

(in a rapidly heating world) Compassion is a Cool Fire

Susan Murphy

Equinox Talk, Centre for a Compassionate Society, Clifton Hill, Autumn 2024. Susan Murphy is a Zen teacher, author and filmmaker. Her most recent book *A Fire Runs through All Things: Zen koans for facing the climate crisis* (Shambhala: Boulder CO) was released in 2023. Since 1999, Susan has been teaching and leading Zen retreats throughout Australia. The talk was introduced by academic, artist and writer Marcus O'Donnell.

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In his opening words, Marcus quoted the words of Zhuangzi from my book, *A Fire Runs Through All Things*:

I'm going to try speaking some reckless words, and I want you to try to listen recklessly.

There's certainly a recklessness in our long-term habit of relating to the earth by 'living by damage', as Roper River elder, Daly Pulkara called it out. Meanwhile, Zen koans recklessly ask us to drop all our pre-emptive certainties and dare to favour an open, not-knowing state of mind. Can this be of some use in coming to meet our world's compounded states of crisis? The koan tradition recklessly *harmonises* with the recklessness of our state of alienation, in order to bring it to light and turn it around, to it back into the wholeness of reality.

While I'm not focussing here on these recklessly compassionate koans, I will share one with you towards the end, one that directly asks 'what is compassionate action?'

When Marcus was speaking I was struck by just how *poised* the equinox is in its balance of darkness and light... This moment of complete equipoise within constant change. In exploring how equanimity grounds compassion in responding to crisis, there may be some close resonance to find with this matter of equipoise.

Meanwhile climate settings have clearly become recklessly damaged and increasingly deranged by our own hands. The case for the reality of global climate emergency, and the compounding eco-crisis and geopolitical crises that come along with it, no longer needs to be made.

If it's not being made clearly enough for some by the stuttering state of the accustomed climate settings on which we've pinned all our certainties up to now, I think it's being made by a cry of pain and uncertainty in the heart of every human being who is even half awake right now.

We find ourselves caught in the glare of this, implicated in every direction. We're clearly responsible for causing the damage we so badly need protection from. *And* we're finally having to face how our state of alienation from the Earth makes us such a dire threat to the entire Earth community, and to ourselves as well.

In the proposal for this talk I quoted the words of Robert Hass, the American poet, who back in 2005 offered a kind of three-part 'theorem' to describe our critical situation – like three walls suffocatingly closing in on us. But exactly equally, you can find there instead the three essential

responsibilities we must address in any compassionate and effective response to the crisis facing us. And be encouraged by how this clears and opens the way:

We are the only protectors.

And we are what needs to be protected.

And we are what it needs to be protected from.

Compassion is obviously that deeply protective desire to be of some help in mitigating and repairing damage, in assuaging suffering and rectifying injustice. And it's something visceral, that rises from the heart towards another being.

Literally 'compassion' means feeling with and actively opening towards the evidence of suffering, activating a two-directional flow which is already a lightening and lifting of alienation.

And looking deeper in, there's something deeply mutual here – a current running *between* two hearts: between the one who offers compassion and the one who perceives and receives it. A mutual, two-way flow takes place, almost to the point of asking 'who is who?'

II

So we've come to the point of living as though we were somehow adjacent to or alien within something called 'the natural world.' Notice that even calling it 'the natural world' is rather strange, is making what is comprehensively what manifests us something other, and 'out there'. Well-meaning people encourage each other to 'go out into nature', just, as though we were not in every breath and step we take seamless with the natural world ourselves.

Even the word 'environment' jars, objectifies abstracts and subtly distances the physical earth as something to be categorised, and then dealt with, rather than being at every point inseparable from we ourselves, and continually bringing us into being.

And meanwhile we're allowing ourselves to be ever more interrupted and removed from lived reality and from each other by digitally mediated 'realities', that effectively impoverish what remains as a shared, social and consensual reality. Our so-called media can now barely *mediate* any public discourse, let alone hold power to serious account, while 'AI' further estranges any way of seriously locating ourselves. We're left in a deeply incongruent state on the earth.

Somebody asked Paulo Freire towards the end of his life, 'What is the most important thing?' Friere (author of the brilliant *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*) simply replied, '(It is) the beautiful daily struggle to be congruent.'

Congruent is a beautiful word. Any two congruent shapes fit so exactly upon each other that you can no longer find 'two shapes'. The one completes the other, a perfect fit. I love that he brings the word 'beautiful' to the word 'struggle', and both are made accountable to the word 'daily', in his

reply. One daily and ultimately beautiful matter of finding a more complete fit with each other, with reality, with a world of crises.

