

COMPASSION MEDITATION



By Pastor Jerry Truex

I begin with a reminder: We are created to imitate God, especially God's compassion as Jesus taught.

Luke 6:36. Be compassionate, just as your Father is compassionate. (NRSV)

Dwelling on whatever is commendable, like compassion, and extending our compassion to others—even our enemies—through action, prayer, and blessing accords with

what we have learned from Jesus (cf. Matt. 7:12; Luke 6:20-22, 28) and from the Apostle Paul (Rom. 12:14). In fact, Paul recommends meditating on such praiseworthy qualities.

Phil. 4:8. Finally, brethren, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is of good repute, if there is any excellence and if anything worthy of praise, let your mind dwell on these things. (NASB)

To enhance our ability to express and experience compassion, let us consider practicing “compassion meditation,” which has proven to be effective.

1. What is compassion meditation?

Compassion meditation or loving kindness meditation is a spiritual practice where we say a series of prayer blessings for ourselves and others, similar to the blessings known as the Beatitudes (Matt. 5:3-12).¹

In a state of quiet meditation we say certain words over-and-over in our minds *directing compassion toward* each person or group of people we desire to pray for. For example:

May he/she/they be happy.

May he/she/they be well.

May he/she/they be at peace.

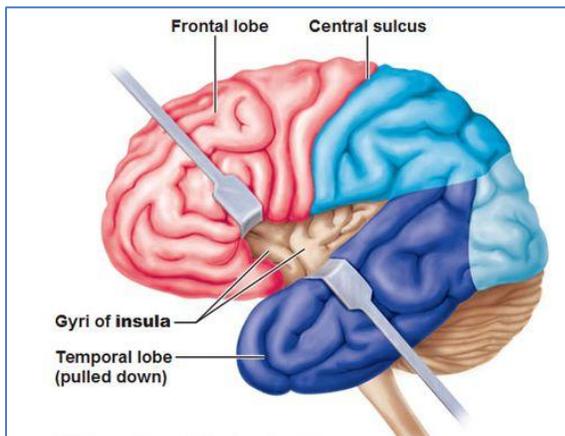
¹ This practice is known as *metta* meditation in Buddhism.

If you wish, you can substitute other words from the Beatitudes (Matt. 5:3-12) or the Fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22-23) or whatever feels right to you. The precise words do not matter so much as *your intention to direct and express compassion* toward your self and others.²

It is recommended that you take from 5 to 20 minutes per session, once or twice per day to practice compassion meditation.

2. What are the benefits?

Neuroscience researchers at the University of Wisconsin-Madison used fMRIs and other brain scanning techniques to show conclusively that compassion or loving kindness meditation

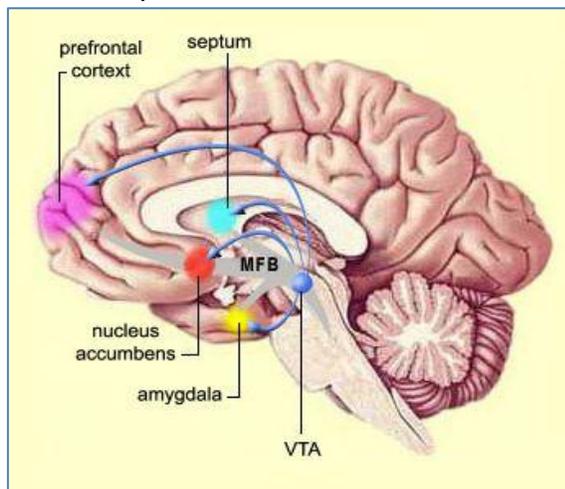


changes the brain in very positive ways.³ In addition, the research shows that happiness and compassion can be learned in the same way as learning to play a musical instrument or a skill at a sport.

The research indicates that specific regions of the brain were stimulated in subjects who practiced compassion meditation. One of the brain regions stimulated by this practice is the **insula**, specifically the anterior insula—“a region of

cortex that is part of the brain that is the only part of the brain to contain a viscerotropic map of the body. What that means is that the visceral organs are actually mapped like retinotopy,

like the eye is mapped in the visual cortex.”⁴ In this way, the insula mediates signals between the body and the cortex and so has an integrating function.



Other parts of the brain are also dramatically altered or elevated during meditation, such as the **amygdala**, the **TPJ** (temporal-parietal junction), the **mid-cingulate area**, and the **L nucleus accumbens**, which is implicated in positive emotions.

² Jewish rabbis stress that *kavanah* (“right intention”) is absolutely essential for prayers to be genuine. The *Mishneh* states: “All depends on the intention of the heart” (*b. Meggillah* 20a).

³ Dain Land, “Study shows compassion meditation changes the brain” (March 25, 2008); <http://www.news.wisc.edu/14944>, refers to the study by Antoine Lutz, Julie Brefczynski-Lewis, Tom Johnston, and Richard J. Davidson, “Regulation of the Neural Circuitry of Emotion by Compassion Meditation: Effects of Meditative Expertise,” *PLoS ONE* Vol. 3, Issue 3, e1897 (March 2008). <http://www.plosone.org/article/fetchArticle.action?articleURI=info:doi/10.1371/journal.pone.0001897>.

⁴ Richard J. Davidson, “Transform Your Mind, Change Your Brain: Neuroplasticity and Personal Transformation” (Sept. 23, 2009); <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7tRdDqXgsJ0>.

The research demonstrates that compassion meditation helps people:⁵

- Regulate their emotions and attention
- Express and experience kindness
- Forgive
- Increase awareness of our interdependence on others
- Grow in humility and gratitude

3. Practice

Sit upright. Take two or three deep breaths with slow, long and complete exhalations. Let go of any concerns or preoccupations. For a few minutes, feel or imagine the breath moving through the center of your chest—in the area of your heart.

First, bring to mind yourself. See yourself in your mind and radiate love and good will toward yourself. Pray slowly and silently:

May I be happy.

May I be well.

May I be at peace.

Second, bring to mind a friend or someone you love—someone very close to you—imagine he/her vividly and slowly and silently project compassion and good will toward him/her:

May he/she be happy.

May he/she be well.

May he/she be at peace.

Third, picture someone you feel neutral about. See their image. Hear their voice. Radiate love and good will toward him/her:

May he/she be happy.

May he/she be well.

May he/she be at peace.

Fourth, bring to mind someone you tend to dislike and allow your compassionate blessing and unconditional positive regard to fall upon him/her:

May he/she be happy.

May he/she be well.

⁵ Davidson, "Transform Your Mind"; <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7tRdDqXqsJ0>.

May he/she be at peace.

Finally, direct your thoughts toward a larger group—the church, the city, even the entire world—and hold that group in your mind and pray compassion toward them:

May they be happy.

May they be well.

May they be at peace.

Once finished, sit and be still for a few moments. Rest in the feelings of loving-kindness. Try to take those feelings of compassion with you for the remainder of the day.