in relaxation.
- **Accept:** Accept that this is how you feel. To accept means to be intimate with your state of emotion, in a non-judgmental way. You may wish to say to yourself the words, “This is how I feel, and it is okay.” You can repeat these words slowly several times, as you sit with the feeling. Turn your attention to the feeling itself, to the immediacy of the experience, letting go of the story leading to the experience, letting go of the impulse to judge the experience, or judge the self. In that immediacy, you may wish to say to yourself “This is what is true at this moment. It is as it is.” You may repeat these words a few times slowly. It is possible for the step of acceptance to develop further. As you grow into this practice, you can deepen into these stages: appreciation, gratitude, enjoyment, and love.

Step Two: Commune with others

- **Commune:** Now, consider: In this suffering, I am not alone. At this very moment in time, there are others in the world experiencing this very same feeling, this very pain. Let the awareness dawn, “So *this* is how so many others feel.” With this recognition, commune with the many other beings experiencing this same suffering. To commune, deeply feel and bearing witness to your suffering *as* the suffering of these many others. Allow the recognition to deepen in you that *this very feeling* is how so many others feel right now, all over the world. Do not leave this as an abstract thought, but imagine these sufferings in specific places and people the world over. You may wish to include in your contemplation both humans and animals, if appropriate. Consider, “Before I had this suffering, I could not possibly have really understood the suffering of these many others. Before, I did not know what they are going through. Now, through the door of my own suffering, I sense intimately what they are feeling.” Not only that, but at this very moment, there are many others who are experiencing a very similar set of circumstances to those that you are facing. The circumstances may not be exactly the same as your own, but the circumstances of so many others are very, very similar to your own. Consider, “Before I was facing these circumstances, I did not really know what this might be like. Now that I am facing this, I sense much more intimately the circumstances others are facing.” Take some time to settle into this process of identifying with the suffering of others.
- **Develop Compassion:** As you meditate on the previous step, feelings of compassion may spontaneously arise, and along with them a wish to do something about all this suffering. As those feelings arise, rest there, allowing the feeling to embrace both the other and the self in one sphere. To have compassion for the other becomes compassion for the self, since you are both going through the same thing. See if you can find a place to rest with the compassion that embraces the yourself and all beings as one family. As a wish to do something arises, make the deep prayer, “May all these beings, going through this particular suffering, experience peace. May they all be free of suffering.” After making this prayer, turn your awareness to your heart center. There, visualize an infinite, open, luminous blue sky. As you breathe in, imagine that you inhale the pain and difficulty of ‘the others’ and yourself. These dissolve completely in the infinite, open expanse at your heart. As you breathe out, imagine you exhale the expansive luminosity at your heart. This goes out on your breath and permeates the bodies and minds of ‘the others’ and your own body and mind as well. Continue this process of receiving the difficulty into the sky at your heart, dissolving it, and sending out light for awhile. If you wish, you may start with doing this without the breath, and then gradually coordinate it with the breath over time.

Step Three: Release

- **Release:** Finally, let go of the mind that holds to the notion of “these many beings” and “self” as separate. Allow the notion of self and other to dissolve into oneness, a state of effortless, radiant, openness. Allow thoughts, feelings and sensations to settle into their own place, like snowflakes falling on a warm rock. Allow the mind and body to relax into natural spaciousness, utter simplicity, letting things be as they are without trying to block, fix or fabricate anything at all. Rest in awareness itself, in the self-luminosity of the present moment. Let thoughts and feelings just arise and dissolve like clouds coalescing and dissolving in an open sky.