Coming into greater congruence becomes unavoidable when a mega-fire is bearing down upon you. Which happened to me at the end of 2019 and into the first week of 2020.

Where we live in Kangaroo Valley, the massive Currawong fire had jumped the Shoalhaven River, and was licking its way into the southern edges of the valley. A strong southerly change was about to bring it roaring freely towards us, this 37-kilometer-wide front of the monster fire that had steadily and inexorably eaten its way up the green spine of south eastern Australia since late October. We'd spent long weary weeks doing everything we could to prepare our house and Zendo building for the coming fire-storm, but now the towering pyrocumulonimbus clouds were spitting dry lightning and fire-created raindrops down on our heads as we prepared to evacuate.

What I did on that evening, just before we evacuated, was to set up the Zendo with the cushions, the meditation cushions – just to begin to summon the presence of the people who had sat there and loved the place and had let themselves open up radically within it. I made them present.

And then I followed the protocol taught to me many years before by Wiradjuri elder, Auntie Maureen Smith, Minmia, when there is a heavy question in your heart.

You take your time to find a place on the earth that wants you to sit down, sit down there, be very quiet, ease your fingertips into the earth, and then openly and say out loud, this is your daughter, Susan, speaking to you, Mother.

And then you ask the question that's on your heart – mine was, 'What do you need us to know right now?' – and then wait quietly for a response coming back to you, with a tingling in your fingers, words that appear in your heart

The words that came for me were these: 'Your suffering with me is my care for you.'

Your suffering with me is my care for you.

It's quite koan-like in its way.

There's a twist in it that won't lie down flat in linear mind. It is revealing suffering and care as one entirely mutual matter – a flow of mutual care that comes to light by way of shared suffering

We know this sense of mutual care from what happens when we face into a crisis and share great grief, or fear, or sadness, or deep questioning, about human beings, about the earth. When it's with people who you trust and love, it opens up some kind of will or even hope but of mysterious possibility and life in that place.

These words were strangely consoling, under that diabolical-looking sky – not my suffering, but *ours*, to be looked into as the way that opens care.

And I should let you know that when we did come back from being climate refugees, to turn corner and look down that house, it *was* still there. The whole green world of Kangaroo Valley was left relatively untouched, because although the forests of the southern end were incinerated, a slight easterly change in wind direction swept that massive fire up through Morton National Park into the southern highlands instead of raining fire on *our* heads.

III

A ‘cool fire’, that koan-like proposition, is sensitive use of fire in a way that is congruent with the terms of the earth. As you know, there are several kinds of fire on the earth.

There is wild fire. From time immemorial, there has been wild fire, ignited by lightning strikes and volcanism. This is endemic to the earth.

Then there is domesticated fire. Home, hearth-created fire. Warmth, light, cooking, goes into agriculture, and the use of char in agriculture, creating the means of shared productive human life.

That’s domesticated fire.

Now there is feral fire, the new unthinkable, unapproachable, non-survivable, habitat-simplifying, megafire. Like the one that was approaching us that night. Megafire, the consequence of unearthing and burning fossil fuels.

But the fourth kind of fire is *intelligent* attentive fire. Cool fire. The cultural burning practice that’s widely used by indigenous peoples.

Not just to moderate wildfire risk, although it does do that, but to lovingly regenerate the life of Country for humans and for more-than-human flourishing.

So at the heart of cool fire there’s a relational ethos, a sense of companionship with the earth, conducted in deep conversation with the earth. In ‘A Fire Runs Through All Things’, I explore the many affinities Zen mind shares with this rich and subtle matter of Country.

Because from the point of view of a deep long, four or five decade-long Zen practice, it is not hard to find many points of affinity between Zen and the deep template of indigenous wisdom that brings Country to life. I’m speaking from the long apprenticeship I served, not just with my Zen teachers across decades, but from spending 25 years also in close companionship with Uncle Max Harrison, Dulumunmun, Yuin elder... a man who’d been taken right through law by his five elders, a rare thing in south coast New South Wales. And a dearly loved being, to my great, bitter sorrow, lost to Covid. I dedicated this book to his memory.

In Uncle Max’s company I spent a lot of time not just walking in Country with him, and learning how to listen to the teaching that Country constantly presents. I also sat with him side by side, in many different contexts, like the one tonight, where I would speak from within my Zen tradition, and he would speak from the depth of indigenous lore. And we just let the reverberations be felt as they will.

They weren't pointed out, they didn't need to be. So that's where my sense of cool fire comes from, as well as from Victor Steffensen's highly recommended book, *Fire Country*.

