The Near and Far Enemies of Fierce Compassion

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Social justice work is not for the fainthearted. Now more than ever, we are obliged to acknowledge our own complicity in systems of oppression as well as to assert our individual agency to bring about a better world. Committed action by many people will eventually become a powerful force for systemic change. And yet many of us grapple with some basic questions: “What can I do?” “What *should* I do?”

After the American presidential election in 2016, much of American life has become politicized. Underemployed white workers found a voice in the new president, but the predatory behavior of powerful men also led to the birth of the #MeToo movement. Since then, the coronavirus pandemic struck and, in the aftermath of the murder of George Floyd, the #BlackLivesMatter movement was reinvigorated. Americans have taken to the streets in unprecedented numbers. The combination of the COVID-19 pandemic and the protests for racial justice has revealed social inequities like never before. Discussions about “systemic oppression” commonly appear in mainstream media. Awareness of racism is growing around the world as well, along with a commitment to eradicating this “second pandemic.” These times call for fierce compassion.

The first version of this essay was originally published in November 2018 and a number of MSC teachers contributed to it, notably Kristin Neff, Hilde Steinhauser, Regula Saner, Susie Fairchild, and Aimee Eckhardt. I’ve updated it to reflect the current social and political climate, especially in the United States, as well as to elaborate on what constitutes compassionate action. It is my sincere wish that the ideas presented below will support readers in all parts of the world to engage in compassionate action for systemic change.

**What’s Fierce Compassion?**

Throughout the world, compassion is generally associated with the yin, or *nurturing*, aspect of compassion. The yin aspect refers to “being with” another person, especially comforting, connecting and validating the pain of another. But this is hardly the only expression of compassion. For example, is it any less compassionate for a firefighter to run into a burning building to save a trapped individual? Surely not. Taking action is the “yang” side of compassion especially protecting others, providing for those in need, and motivating one another to do what’s right, even if it’s hard.

Sometimes yang compassion needs to be fierce, as Kristin Neff points out in her [essay on the topic](https://centerformsc.org/why-women-need-fierce-self-compassion/) in the context of self-compassion. The expression “fierce compassion” includes the qualities of strength, courage and empowerment to confront social injustice and change it. Fierce compassion also often contains an element of anger. A good metaphor for fierce compassion is the behavior of a mamma bear when her cub is threatened. The anger aspect can be confusing to people who typically associate compassion with warmth and nurturing. However, learning to harness anger is an important part of fierce compassion. When we suppress our anger, we are likely to lose our capacity to speak truth to power or to take positive action. Conversely, letting our anger run amok can cause irreparable harm to oneself and others.

It is easy to make excuses for harmful behavior in the name of fierce compassion. For example, we may think that cursing at someone who has insulted a loved one is protective and therefore fierce compassion. That’s not compassion, however, it’s revenge. Or in social justice work, we might think that destroying an innocent person’s property is a valid form of protest when we are filled with rage. The pent-up rage might be understandable–Martin Luther King noted, “Riots are the language of the unheard”–but riots are not fierce compassion and inevitably beget more violence.



**How Do We Know When We’re Fiercely Compassionate?**

An exploration of the near and far enemies of fierce compassion can help. “Near” and “far enemies” are Buddhist terms that are usually applied to the Brahmaviharas, or the Four Immeasurables—loving-kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy, and equanimity. Near enemies are states that appear *similar* to the desired quality but actually undermine it. Far enemies are the *opposite* of what we are trying to achieve. For example, a near enemy of loving-kindness is sentimentality–similar but different. A far enemy of loving-kindness is ill will–the opposite of loving-kindness. Similarly, a near enemy of compassion is pity and a far enemy is cruelty. Understanding these differences, especially the near enemies, helps practitioners to cultivate compassion in their thoughts, words and deeds. In this essay, we will apply the concept of near and far enemies to fierce compassion, especially as they apply to the three components of compassion articulated by Kristin — mindfulness, common humanity, and kindness. The focus of this essay is also on *compassion for others* rather than on self-compassion.

**Far Enemies of Fierce Compassion**

1. **Emotional Reactivity** (versus Mindfulness)

Mindfulness is the first component of compassion. Mindfulness is awareness of present-moment experience. It’s the first step toward compassion because we need to know that a person is suffering in order to respond compassionately. The opposite of mindfulness, or the far enemy of mindfulness, is *emotional reactivity*–getting hijacked by our emotions, such as anger, fear or despair, and losing sight of the other person. When we see a person being treated unjustly and anger starts coursing through our bodies, it’s easy to get hooked by it. We need a lot of mindful awareness to *choose* how we’re going to respond, rather than simply reacting.

When anger is tempered by mindfulness, is it still the same anger? Probably not quite. In her essay titled, “Was Gandhi Angry?”, Stephanie Van Hook (2015) quotes Mahatma Gandhi (*Young India*, Oct 1, 1931) as saying, “It is not that I am incapable of anger, for instance; but I succeed almost on all occasions to keep my feelings under control.” In this comment, Gandhi wasn’t saying that he suppressed his emotions – he simply wasn’t controlled by them. Gandhi harnessed the energy of anger in his non-violent civil disobedience movement and liberated his country from oppression. That’s fierce compassion.

