

## Compassion Through Nutrition

The first line of The Charter For Compassion by Karen Armstrong states, " The principle of compassion lies in the heart of all religions, ethical and spiritual traditions, calling us always to treat all others as we wish to be treated ourselves."

How can we practice compassion through our own nutrition choices? The simple solution is to become a vegan or vegetarian; that way, one does not take the lives of other sentient beings. This would be the ultimate act of compassion.

However, my studies at The Institute of Integrated Nutrition have opened my eyes to a broader nutrition definition.

Nutrition is more than what we put into our mouths. In fact, what we eat is considered secondary. Primary nutrition includes spirituality, career, relationships, and exercise.

As a young adult I was taught to practice self-esteem, not self-compassion. The difference between self-esteem and self-compassion is immense. Self-esteem is achieved by believing oneself to be superior to others. It is based on judgment and the need to be right. This leads to isolation.

Self-compassion focuses on one's own health and wellbeing. Karen Neff in her book, *Self-compassion: Stop Beating Yourself Up And Leave Insecurity Behind*, writes "...treating yourself with care and understanding rather than judgment, seeing your own experience as part of a larger human experience, and avoiding the extremes of suppressing or running away from painful feelings are the elements of self-compassion." This stance, consciously practiced every day, leads us away from a rigid sense of self-expectation, and therefore self-judgment, when one inevitably does not reach every expectation.

In turn, we create for ourselves openness and a resulting abundance of happiness, optimism, curiosity and connectedness. Self-compassionate people are kind to themselves when they fail; they are more willing to admit their mistakes, make changes in their behavior and take on new challenges.

I believe all compassion must begin with self. Although I was brought up to believe self-esteem was the ideal achievement and that concern for myself was selfish; being selfish was a bad thing, my life has taught me that if I do not come from the deep well inside of myself I have no compassion for anything.

Compassion for self happens when we begin to listen to what our bodies are telling us. Our bodies love us. They are the earthly home of our soul. We too often fail to receive or pay attention to the messages our bodies send to us through discomfort or pleasure. Internal dialog is essential to live a life of compassion.

Learning to listen creates a space for a dialog to begin. Self-compassion is dependent on an inner dialog and awareness of what we allow into our internal systems--be it an apple, a deep breath, a violent movie, a favorite hymn, or a hateful thought.

Compassion--with heart--is difficult to achieve in a fast-paced, brightly lit mental world. We are constantly bombarded with bright shiny things to distract us. This causes unfocused, ungrounded behavior and thoughts. We are a nation of zombies without heart. Sure, we give to charity, we go to church, we speak the words, we flagellate ourselves with derogatory words, negative beliefs, fast foods and constant sound and moving pictures. TV and radio are ever-present. Is there a restaurant in town without the ubiquitous television?

Our spirits need our consciousness, satisfying work, loving relationships (particularly with self). Our bodies need daily movement of at least 30 minutes to harbor our souls in a healthy way. "The more coherent one becomes within oneself as a creature, the more fully one enters into the communion of all creatures.", said Wendell Berry. To be coherent within, to have communion with all creatures, is to live a nutritiously compassionate life.

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