Cool fire is the mind-opening phrase that's used for the activating of cultural burning. Right at the heart of it is an etiquette of moving in concert with the so-called other. The other in the form of the bushes, the trees, the grasses, the exact moisture in the grasses at that time.

Readiness and appropriateness is investigated by touch, and also of course by exquisite knowledge of which plants speak what kind of language about fire, and what kinds of communities they form.

So when you set the central point of fire, it will radiate out safely and mildly enough to a point known in advance where it will peter out, confident that its moderate nature will not climb into the sacred life-world of the canopy.

And it will be cool enough for barefoot children to walk on soon after, cool enough that creatures can move out quickly enough, and safely move back soon after to enjoy the pickings.

Because of course, cool fire is regenerative at every possible level.

Victor Steffensen says in *Fire Country*, 'You have to walk the Country to read it.' If you're going to pick up what he calls the knowledge indicators poking out everywhere, this means standing on the ground and noticing, touching, being touched. Read the grasses by hand. Feel for the exact balance of moisture and dryness that will get what he calls the 'good white medicine smoke.'

White smoke, not brown or yellow, orange or red smoke.

So a cool fire manifests a very detailed and poised relationship to something as potent as fire.

A cool fire brings forward a whole relational ethos, a conversation with the earth, conducted under respect law, approached with a non-coercive mind that is instead a form of thinking along with country.

Let me draw that into play with what I have been saying about compassion. Because compassion embodies a relational ethos too. A willing form of feeling *with* suffering that becomes hard to separate from love. And compassion lets us think along with 'the other', at a deep level.

Responding with or being in concert with the other. Who is approached as not other, or even no other, than the self.

IV

Compassion is a naturally warm state. We are warm-blooded mammals, flourishing best within a literally warm connectedness. But a compassionate response can move from warm to heated quite quickly, can become hot, fogged, outraged.

When strong sense of scarifying injustice catches fire when witnessing horrific suffering and deadly levels of oppression, a strong sense of otherness rises up with the rage, incompatible with compassion,

Like the protests happening right now, on either side of the historically compounded impossible Gordian knot that is Gaza, Israel.

Can we really say these protests are compassion-based? Yes, they are – at an early point. But an almost suffocating sense of righteous-feeling anger at the horror, mixed with fear and hate, quickly and dramatically narrows perspective.

Fear and hatred begin to narrow and coerce response – almost strategically. Because if the perspective is too wide, you can't move with the sort of mob feeling that starts to happen.

So I want to argue that the fundamental ground of compassion is equanimity. A *cool* fire.

This equanimity is a state that is open and equal in all directions a wide field of view. It is seeking balance, equipoise, a state that is neither hot nor cold.

It is resting in a disciplined practice of staying close in to not-knowing, which Zen sees to be the true ground of mind awake: a not knowing mind, beginner's mind, if you like. 'Don't know mind', it's sometimes called.

Not-knowing mind doesn't leap ahead to declare anything at all, it eschews the excited leap into any immediate, usually self-protective, claim of knowing. Almost paradoxically, the genuine, productive, regenerative warmth at the heart of the fire of compassion turns out to have this grounding in the cooler state of equanimity.

Equanimity keeps the heart steady. It's free, wider than any strongly confronted feelings. It's willingly open, even in the face of sharp challenge.

And so it is constantly tempering strong compassion with something more like clarity and efficacy.

Let me try placing this in a slightly more Buddhist context, because equanimity arises as one of the so-called Four Immeasurables, or Four Noble Abodes – touchstones of the mind and heart in a more awake state.

Equanimity turns out to be the fundamental ground of the other three warm and radiant states.

'Metta', or loving-kindness, will be familiar to most people, I think, often understood as an unqualified friendliness, wishing all beings to be at ease. An old image for this boundless state of the heart is the sun at noon. Everything equally well-lit, casting little shadow, a state of radiating kindness over the entire world.

‘Karuna’ – the second ‘immeasurable’ aspect of mind awake – is compassion. And the image here is the sun setting. This is the warmth of the day meeting the darkness of suffering, with a natural (as in, ‘by nature’) tender readiness to find the actions of care.

‘Mudita’, the third immeasurable aspect of mind, can be translated as appreciative joy. It’s really the spirit of joy itself, needing nothing for itself and so delighting in sharing the joy of others. The image here is sunrise, brightening the moment with enthusiasm for the success and well-being of the other, a pure receptive state.

Underlying and supporting all of them is equanimity – ‘Upekkha’ in Sanskrit. And the image here is of the full moon, a very familiar Zen image of the mind awake.

Now the full moon evenly and safely reflects and distributes the sun’s light without heat or glare in a vast, cloudless sky. And of course, moonlight lets everything it touches be present in a strangely equal light.

