

Self-compassion

Let us begin with **self-esteem**, which, in simple terms, is how we evaluate or perceive ourselves, rightly or wrongly (more often wrongly). When something bad happens to us, we might think that we are a failure, or attract bad luck, and we blame ourselves. This brings on and encourages a low self-esteem.

Or, when we have a lot of things we like, or have our way with people, or simply seem to have done the right things, or people say nice things to us, we feel good about ourselves, that we are successful. This brings on and encourages a high self-esteem.

Either way, we have allowed a self-view to arise. A **self-view** is how we view ourselves against others. It is a mental construct centred around the “I.”¹ We measure ourselves as being better than others, or being as good as others, or as being inferior to others.² But what are our standards? Where have we learned these standards from?

With such a measuring, we try to keep ourselves at the centre of things, or have a handle on people. It makes us a control freak. At its worst, it becomes narcissism, a “me-first” or “me-only” attitude.³ The irony is that a narcissist is fully dependent on others, especially seeking or attracting the approval of others for his self-esteem.⁴

We might even be a great Buddhist speaker, and impress our audience who endorse us with their loud applause, warm praises and approving smiles. But, we only feel alive when we have these external feedbacks. And our lives are mostly looking for and preparing for such moments, because without them, we feel simply lost, anxious, even depressed.

The reality is that we are afraid to give up our views, even when they are wrong. We are defined by our views, so we think. Without our views, we appear naked; it is as if we have nothing, are nothing. We simply do not want to change, or to grow. We simply crave for attention. We don’t even know this, much less understand what it means.⁵

With such a self-view, we also tend to think that other people “cannot change.” We seem to tell ourselves, “So, if they cannot change, why should I change?” When we do this, our reptilian brain goes into overdrive. We fall into a “fight or flight” mode.⁶

In our “fight” mode, we keep up our strong self-view, float around in a bubble of airs, expressing strong opinions. We feel that only we are right, and everyone else wrong. We are usually not even aware of this; that’s why we keep acting that way. So we make every effort to defend our views, refuting others point by point. The important thing for us is that we must be proven and shown to be right.

When the fight approach seems not to work, we resort to a “flight” mode. We might deny everything we have known or said, or take a “neutral” stand. In a Buddhist

¹ For details, see **Emotional independence**, [SD 40a.8](#).

² For details, see **I: the nature of identity**, [SD 19.1](#).

³ For details, see **Me: the nature of conceit**, [SD 19.2a](#).

⁴ On narcissism, see [SD 38.4 \(3.3.3\)](#).

⁵ For details, see **Mine: the nature of craving**, [SD 19.3](#).

⁶ On the triune brain, see **Meditation and consciousness**, [SD 17.8c \(6.2\)](#).

situation, for example, we might say, “Why bother about Mahayana and Hinayana, or this and that Buddhism? It just stresses us up!” or we might claim, “I’ve no views at all!” Ironically, that’s a view, too!⁷

If we seek a high self-esteem, then we are also likely to feel the impact of low self-esteem. It’s all in the game, a package deal. How does **low self-esteem** work on us? It is essentially negative self-talk, constantly seeing our failures and weaknesses, and blaming ourselves for them. Since we are constantly saying negative things to ourselves, that is all our mind hears. So, we get depressed.

Then, we look for someone to blame, even our loved ones. And as the situation worsens, we even attack ourselves, we blame ourselves: we say more bad things about ourselves. Perhaps, we even blame Buddhism (“It did not make me a better person”). If this habit spirals on, we might end up with fear, or panic attacks, even with thoughts of suicide.

Fortunately, for most of us, we do not have to go that far. We know about loving-kindness and compassion. So we know that the answer lies in unconditionally accepting ourselves. If we do not, then who else can accept us? It begins with the thought, “I accept myself just as I am. I forgive myself completely.” And so on. We need to say this constantly, especially just before falling asleep. We should sleep happily.⁸

And when bad things happen to us, such as someone disagreeing with us, or making a nasty comment about us, it’s time we get into self-compassion mode. First, we take a deep, slow breath, and breathe out any hasty or hurtful reaction. Then, we ask ourselves, “What is he really saying?” “He must be really upset. What is he upset about?”

We may not know the right answer for these questions, but it takes our mind away from the reptilian brain or the subhuman part of us. We begin to use more of our human brain. We cultivate self-compassion (by touching our heart, if we like), and say to ourselves, “How can I support you?” Or, something to that effect.

Once we fill ourselves with self-compassion, we are in a better position to show loving-kindness to the other party. It also helps that we smile within our hearts, so that our face will light up. If the other person is before us, he is likely to sense this. If we are by ourselves, we would feel better, too.⁹

This same approach works when we face some kind of loss, such as the loss of a job, or of a dear one. We show ourselves self-compassion, by listening to ourselves: “Wow, this is a painful loss! What do I learn from it?” Don’t make any effort to answer; it will come by itself in its own time. Just keep on saying compassionate words to ourselves.

The point is that we are more affected by what we say to ourselves, than what others say to us. What we habitually say to ourselves feeds our personality. As such, it is vital

⁷ See **Digha,nakha Sutta** (M 74/1:497-501), [SD 16.1](#); **Notion of *ditthi***, SD 40a.1 ([7.2.3.2](#)); **Levels of learning**, [SD 40a.4 \(3.2\)](#).

⁸ On self-acceptance, see Reflection, “Buddhist love training,” [R218](#), 2011.

⁹ See Reflection, “Stop, thinking! Welcome, feeling!” [R235](#), 2012.

that we show self-compassion. This is the start of self-healing and of a wholesome personality.¹⁰

We should not compare ourselves with others, not too often anyway, because we will then fall into the “self-esteem” game. Then, it is either low self-esteem or high self-esteem. We’re caught in a balloon game. It’s a huge balloon: when it is deflated, we’re grounded; when it is inflated, we are whisked into the heights; then, it bursts.

We must let go of the balloon while we’re still on the ground. That’s how we begin to have a handle on ourselves. We should learn to work with ourselves, support ourselves. Be kind to ourselves.

Think of our best friend or someone we would be really kind to, even a favourite pet. When this friend has a problem, we show kindness to him, we say kind things to him, we whisper love to him. Now let us direct that same unconditional love, that great compassion to ourselves. We are then our own best friend! We have cultivated self-compassion. True happiness begins here.¹¹

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¹⁰ On the doer and the knower, see *Viññāṇa*, SD 17.8a (8.2.7) & *Nīvaraṇa*, [SD 32.1 \(4.3\)](#).

¹¹ For a short inspiring talk on self-esteem and self-compassion by Kristin Neff (TED Talks, 2013), see: <http://youtu.be/lvtZBUSplr4>.