

STEP 12: A PRIMER ON COMPASSION

The little study entitled “Compassion and Selfishness” enabled us to do a certain amount of groundwork on compassion by determining what it was *not*. We concluded there as follows:

1. Compassionate action results from an ongoing, dedicated, and meaningful practice of Steps 10 and 11;
2. Compassionate action results from God-directed intuition and inspiration, not from our calculating minds;
3. Selfishness is the enemy of compassionate action;
4. By definition, therefore, no action which has any hint of personal goal in it – no matter how “enlightened” or noble that goal may be – is or can be a compassionate action.

Our third and fourth conclusions summarize what we believe that compassion is *not*. But the first two conclusions point us in the direction we must now go. They summarize the belief – and not merely the belief, but the *experience* – that compassionate action results from the practice of Steps 10 and 11 (or the equivalent of those Steps in any meaningful spiritual practice) *and from nowhere else*.

Let's say a little more about this matter of *experience* when it comes to determining what a compassionate action is. Underlying all of these little studies on the last three Steps is one common idea: that what we learn about Steps Ten, Eleven and Twelve comes first and foremost from *our experience of working them*. These studies are intended to be read, to be understood, and to be agreed with or disagreed with primarily on the basis of our shared experience of working those Steps. What we have to say in these pages may be of intellectual, psychological, or academic interest to readers who do *not* have a daily spiritual practice based on Steps 10, 11, and 12; but whether such disengaged readers agree or disagree with what is said here can be of no significance at all to those of us who *are* practitioners. In other words, what lies at the heart of these studies is the experience of a Power greater than ourselves, an experience which is a part of the practice of those Steps – indeed, an experience which *is* the practice of those Steps.

Why then have these studies been written at all? If all our interest is in our shared experience of working these last three Steps, why should there be any need for these little essays? And the reason is this: Those of us who base our lives on this simple practice live in a world which is anxious to explain what we practitioners experience, but in intellectual, psychological, or academic terms. And not only that: Too many of the inhabitants of this world – indeed, too many of *us* – are subject to the temptation to explain what we practitioners experience using *religious* terms, or *moral* terms, or *humanist* terms. Many of us are not willing to take our ongoing experience of a relationship with a Power greater than ourselves as the *basis* of our entire outlook on life. Instead, we want to explain what we experience in terms which will be accepted – or at least understood – by people who do *not* share this experience. Particular problems can arise when we attempt to understand matters like compassion in a religious or moral context.

Of all parts of the AA Big Book, it is perhaps pages 84-88 which stand in the strongest opposition to the idea that our continuing spiritual practice – the practice of watching, praying, and serving or doing – has or should have a religious or moral basis to it. In our studies of Step Ten in particular, we have seen that the peculiar genius of the AA Big Book is that it rejects the notion that “goodness” comes from morality. As early as its treatment of Step Three, the Big Book instead urges upon us that the heart of our problem is our *selfishness*. Unlike the *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions*, it rejects the idea that we will ever reach the point where we will know *as a matter of principle* what is right and

what is wrong, what is good and what is bad. Instead, that knowledge, and the power to do what is good, is mediated to us on an ongoing basis by God as we understand God, as we practice Step Ten (acknowledging that we do not know what to do) and Step Eleven (determining what God as we understand God wants us to do, and finding the power to do it).

The inevitable consequence of this position is that we cannot look to academicians, psychologists, intellectuals, moral philosophers, or even religious authorities to tell us what compassionate action is. If we do look to these people, then we are diluting what we learn from God in our practice of Steps Ten and Eleven with what other human beings are telling us. And that cannot be the way to proceed. Instead, we must learn from God what compassion really means.

In taking this stance, the AA Big Book sets itself apart from the majority of religious teaching and literature and even from the tenets of many spiritual movements. It is in many ways the most radical aspect of the spiritual foundation of AA. In this regard, the Big Book finds itself much more in line with what the Buddha is supposed to have said about the basis for compassionate action: "Believe nothing, no matter where you read it, or who said it, no matter if I have said it, unless it agrees with your own reason and your own common sense" (remembering, of course, what the AA Big Book says about "common sense" on page 13: "Common sense would thus become uncommon sense," and about having God direct our thinking, in the third paragraph of page 86). It also finds itself in agreement with the teaching of Jesus in one of the hardest sections of the Sermon on the Mount, namely Mt. 7:21-23. In that section, Jesus makes it clear that actions which are performed because *someone else* says they are compassionate are of little account; instead, only actions which are performed because "they are the will of my Father" can be said to be compassionate.

While we are discussing the issue of other people's ideas of what constitutes compassionate action, it may be worth saying something about politically based thinking. Alas, what we have to say here is likely to be as controversial as other statements we have made, but nevertheless let us proceed. Socially-oriented action tends to be part of more left-wing political agendas. The dedicated practitioner of the last three Steps will hopefully already have reached the conclusion that following the spiritual path must inevitably bring about the death of political commitment of any kind, since political thinking is invariably based on the idea that what is wrong with the world at heart has the possibility of being fixed or at least ameliorated by humankind. In particular, those of a left-wing orientation tend to believe more readily than their opponents that it is, it can, or it should be the role of the state to promote, underwrite, or prosecute a social agenda because it is "compassionate." But compassionate action can no more arise from political conviction than it can from religious or moral conviction. It can arise only from our ongoing practice of the last three Steps or their spiritual equivalent.

