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ORIGINAL PAPER

Compassion Manifesting in Skillful Means

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Abstract

Contemporary philosophers and scientists have been taking greater interest in compassion and skillful means, investigating them and devising programs to teach them. In light of the increase in violent actions and harsh and divisive speech in society today, these topics are of crucial importance. Buddhism has an abundance of teachings on compassion, skillful means, and methods to cultivate them. These "teachings from the East" can complement and enhance the Western approach to these topics. The Mind and Life Institute has contributed to this, as have the programs suggested and endorsed by the Dalai Lama—Social, Emotional, and Ethical Learning at Emory University and the Center for Compassion and Altruism Research and Education at Stanford University, among others. Having trained as a monastic in the Tibetan Buddhism tradition since 1977, I write from within the Buddhist tradition, sharing knowledge from source material in India and Tibet and oral teachings and explanations of Tibetan teachers. My emphasis is on clearly defining what compassion is and is not and on explaining a method to cultivate and practice compassion as taught in the Indo-Tibetan Buddhist tradition. I make recommendations on how to adapt traditional Buddhist training in a secular compassion training context.

Keywords Compassion · Skillful means · Tibetan Buddhism · Bodhisattva · Dalai Lama

One of the teachings that sparked my interest when I encountered Buddhism was compassion. My teachers, Tibetan lamas who were refugees in Nepal and India after the Chinese communist takeover of Tibet in the 1950s, explained a step-by-step method to generate love and compassion. Until then impartial love, compassion, and forgiveness were wonderful ideals to me, but I had no idea how to cultivate them and there were few, if any, role models to follow. Most well-meaning people mouthed the words of "kindness and compassion," "harmony and peace," especially in the holiday season, but it seemed they conducted their lives with their own self-interest foremost. Unfortunately, I was the same.

But here at this meditation retreat were refugee monks who had lost everything except their spiritual practice. One teacher, Lama Thubten Yeshe, put his palms together and said, "I have to thank Mao Tse Tung for making me a refugee. It taught me the real meaning of spiritual practice. Without this experience of suffering, I would have remained complacent; but due to Mao's kindness, I have learned compassion." And H.H. the 14th Dalai Lama related his meeting with a monk who had been imprisoned by the Chinese communists and tortured for years. Asked what he feared the most during his captivity, the monk replied, "Losing compassion for the prison guards." What?! I was shocked to think that someone could even have compassion in such circumstances. The fact that this was possible woke me up; I wanted to develop such love and compassion.

In this article, I share the methods found in Tibetan Buddhism to cultivate such love and compassion. A Buddhist nun since 1977, my study and practice of these teachings is a work in progress as I repeatedly encounter difficulties—as do we all—in working with a mind/heart with entrenched ignorance, anger, and clinging attachment.

The discussion of compassion and skillful means as they are viewed and practiced by followers of Tibetan Buddhism occurs in the context of generating bodhicitta—the loving, compassionate altruistic intention to become enlightened in order to benefit all sentient beings most effectively. The beings who have spontaneous bodhicitta are called bodhisattvas. Their compassion is superior to that of us ordinary beings and gives us an ideal to strive for. These bodhisattvas are role models who have done what we aspire to do and provide a measuring stick to evaluate our progress in generating compassion.

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While bodhisattvas' views of compassion are suitable for Buddhist practitioners holding the Buddhist worldview, adapting this view and the practices to cultivate it in a secular context is possible and beneficial. Here "secular" does not mean non-religious, but suitable for people of all religions and philosophies and also for the people who follow none. Our common worldview and concern is centered principally on finding peace and contentment in this life.

Some secular training programs in compassion may be *based on* Buddhist teachings, but they do not try to convert people to the Buddhist religion and teachers of secular compassion are not necessarily teachers of Buddhism. These distinctions are important for several reasons. Most countries are multicultural and multireligious, and compassion is a universal human value esteemed by all religions and cultures. Tying the cultivation of compassion to one religion would likely impede many people from attending courses to train in compassion. Similarly, people who are interested in Buddhist teachings could become confused thinking secular compassion is none other than the extraordinary compassion of Buddhas and bodhisattvas. This has been addressed in a variety of sources (Jinpa, 2006; Kolts & Chodron, 2015).