2. **Demonizing** (versus Common Humanity)

Common humanity involves the recognition that we all suffer, we all wish to be happy, and we’re all interconnected. When we imagine that we’re morally superior to other people, we subtly disconnect. This is the process of “othering,” which taken to an extreme can result in demonizing. *Demonizing* is a far enemy of fierce compassion.

Thich Nhat Hanh (2001) wrote in his beautiful poem, “Please Call Me by My True Names:”

*I am the child in Uganda, all skin and bones,  
my legs as thin as bamboo sticks.  
And I am the arms merchant,  
selling deadly weapons to Uganda.*

Our sense of common humanity needs to run very deep not to demonize an arms merchant whose actions cause the destruction of innocent beings. However, challenges to common humanity arise every day when we turn on the news and hear about the words and actions of people on the other side of the political spectrum. It’s so easy to become morally indignant and to demonize our opponents. In contrast, awareness of common humanity recognizes our differences while remembering that everyone is still a human being–”just like me” (Jinpa, 2015).

3. **Hostility** (versus Kindness)

In yang compassion, kindness is evident when we protect, provide and motivate others. The opposite of care and kindness is *hostility*, the third far enemy of fierce compassion. The challenge of yang compassion is to be tough and to say “No!,” and to create safe boundaries without developing a hostile attitude. The process of demonizing described above is actually a combination of othering and hostility.

Hostility is often associated with the emotion of anger, and anger is a natural human emotion that we all need to survive. Anger is also a clear sign that we or others are in physical or emotional danger. This is why people on opposite sides of the political spectrum get so angry. They feel threatened.

To discern whether our anger will be put to compassionate use, we can ask whether we are angry at *injustice* or feel hostile toward a *person*. Compassionate action always spares the person and focuses on the problem. We can love our enemies. A helpful metaphor is a martial artist. A martial artist has equanimity on the inside and is a warrior on the outside. In our current climate of political polarization, it is especially important not to get swept up in the contagion of hostility toward specific individuals even as we fight to improve our government and leadership.



**Near Enemies of Fierce Compassion**

What are the *near* enemies of fierce compassion — qualities of mind that are very similar to fierce compassion but actually undermine it? Again, let’s consider the near enemies in relation to the three components of compassion

**Complacency** (versus Mindfulness)

In ancient Buddhist texts, mindfulness is closely related to equanimity. Equanimity is balanced awareness. However, the effort to maintain balanced awareness can sometimes lead to inaction in the face of injustice. *Complacency* is a near enemy of mindfulness, and therefore, fierce compassion. An example is saying that “both sides are at fault” and then doing nothing when one group is obviously harming another. Similarly, when we are not actively working to dismantle racist social structures such as unequal healthcare, education, or voting rights, we are unwittingly supporting them through our acquiescence. Fierce compassion implies that we are willing to act to dismantle systems of injustice as they appear in our lives.

**Sameness** (versus Common Humanity)

A common interpretation of common humanity is that we are all “one.” This may be true at an absolute level, but at the level of lived experience, each of us is subject to different causes and conditions. What we have most in common is that we are all different. Some people say, “Can’t we just stop talking about our differences and focus instead on the fact that we are all human beings?” This is the assumption of *sameness* and is a near enemy of common humanity because it disregards and marginalizes the experiences of others. Fierce compassion includes the courage to have difficult conversations about our differences based on race, ethnicity, ability, gender, sexual orientation and a multitude of other identities.

**Pity** (versus Kindness)

The third component of compassion, kindness, implies that we see others as equals. In contrast, a near enemy to kindness is *pity*. Pity implies that we are looking down on others who we see as unlike ourselves. Pity subtly devalues another person. In the racial justice movement, disenfranchised minorities are not asking for pity; they are asking for equality. Pity arises when those with social privilege are unable or unwilling to let their hearts break from the suffering of others in our society. This kind of emotional numbness makes people feel separate and leads to pity. In contrast, opening to our own pain opens us to the pain of others and motivates us to work together for a better world.



**A Test**

When you experience an injustice, personal or social, ask yourself the following questions:

**Far Enemies:**

1. “Am I controlled by my anger?” (emotional reactivity)
2. “Do I feel morally superior?” (demonizing)
3. “Do I want my adversary to suffer?” (hostility)

**Near Enemies:**

1. “Am I willing to take necessary action?” (non-complacent)
2. “Am I curious about the experience of others?” (non-sameness)
3. “Am I willing to feel the pain of others as my own?” (non-pity)

If you responded “no” to the first three questions, and “yes” to the next three questions, you are probably in a state of fierce compassion.

**Taking Wise and Compassionate Action**

Practitioners of compassion inevitably ask, “What specific actions should I take?” to address injustice in their lives. To answer that question, compassion is not enough. We need wisdom. Wisdom may be defined as an understanding of the complexity of a given situation and the ability to see one’s way through. Another definition of wisdom is recognizing the short and long-term consequences of an action and choosing the course of action that yields the greatest long-term benefit.

Cultivating the qualities of mindfulness, common humanity and kindness is a good foundation for compassionate action, and when we add a measure of wisdom, we can surely change the world for the better.