



# A QUESTION OF COMPASSION

Is it possible to try too hard to help others and only end up damaging ourselves? This is one of the complex questions faced by yoga teacher Isabelle Skaburskis when she set out to ease the suffering of sexual trauma victims in Cambodia.

With her burgundy hair and mischievous grin, Lily is a stylish and strong-minded young woman who recently graduated from a yoga teacher training program at my studio. She had been my student for three years and I knew she struggled with a difficult past. I saw how she dissociated in certain poses and I recognised her tendency to become suddenly aggressive when she felt challenged. As our relationship and her practice progressed, she opened up to me about her history of sexual abuse. Whilst I suspected there had been trauma, I was unprepared for what she would tell me in that quiet room, her knees tucked up to her chest, her voice steady as tears ran down her cheeks.

What began as sexual assault against her by a distant family member became institutionalised when she was forced into an illegal brothel. By the age of fourteen, Lily was living on the street, relying on methamphetamines to get through the nights she endured to support her family, after her father was killed. She told me what men used to do to her, and groups of adolescent boys, when they took her out for the night. She has told me about the fate of her sisters and brothers. She has told me what she has done to others in anger

and despair. As her yoga teacher, I have seen the scars that her past has left on her body and in her mind.

How is compassion possible in light of pain so deep it seems it could never be relieved?

I began a social rehabilitation/teacher training program for young people from backgrounds of abuse and trauma because I believe that yoga practice and philosophy provides both a vocational skill and a set of resources for young people to manage physical and emotional wounds. When I started the program, I believed that a new outlook and strong, supportive environment could alleviate the suffering of these students, and I worked tirelessly to make that happen.

I spent three years putting at the centre of my world Lily and six others with equally horrifying life stories. I visited their families, who are tormented by chronic poverty and live in slums with thousands of other disenfranchised, unemployed people. I listened to my students' accounts of neighbourhood or domestic violence that are so normal to them they laugh as they compare tragedies. I contemplated the fact that these experiences are the stories of everyone in their community, and

even though these teachers happen to live in Cambodia, their circumstances echo across the planet. I am one of the relatively few human beings who can expect clean drinking water, food, and medical care when I need it, and who assumes that my family and my society will aim to protect my wellbeing.

Having witnessed the depth and rate of personal transformation that my students have been able to achieve over the last three years with yoga, my faith in the practice is profound. They have become confident young adults able to engage a room full of Cambodian and expatriate students and donors equally.

They speak with unusual lucidity about their own emotional states and relationship dynamics. They overcome physical blockages and breathe awareness into parts of their body that they had previously dissociated from. They have developed the capacity to sit quietly on the mat in meditation without flashbacks and panic.

But they are not healed. They are stronger now, but they still live every day with their experiences, with the memories of what happened to them, with nightmares, associations, social stigma, hunger for money and prestige. They have a deeply engrained sense



of instability that is confirmed by the perpetual fears and crises that their parents and siblings still suffer from. It took me almost two years before I could admit to myself what I now believe: that for these young people who have endured suffering and violence since they were babies, and inherited the cultural trauma of their parents' generation under the Khmer Rouge, there is no healing. They will have nightmares for the rest of their lives. They will have to manage depression, dissociation, and aggression for the rest of their lives. They will never trust another person fully. They will never relax into intimacy or a healthy sexual relationship. The slash marks on their wrists will never go away. They were born into a pained and traumatised society; their families still suffer and live in perpetual fear of hunger and exploitation.

If compassion means to empathise with the suffering of another, is it of any benefit to try to feel the depth of this kind of suffering? There are millions of people working compassionately around the world to alleviate the suffering of others; and I have seen after



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seven years in Cambodia that the rate of burnout is high. Human beings are not tireless, and the problem is huge. Compassion seems impossible.

The word “compassion” translated literally means to “feel with”; to empathise with the emotional experiences of others. It is a cornerstone in almost all religions and ethical philosophies. The Charter for Compassion, created by Karen Armstrong in 2008, articulates the basis of an international movement to bring compassion back into our everyday lives. According to the charter, “compassion impels us to work tirelessly to alleviate

the suffering of our fellow creatures, to dethrone ourselves from the centre of our world and put another there.”