Since we do not enter this discussion as blank slates, but as people with our own notions of compassion, we first look at what compassion is and what it is not. This is followed by a short discussion of mindfulness and introspective awareness as elements that aid the development of compassion and the methods to cultivate compassion. Then we look into skillful means as the expression of compassion and conclude with some suggestions on how to adapt Tibetan Buddhist training in compassion to a secular context.

What Is Compassion?

Compassion is a mental factor that is often paired with love; both concern positive attitudes and emotions toward others and ourselves. Some definitions are helpful for clarity. In Tibetan Buddhism, love (*maitri*) is defined as the wish for beings to have happiness and its causes, and its compatriot, compassion, is defined as the wish for beings to be free of all *duḥkha* (Pāli: *dukkha*) and its causes. The Sanskrit word *duḥkha* is often translated as suffering, an English term that does not correspond to the Buddhist meaning. A better translation is "unsatisfactory experiences"—experiences and conditions that are problematic, stressful, and confusing.

This brings up the larger questions: What is happiness and what are its causes? What is *duḥkha* and what are its causes? Buddhism, other religions, and the secular world have different answers to these questions, although the answers have overlapping points.

According to the Buddhist commentarial tradition, happiness is of two kinds. *Temporal happiness* is the happiness we ordinary beings experience in cyclic existence: good health, friends, wealth, job fulfillment, loving relationships, social status, freedom, and so forth. In general, this type of happiness is connected in one way or another to objects of our five senses. To receive it, we orient our lives toward people and external objects that we believe are its causes. We seek contact with people, possessions, and other objects of the five senses that give us pleasure and joy. Similarly, we endeavor to get away from or oppose whatever or whomever we believe is interfering with our possession of or contact with these external sources of happiness. In contrast, *ultimate happiness* is the deep fulfillment and joy of abiding in meditative equipoise on the nature of reality, knowing that the innate ignorance and mental afflictions that are the source of our misery have been eradicated and that our innate good qualities have been expanded and developed to their utmost.

From the earliest Buddhist sources, *duḥkha* is of three types: the *duḥkha* of pain, the *duḥkha* of change, and the pervasive *duḥkha* of conditioning (Bodhi, 2000, 38.14.; Gyatso, 1994). The *duḥkha of pain* is the physical and mental suffering that all beings recognize as unpleasant and undesirable such as aging, sickness, death, unfulfilled wishes, loss of dear ones, wealth, status, and so forth. The *duḥkha of change* has to do with the loss or separation from the sources of our pleasure. The people and objects that are sources of our temporal happiness lack the power to bring lasting happiness. If they brought true happiness, the more we were in contact with them or the more we did certain activities, the happier we would become. But this is not the case. Eating good food is a source of pleasure, but if we continue to eat, the pleasure ceases and the pain of a stomachache arises. We may love to be with someone, but if we were with that person around the clock for even a few days without even a moment's break, we would want to be alone, do something else, or have our own space. Social status and financial success bring their own suffering: they are taxing to maintain yet we are anxious about losing them. The *pervasive duḥkha of conditioning* refers to our being born with a body and mind under the influence of ignorance and mental afflictions (confusion, anger, attachment, and so forth) and actions (*karma*) motivated by them. Without choice, we are born with a body that ages, falls ill, and dies.

Many of the superficial causes of *duḥkha* are external—the loss of cherished relationships or possessions, or people or animals that threaten or destroy our physical or emotional well-being. Some have to do with our body—injury, the imbalance of elements, illness. Innate sources of *duḥkha* cause us to be reborn repeatedly in cyclic existence—ignorance misconceiving reality, innate mental afflictions, and the actions we engage in under their influence. These actions leave "seeds" on our mindstream that ripen into unpleasant or stressful circumstances and experiences in the future.

