

STEP 12: COMPASSIONATE INACTION

We have so many little studies here dealing with the subject of Step Twelve and compassion that the reader may end up feeling discouraged. Could the subject of compassionate action really be so complex? Is it so difficult to determine what a compassionate action is? Why is it that something that seems so simple to most people should require so much discussion in these studies?

There are at least three important points that we can make here about compassionate action.

The first is this: Properly approached, compassionate action associated with our working of Step Twelve is something that, in reality, we do not have to think about at all ... provided that we are working Steps Ten and Eleven routinely, as part of our dedicated meditation practice in the morning and/or the evening, and as part of each moment of our daily lives. If we are indeed working Steps Ten and Eleven in this fashion, we will find that Step Twelve happens all by itself. Our practice of Steps Ten and Eleven will automatically guide us towards compassionate action – we will find we are impelled to it without any effort or thought on our part. Through our practice of Step Ten, we will remind ourselves frequently that we do not know what to do next, and we will admit that to God as we understand God. In Step Eleven, we will find that God is directing us, through intuition and inspiration, to take certain actions, and that God is also giving us the power to do what God is guiding us to do. The resulting actions are Step Twelve-based, compassionate actions – they cannot be anything else. So – in a way – many of these studies on Step Twelve are unnecessary. A practitioner of Steps Ten and Eleven will find she is performing them anyway.

Secondly, the reason we have offered so many studies on the subject of compassion and Step Twelve is this: Unfortunately, compassion is something which the majority of people in the world – whether spiritual in orientation or humanist, whether faith-driven or agnostic or atheist – believe they understand. Perhaps they do; but if they do, then they understand something very different about compassion from what the practitioner of the last three Steps will understand. Indeed, you could make out an excellent case for saying that the practitioner of Steps Ten, Eleven and Twelve does not understand what a compassionate action is because he doesn't need to understand it – he merely needs to do it. *Do what?* may ask our secular friends. And the answer is: Do what God suggests through inspiration and intuition in Step Eleven. For the spiritual man and woman, there need be and often is no understanding at all of the actions they feel impelled to perform as a result of working Steps Ten and Eleven.

A recent book by a well-known author on the subject of religious belief makes this classic mistake of starting with the idea of compassionate action and then suggesting how one approaches performing compassionate actions. But this is to put the cart before the horse. The whole point about Step Twelve-based compassionate action is that it cannot be defined by us, simply because it can never originate with us – it must always originate as an impulse which is engendered in us by God. We need not, and indeed cannot, define what compassionate actions are. We merely perform them.

Thirdly, most compassionate action is in fact compassionate *inaction*. And that's what this little Study is about.

Let's see what we mean by this.

Many of us find that our involvement with compassionate inaction begins with our ongoing practice of Step Ten. As we ask ourselves on a continuous basis what we are thinking and feeling, what we are

doing and what we are about to do, we often find that we are feeling resentful, selfish, dishonest, or afraid, and as a result of that feeling we are about to do something which is going to harm other people or ourselves. We find ourselves in a disagreement, and realize that we are about to say something hurtful or that we are about to lose our temper. We find ourselves at a disadvantage, so we are about to say something dishonest to justify ourselves. We are afraid that we may lose something we think we have, so we are tempted to withdraw to protect ourselves. We are in a meeting at work, and realize that we want other people to think we are effective and knowledgeable, so we are about to try and dominate the meeting The list is endless, just as our encounters with our own resentments, selfishness, dishonesty and fears are endless. Feelings like these do not go away, or if they do so, they do not go away for long. Which is not surprising, for these feelings are *meant* to happen. It is the job of our brains to think thoughts and to feel feelings. There is nothing wrong with the thoughts and feelings in themselves, unless we fail to raise them to the level of awareness. Then there is a danger that we will act on those thoughts and feelings as if they were real or true.

As we raise these thoughts and feelings to the level of awareness in Step Ten, therefore, we accept that we are unable to control them, and therefore unable to control the actions we make take as a result of those thoughts and feelings. This is a critical part of Step Ten: our acceptance of our inability to manage ourselves and our lives. To this extent, Step Ten is a repetition of our taking of the First Step with respect to our core addiction. We acknowledged then that we were powerless over our addictions *and that our lives had become unmanageable*. Now, as we perform Step Ten on our thoughts and our feelings, we acknowledge not only that we are powerless over them but that we are quite powerless as to what actions we will take as a result of experiencing them. The proper conclusion to our practice of Step Ten is always the same: our acknowledgment that we do not know what to do, and could not do it even if we knew.