It’s almost hard to tell one thing from another – everything is simply silvered moonlight, such a unifier of whatever it picks out. And that’s the mind of equanimity.

‘Upekkha’ has two Sanskrit roots. One is ‘upa’, meaning clear ‘all around’ perspective, a wide field of attention. And the second part, ‘ekkha’, comes from the root ‘ica’, which means to look and clearly see.

There’s a sense of entirety here, of seeing with entirety, of being more entire with the whole situation, and so, of being without bias. Of seeing *roundly*, perceiving steadily with understanding and friendliness and patience.

I want to argue that this is the true face of love and courage. That this identifies the courage or fearlessness within compassion. There’s a giving away of the boundary of the self in a certain measure, a yielding and conceding of the self to the other.

And there’s love in that.

The Buddha called equanimity ‘abundant’, so we don’t have to worry about it ever running out, and also ‘exalted’, as it lifts us, lifts everything. He also named it ‘immeasurable’, being without beginning or end. And ultimately, his description of equanimity comes down to *‘without hostility, without ill will.’*

IV

I’ve spent a lot of time recently rereading James Baldwin, one of the truly great spirits of the 20th century. I love his generous wisdom and his clarity – a scarifying clarity at times.

But when he was speaking in the heat of the 1960s fight for racial equality, he said ‘We are charged with equanimity’ in such an intense struggle.

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We are *charged* with it. And I hear the word ‘charged’ in both senses. He speaks of it as ‘a charge laid to our hearts’ by injustice and suffering, implying a need to stand in the middle of all things and open up a clear head and strong heart for what must be maintained in the struggle – of being held accountable to what most truly matters.

But the word also reverberates with a sense of being *charged*, as in *energised*, by this need to move skilfully and congruently with what is happening.

Equanimity might seem at first glance to be pointing to an emotionally aloof, reserved kind of state. But it’s not.

It is a fundamental adherence to a genuinely curious, open, non-judging and non-prosecuting state of mind, that allows compassion to become skilful, to become *skilled*.

Zen master Dogen, the great 13th Century Japanese Zen master, in his ‘Advice for the Cook’, advises us to ‘turn things while turning *with* things’.

You can’t stand outside the turning – the flow of what is happening. But you can shape the course of that flow by turning with it, by being in close concert with the unfolding event. Which requires equanimity.

With is not opposed. It is not coercing anything. It’s flowing with the world as the only place from which any way of shaping how the world may flow is possible, without bumping into everything.

So to practice not-knowing is to work skilfully with the grain of what is emerging.

It’s easy enough to imagine remaining at peace right at the heart of turmoil as a safe place of respite. But it’s not. It’s a constant action, a practice, to find and maintain such a poised state of mind and being.

There’s an image in Buddhism of ‘the lotus in the midst of fire’. Often the lotus is seen as rising cool and immaculate from the mud. That’s one way of understanding the mind becoming clear and rising above into clarity.

But from the Zen point of view, the lotus blooms most brightly in the midst of fire. That’s the fire of our lives, of impermanence, of suffering, of change, of loss, of grief. But also of joy, and of life and death inseparable – that fire.

So setting this cool fire of compassion – that is at once strong and soft, free of rancour and despair, because it is not jumping ahead of itself and presuming a single thing... Can this be accepted as the charge laid to our hearts by the comprehensively challenging time we’re in?

There’s a newly-coined word that comes to light in Victor Steffensen’s book, *Fire Country*, when one of his two old teachers probably semi-accidentally suddenly calls out to Victor, ‘Make sure you’re using *the praction*.’

Victor thought ‘Praction, the praction, what’s that?’ But went on to gladly embrace it, as do I, as a beautiful, continual collapsing and transmuting of ‘practice’ into ‘action’. ‘The praction’ offers a beautiful way of understanding compassionate action arising from not-knowing mind, from the humility and equality of the mind of equanimity.

As Steffensen says, ‘When the praction activates everything to move together, it becomes *living knowledge*.’

Not-knowing opens the way to this living knowledge, that confirms our solidarity with one another and with all the beings of the Earth.

V

I’d like to offer a koan about compassionate action, as a way invite us all to begin to think our way into the nature of caring action. The ‘praction’ of compassion, perhaps. Because at the heart of compassion as a cool fire is exquisitely awake kind of care.

This one comes from *Blue Cliff Record*, a tremendous Tang Dynasty collection of 100 koans and cases.

They’re called cases, public case. Ko-an, translates as ‘public case’.

‘Public’, because nothing is hidden. ‘Case’ because every koan directly prosecutes the true nature of reality, in the most ordinary of encounters between people.