All beings—be they religious or not—agree that temporal happiness is desirable and the *duḥkha* of pain is unwanted. Religious practitioners of Buddhism and some other religions agree that the *duḥkha* of change is miserable. Buddhism asserts that rebirth in any realm of cyclic existence under the influence of ignorance, afflictions, and harm is undesirable. Likewise, the assertions of the causes of these three types of *duḥkha* vary according to people's philosophy and religious beliefs.

What Compassion Is Not

Before discussing how to develop compassion, Buddhist traditions consider it important to dispel erroneous views about what it is. Some of them are outlined below.

1. *Compassion entails being personally distressed.*

   Some people in the West like to explain compassion according to its etymology: *passion* refers to suffering; com means with. Thus, compassion means suffering with someone. This implies that to be compassionate, we must suffer along with others when they suffer. But this is personal distress, not compassion. When we become overwhelmed and distraught by others' misery, the focus of attention has shifted from others' misery to our own. We become unable to respond compassionately to another's suffering because our own distress has overwhelmed us. For example, I was in the hospital room with one of my students as he was dying. His wife, two children, and best friend—all of them loved him dearly—were also there. But they were so overcome with grief and tears—their own distress of losing him—that they were unable to help him during the dying process. I was moved by his dying, but my mind was calm as I stood by his bedside, encouraging him to have virtuous aspirations for his next life and reminding him of the Buddhas, bodhisattvas, and his Buddhist teachers. While empathy is a prelude to compassion, they are not the same and the methods to cultivate them differ as well.

   There is the notion in our culture—perhaps linked with Christian notions of Jesus dying on the cross to atone for human sins—that to be truly compassionate, we must suffer. Any kind of mental peace—let alone happiness from other aspects of life—indicates that we are selfish. However, this notion is far from the meaning of compassion as understood by the Buddha.
2. *Compassion is pity.*

   Compassion is not looking down on suffering beings as if they are to blame for their misery. If we are truly compassionate, we do not put ourselves above others. We help people simply because suffering is undesirable—it does not matter whose it is; it should be eliminated. The giver and the receiver of compassion are equal. There is no space for thoughts such as "Oh, you poor creature. I feel so sorry for you. How did you get yourself in such a predicament? But don't worry. I, the superior compassionate one, am here to rescue you. You should feel grateful for my help." Such an attitude is condescension, not compassion. True compassion does not want anything in return, not even a thank you, because the act of helping itself is the "reward." We feel fulfilled when we are able to contribute to someone's well-being; we do not want or need anything more.

   Eighth-century Buddhist sage Śāntideva (1999) gives the example of our hand extracting a thorn from our foot. The hand reaches down and removes the thorn. That is it. Life goes on. No drama, such as "I the great and glorious hand am so compassionate that I am helping you, the stupid foot, who didn't look where you were going. Remember my kindness; you owe me a favor, be sure to repay it." Why does the hand automatically help the foot? Because they are part of the same organism. They help each other for the benefit of the greater good of the organism. Similarly, each of us is a part of the greater collection of all sentient beings, so compassion for others and extending aid to them is not a big deal. It is what we naturally do, just as the axle engages the wheels so the car can move.

   The Dalai Lama points to anthills and beehives, remarking that each insect works for the good of the group, and in that way everyone survives and prospers. We human beings have superior intelligence to that of insects, but we misuse that intelligence to create bigger and better weapons to harm one another. We must use our intelligence to benefit one another instead.
3. *Compassion makes us people pleasers.*

   Compassion does not entail becoming a people pleaser—someone who is seemingly so concerned about others' welfare that they do everything to soften their suffering and bring their happiness. Although this appears to be compassionate action, their motivation may not be, and Buddhism considers our motivation to be the factor determining the value and virtue of our actions. People pleasers serve others because they want to be accepted and appreciated. They want others to think well of them and laud them. They are dismayed if they work hard to help but do not receive overt appreciation and praise. Here, too, the mind is entangled with self-centeredness; true compassion is focused on others.