Immediately we pass to Step Eleven. Step Eleven is to be practiced constantly, just like Step Ten (the treatment of Step Eleven in the AA Big Book is basically a gentle way of introducing us to the idea that it is to be done all the time). It is Step Eleven that enables us to determine what we should do, and that gives us the power to do it. Interestingly, for most of the time our practice of Step Eleven tells us to do *nothing*, and gives us the power to take no external action *with respect to the resentment, selfishness, dishonesty and fear that we have just been talking about*.

When we practice Step Eleven moment by moment just as we practice Step Ten, we find that – despite the disagreement we are having – we don’t take the harmful action we were just contemplating. We see that the feeling we have, of being at a disadvantage, is just a feeling, so we don’t make the dishonest statement we were considering. While we understand that we have a fear of losing something, we don’t act on the impulse to withdraw and protect ourselves. We see that we want to impress others in a meeting, but even so we don’t try and dominate them. As Step Eleven merges imperceptibly with Step Twelve, we *simply “don’t do” what we were unconsciously thinking about doing before we did Step Ten*. In exactly the same way as freedom from thinking about our core addiction “just comes” to us recovering addicts as we reach the end of the Ninth Step “without any effort on our part,” so the impulse to act resentfully, selfishly, dishonestly or fearfully “just goes.” *There is no real difference between the two situations*. In both cases, a Power greater than ourselves brings these things about. We do nothing: we merely surrender all over again to our helplessness, and precisely as we do this, so we receive the knowledge of what to do (or *not* to do, in this case) and the power to do it (or *not* to do it, in this case).

This “compassionate inaction,” this ability *not* to do what we were going to do, is so deeply mysterious to us recovering addicts, even those of us who routinely work the last three Steps, that we are tempted

to come up with all sorts of explanations as to how we are able to refrain from these damaging actions. It is perhaps inevitable that, because we live in this secular world, we use humanistic concepts to explain why we did not act self-defensively. “I realized that it was not her fault,” we say, “so I simply didn’t say anything.” Or “I could see that I was being bloody-minded about it, so I just nodded when he told me what he was thinking.” In other words, we tend to talk about these “compassionate inactions” of ours in *rational* terms, as though we had reasoned the matter through and managed to persuade ourselves that the actions we were contemplating would benefit no one.

But these explanations simply aren’t true. It’s not the case that we refrain from these actions because we pause, see clearly what the negative results would be, and therefore decide not to perform those actions. In exactly the same way, it is not the case that we no longer drink or over-eat or gamble because we are able to pause, see clearly what the negative results would be, and therefore decide not to drink or over-eat or gamble *The two situations are completely and absolutely identical for the recovering addict who is practicing the last three Steps.* In just the same way as we are able to refrain from over-eating, gambling, or drinking solely because of the relationship we have developed with a Power greater than ourselves, so we are able to refrain from the selfish action. We don’t know *how* we can refrain because it’s not an ability that we have. In and of ourselves, we *can’t* refrain from the selfish action, any more than we can – in and of ourselves – handle our core addiction. Our ability *not* to do these things comes solely and paradoxically from our acknowledgment in Step Ten that we *do not have that ability*, followed by our obtaining that ability in Step Eleven.

In other words, there is a very strong link between *not* taking those selfish actions that used to be motivated by our core addictions, and *not* taking the selfish actions that we contemplate as we interact with other people. These “inactions” are compassionate because they originate in the same way as the compassionate *actions* that we have discussed here in other Studies. They originate from our acknowledged powerlessness and from our ongoing dependence on a Power greater than ourselves.

To return now to the start of this little Study: It turns out that compassionate action is not quite the difficult business that some readers may have suspected from reading other Studies here on Step Twelve. Because these “inactions” we have described here are themselves compassionate, we can see that all of us are involved in compassionate situations to a much greater extent than we may have realized. We now understand that behaving in a compassionate manner does not merely involve taking actions that we would not otherwise have taken. It also involves – and to a much greater extent – *not* taking actions that we would otherwise have taken: selfish, self-protective, dishonest actions born of fear, self-absorption, and resentment.

Compassionate inaction is one of the keys to accepting the workings of a Power greater than ourselves in our lives. It may be that sometimes we find it hard to see that we are acting out of genuine compassion with respect to those that we live, work, and socialize with. But all of us can see that – by virtue of our working Steps Ten and Eleven – we tend *not* to do many of the selfish things that we used to do. And when we are able to see this, it perhaps makes it a little easier to understand that the path to compassionate *action* is the same: the ongoing practice, moment by moment, of Steps Ten and Eleven, as the gateway to “practicing these principles in all our affairs.”