

The Three Elements of Compassion

Derek V. Schmalenberger

Compassion is often defined as: “[*sensitivity to another’s suffering coupled with a desire to alleviate that suffering*](#)”, which makes it reactive.

If we define considerateness as the desire to support well-being (or prevent suffering), it can be thought of as proactive compassion.

But what I really want to share, what I discover from introspection, is a hope: **I hope that no one suffers**. This hope is neither proactive nor reactive.

So the three elements of compassion are:

- *Hope that no one suffers*
- *Consideration of the potential for suffering coupled with the desire to prevent it*
- *Sensitivity to suffering coupled with a desire to alleviate it*

Hope

I have received concerns about my hope that no one suffers on the grounds that “suffering is inescapable” and “a world without suffering is impossible”. Perhaps they want to protect me from wasting my effort or being disappointed. But a hope is not an expectation or goal. It doesn’t need to be realistic. I also hope that everyone enjoys their life more often than not.

My hope that no one suffers is grounded in personal interactions. When I approach a conversation I hope no one suffers. That’s definitely possible. But the hope does also extend beyond that to all people in all situations. To me that hope is a part of compassion. And I’m not saying that in a prescriptive way: I’m saying that once you have overcome the ways of thinking that block compassion, you will find that this hope exists in you.

Regarding the claim that “suffering is inescapable”, I can understand that in the sense that I’m likely going to bash my elbow into a wall, get infected, or have something else happen that causes pain that I can’t overcome by thinking differently. But that’s just one category of suffering. There’s a whole other realm of suffering that is definitely escapable.

The Buddha taught that the peaceful (i.e. those not causing suffering) have let go of sensual desire, craving, clinging, aversion, views, comparing, judgments, evaluations, ambition, the self-concept (and therefore possessions), and concern with past or future. In short, he taught that the peaceful, the fully liberated, have let go of everything that can be let go of. Needless to say, most people don’t ever become fully liberated from all those things, as that would pretty much exclude you from most of traditional human life. But it’s not all-or-nothing.