Now, this is not to say that compassion may not drive us to participate with other people who themselves may have a political, religious, moral, or philosophical agenda. To decide whether, when, and how to cooperate with people who may be motivated very differently from ourselves is one of the most difficult decisions to make in our practice of Step Twelve, and we deal with it in another Study where we can give it the consideration it deserves.

We have now made some advances in determining what actions are compassionate. We have discovered that compassionate actions are actions which are taken because they are the will of God, and that knowledge of what to do and the power to do it come about through the practice (and solely through the practice) of Steps Ten and Eleven or a similar, continuous, spiritually based practice. We have learned that moralists and philosophers, intellectuals and even religious authorities may be of little help in our ongoing attempts to determine what we should do. It is not unlikely that these people may

approve of our actions; but whether they approve or not cannot help us as we seek for God's will and the power to carry that out.

At this point, we may want to pause and consider an important question. We have suggested that a truly compassionate action is one which results – and can only result – from our practice of Steps Ten and Eleven. Well, what happens if I am deluded in some way? What happens if I believe that a particular course of action is being suggested to me by my practice of Steps Ten and Eleven, but – because I am actually being selfish, because I am under stress or mentally or emotionally ill, or for some similar reason – the action that I am contemplating is not compassionate at all: perhaps it is even deleterious?

The answer to this question lies within the immediate area of Step Eleven and also outside it. It is connected strongly with our practice of Step Ten, with what became the First Tradition of AA, and with what became the Eleventh and Twelfth Traditions of AA.

Let's begin with what the Big Book says about our practice of Step Eleven. It suggests that, *[i]f circumstances warrant, we ask our wives or friends to join us in morning meditation. If we belong to a religious denomination ... we attend to that also Be quick to see where religious people are right.* In other words, the practice of Step Eleven is intended to take place, at least in part, in a community. At the time the Big Book was written, there *was* no real 12-Step-based community as we understand that today. Many AA members were members of the Oxford Group, a Christian community. This is of the greatest importance. If the practice of Step Eleven takes place to some extent within a community, then it is much less likely that I am going to be deluded in some way about the actions that I believe I am being prompted to perform. Indeed, the Oxford Group had adopted as a standard practice not only the devoting of an hour every morning to what was called “quiet time,” but also, and significantly, to the “checking” of any “guidance” that might be received during that time with another member of the Oxford Group – precisely to guard against the eventuality we are now considering. Particularly with regard to significant actions I may feel drawn to perform, *and particularly when it comes to the matter of whether the action I am contemplating is truly a compassionate action*, I turn to other members of my spiritual community for help.

An additional safeguard against taking action that may be ill-considered comes from Step Ten. The Big Book's treatment of Step Ten says, *When [selfishness, dishonesty, resentment, or fear] crop up, we ask God at once to remove them. We discuss them with someone immediately* The process of watching myself, of coming to the conclusion over and over that I do not know what to do next, of realizing that the understanding of what I should do and the power to do it must both come from God, is preceded by my talking with someone else in my spiritual community, in order in part to ascertain that – whatever motives I may have – they are not *selfish* motives.

When AA had been in existence for twenty-one years and had indeed become a spiritual community in its own right, the importance of that community became enshrined in the First Tradition: *Our common welfare must come first: personal recovery depends upon AA unity.* In fact, something very radical had been understood by the time the Tradition was formulated, and that was that *the spiritual community had primacy over the individual member.* This is reflected in many religions too: for the knowledgeable Christian, the Body of (the members of) Christ is more important than the individual believer; in Buddhism, the *sangha* or community has primacy over the individual member of the *sangha*. In our 12-Step programs, the wisdom of the group is greater than my wisdom, however spiritually oriented I may believe myself to be. If the group, or a member of the group, tells me that the supposedly compassionate action I am contemplating is in fact selfish in some way, I do well to listen

and to return to Step Ten to determine why. Compassionate action arises out of my individual practice of Steps Ten and Eleven, and out of the humility I have when I check my intuition and inspiration with another, spiritually-oriented member.

Finally, the Eleventh and particularly the Twelfth Traditions spell out for us that compassionate action must always be anonymous to the maximum extent that that is possible. If we look at actions that we took (before we began our practice of the last three Steps) which we believed to be compassionate, we often find that we talked about those actions, either directly and openly or covertly; we grasped at chances to let other people know what we had done; we told others of our actions in the hope that they would approve of them or of us; we mentioned them in order to influence other people to our way of thinking. Any action which is not performed "in secret" is open to the suspicion that it is not in fact compassionate. The links between anonymity and compassionate action is so important that an entirely separate Study is devoted to the subject.

There, then, are some of the tests we can use to determine whether an action we are contemplating is compassionate: Has the action arisen naturally out of our ongoing practice of Steps 10 and 11? Have I checked the action with another, closed-mouth member of my spiritual community? To the maximum extent that this is possible, will I be performing the action anonymously, without the intention of letting anyone know unnecessarily what I am doing or what I have done? If the answer to any of these questions is No, then the action is probably not compassionate.