In eight years of teaching yoga in Cambodia, I have come to question the accepted wisdom of what it means to live with compassion.

The Dalai Lama says compassion is “an empathetic altruism that actively strives to free others from suffering,” and is essential to finding peace and spiritual happiness. After three years of taking my students’ suffering into my own consciousness, I found I could no longer get on the yoga mat to practice. I could not sit still; I was perpetually

claustrophobic; I became aggressive, needy, and overly emotional. I went on retreat and got angry at the other yoga students for being relaxed and feeling safe in their wealthy Western world, as though their comfort were somehow related in inverse proportion to the suffering of human beings worldwide.

Every story my students told me, every piece of information I gathered about the world that they live in, I took into my mind and body and processed as I would my own emotional challenges, applying the tools of my practice to find a solution. I thought that by breathing in their suffering, I could cleanse them of it; I could subject their pain to a magical mental yoga machine and breathe out purity. But everywhere I looked, I witnessed new forms of human suffering, and soon my own body was saturated in it.

When I went on retreat, I discovered that my practice of compassion had effectively traumatised me, and as a

result I had become uncompassionate towards the segment of the population who does not visibly suffer to the degree of those young yoga teachers I knew at my own studio. In a perverse manifestation of compassion, I became fixated on other people's suffering and furious at the world.

Under the guidance of my yoga teacher, who is trained in social work and experienced in trauma therapy, I relearned how to sit still, how to feel my body, and regained confidence in the fact that beauty and love are also real.

Some things have changed for me fundamentally from my experience working with these Cambodian yoga teachers. I can no longer believe that compassion entails taking on the suffering of other people and feeling their pain like my own. I can no longer believe that compassion means trying to relieve others of their suffering, because I found that my tendency to perpetually invent solutions for difficult circumstances was simply another form of looking away.

Krishnamurti refers to "this sense of astonishing energy which is compassion, the end of my sorrow." My experience of living compassionately drained me of energy and became my great sorrow. What is this other compassion that he refers to? "Compassion is not the doing of charitable acts or social reform . . . Compassion is the essence of the wholeness of life."

The question presented to me through my experience teaching yoga to young Cambodians is whether I can live a fully compassionate life without becoming helplessly fixated on suffering, and without overwhelming myself grappling with the pain of others. Or, must I compromise my commitment to compassion in order to maintain my own wellbeing? There must be a way to live compassionately that does not mean I first have to bring suffering into focus before I can open my heart to a person's humanity. Maybe I can find a definition of compassion that allows me to celebrate people in their joy as well as their suffering.

I have a question about compassion, and this question is my practice now.

When Lily invited me to listen to her story, she was not asking me to heal her, or to change the past or punish those who have hurt her. It would bring her no relief to think that I would vicariously experience the horrors that





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she knows. And I learned that neither was she expecting me to teach her how to understand her circumstances, or how to live her life in a way free of suffering. She already knows how to live: she has survived, and today she thrives.

Lily opened up to me because there was already compassion: compassion is the relationship we built together through a willingness to see each other and speak together. My own healing process meant learning how to open my eyes and be available to Lily's experiences, without having to solve the problems of her world; and allowing myself to appreciate the love that thrives in her family despite difficult circumstances and feel joy for the successes in her life.

As our relationship evolved, I learned how to meet Lily on her own terms, in her own world, in her own language. I finally learned to see who she is beyond her suffering.

By trusting me, by sharing with me, by sending me on a journey, Lily has not given me a definition of compassion; I cannot provide a one-sentence catch-all that makes a rule. Lily gave me something much more valuable: she gave me the question, and in the question is my spiritual path. The more I ask myself, "What is compassion? Where does it live in this relationship I am experiencing right now?", the more I am able to recognise the answer and in that moment, recognise a human being.

### References

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Isabelle Skaburskis established Cambodia's first yoga studio in 2004 and yoga therapy not-for-profit, Krama Yoga. She currently teaches in Cambodia and in Melbourne. If you would like to help or contribute funds, Isabelle can be contacted at 0487 319 258 or [natarajyoga@gmail.com](mailto:natarajyoga@gmail.com).