To work with a koan, first find a way to let yourself grow quiet.

Just settle into a posture that feels comfortable for you.

Feet on the floor is always a good place to start.

And then I’m simply going to speak into the silence, a case, a koan case, and see how it reverberates with you.

There’s nothing complicated you need to do with this.

All that is required is that you let it ripple through you, and possibly touch off something fresh and unexpected in you.

So, let’s just settle for a minute.

So this is a case known as ‘Yunyan’s Hands, and Eyes’.

Yunyan asked Daowu, how does the bodhisattva Guanyin use all those many hands and eyes?

The figure evoking unqualified compassion is called Guanyin or Avalokiteshvara, depending which century and country you're in, and is sometimes depicted with many arms radiating from her shoulders.

And at the end of each arm is an open hand, and in every open hand is an open eye.

It is said that Guanyin, the bodhisattva of compassion, cannot *not* hear all the cries of the world.

So, how does the bodhisattva Guanyin use all those many hands and eyes?

Daowu answered, oh, it's like someone in the middle of the night reaching behind their head for a pillow. Like someone in the middle of the night, reaching behind the head for a pillow.

Yunyan said, oh, I understand.

Daowu said, how do you understand it?

Yunyan said, the whole body is hand and eye.

Daowu said, oh, that's very well expressed, but it's only eight-tenths of the answer.

Yunyan said, oh, how would you say it, older brother?

Daowu said, throughout the body, the hands and eyes.

So there're several koan points here to trouble you in the best way.

Someone in the middle of the night reaching behind their head for a pillow. Just getting everything a little more comfortable, earlier than any kind of good intention. It's a beautiful pointer, I think, to the deeply relaxed nature of true compassion.

And then pressed further, Yunyan says, the whole body is hand and eye.

And Daowu tweaks it slightly differently.

Daowu says, throughout the body, the hands and the eyes.

By that stage, 'body' may be bigger than just my body, your body.

Meanwhile, the image of the bodhisattva, motivated entirely by compassion, has many, many arms and hands, and in each one, an open, awake eye.

And instead of busyness, an evocation of fundamental ease at the heart of compassion put into the service of the earth, of response to every cry.

An ease in which the whole body – of you, of me, of each of us, of all beings on earth, of the Earth herself...? – is 'hand and eye'.

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By way of illustration, let me offer a moment in which I saw this beautiful coalescence of equanimity and compassion, of fearlessness within compassion, of practice within action. I'll read this account from my book, in doing so:

Scene on a packed train full of people, in the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic: A woman, not wearing a mask, coughed loudly, pointedly not covering her mouth. The man standing next to her in direct range of her cough reacted angrily, demanding, 'Why aren't you wearing a mask like everyone else?' The woman immediately turned and coughed aggressively in exaggerated fashion right into his dismayed face. An entire carriage full of people became incensed, fury building against the woman, who seemed now to be gleefully relishing the anger she was arousing.

But then another man, small child in tow, eased his way up to her through the crowded train. Very gently touching her arm, he asked calmly but firmly, 'Are you *right*?'

She looked him in the eyes, slightly shocked, yet visibly more coherent, and immediately began making her way to the doors to get off at the next station. No accusing eyes were directed at her as she pushed her way through. Quieted and relieved by that tiny intervention, everyone on the train just looked away, giving her space.

The nonpartisan care in the touch and words 'Are you *right*?' quelled the panicked spite and rage in the woman and healed the outrage of an entire carriage, leaving everyone a little more emotionally informed.

In this path beyond mistake, the man did not 'leave this place abruptly.' His tone was calm, his words not accusatory, yet they conveyed just enough un-sticky concern—as in, 'Are you all right?'—while checking her behavior as being evidently *not* right in every obvious way. Skilfully noncoercive, he left things in the woman's own mind to be examined by her—a question, not a finding, a very ripe response, right on the point of the moment. She was safely shifted into a neutral place, where she was personally met, not despised, and not opposed in any way that could fuel more defensive anger. He just enabled her to find her own next move, her own way home, while helping turn the other people on the train onto the same path in the process.

[p. 129–130]

I found that man's intervention to be an act of compassion, but one that was deeply skilled in the cool fire of equanimity – presuming nothing, moving with just what is happening, intuiting and risking just what is needed, congruent with what could quickly become a dangerous situation...

Compassion ripe with not-knowing.

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The aim of the **Centre for a Compassionate Society** is to create community around compassion. It originates program materials in the areas of compassion education and training, meditation, and social activism, as well as cultural activities such as the Equinox Talks.

<https://centreforacompassionatesociety.net>

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