   Compassion does not mean we indiscriminately do what others want or like to win their affection or approval. Rather, in some cases, compassion requires risking the relationship and our good standing with someone in order to benefit them in the long term. For example, as a teenager, Joe repeatedly got in trouble

with the police. Each time, his mother would go to court, pay a fine, and ask the judge to let him go home, which the judge did. But one day, she told the judge, “I’ve tried to help him, but he doesn’t listen. Judge, you keep him in custody. Take him to juvenile hall.” Joe was initially furious that his mother did not rescue him yet again, but later, he realized that being alone at juvenile hall made him think about how he got there. He understood that if he continued with the same behavior, his situation would never change. “I had to hit bottom to understand that I am responsible for my actions and my life. My mother refusing to bail me out was a great kindness.”

4. *To show compassion, we must fix others’ problems.*

   Compassion does not involve fixing others’ problems. Some people may feel responsible for rescuing others from their distress. Others want to show their care by solving their problems. The difficulty with this is that it does not necessarily meet the other’s needs. Some people in suffering situations simply want someone to listen with empathy and compassion; they do not want Mr. or Ms. Fix-It to jump into their lives, meddle in their business, and push his or her own ideas in an effort to make everything okay again. Sometimes Mr. or Ms. Fix-It becomes overbearing and controlling, disrespecting the other person’s intelligence and ability to solve their own problems or to learn from their own mistakes. This often causes more confusion and tension.

5. *Compassion makes us weak.*

   Some people believe that compassion makes us weak. We are so kind that we agree with whatever someone else says or does because we do not want to stir up conflict or embarrass them by calling out their inappropriate actions. We have so much compassion for the perpetrator that we do not try to stop their actions or hold them accountable for the harm they inflict. A battered woman thinks, “I forgive my husband. He’s kind; he just loses his temper once in a while. I have compassion for him. He will change if I just practice patience.” Meanwhile, the abuse continues. This way of thinking is foolishness, not compassion.

   Compassionate action requires extraordinary inner strength. We must be able to endure difficulties without discouragement and to leave the door open if at present the person we are trying to help rejects that help. We are willing to risk our reputation and relationships in order to do what is best for the other person in the long term. For example, Susan’s brother Henry, who she is very fond of, has a substance abuse problem. Henry asks her for money, but knowing that he will use it for drugs or alcohol, she declines and offers to take him to a rehab center and cover the costs of his stay instead. Henry is insulted and accuses Susan of judging him unfairly and projecting faults on him that he does not have. He blows up, stomps out of the room, and declares that he will never speak to her again.

   When their help is rebuffed, many people would feel angry, discouraged, and misunderstood. They, too, respond with anger and decide not to speak to their relative again. But Susan has trained in compassion and has the inner wisdom and strength to know Henry’s response was fueled by ignorance and attachment. She checked her motivation before speaking and knows it was compassionate, not manipulative. She understands that his anger actually has nothing to do with her, so she does not take his words personally. Rather, she calmly steps back and gives Henry space. Later, when he owns his substance abuse problem and requests her help, she will help. There is no “I told you so,” no “Look how kind I am helping you after you treated me so badly.”

6. *Compassion is ineffective in opposing injustice.*

Some people declare that compassion in situations of conflict is ineffective and proclaim “righteous anger” as the solution to injustice and abuse. However, anger—righteous or not—is based on exaggerating the negativity of the other party. When I was a college student at a protest against the Vietnam War, we students stood in a line facing the police wearing riot gear. The person next to me picked up a rock and, screaming at the police, threw it as hard as he could at them. At that moment, something in my mind clicked and I thought, “His mind is exactly like the minds of the people whose actions he is protesting—the officials behind the war.” Both parties had minds of “us vs. them,” both thought their anger was justified and necessary, both sought to harm the other party. Clearly no good could come from that.

Both the Tibetan and Palestinian peoples lost their land around 1950. The Palestinians responded with “righteous anger.” The Dalai Lama repeatedly told Tibetans and their Western allies not to hate the Chinese communists and to never be violent or harm them. Years have passed. So many people have died by hijackings, assassinations, and violent protests in Palestinians’ struggle for autonomy. Very few Chinese have died in the Tibetans’ struggle. When the first Tibetan man self-immolated in Delhi, the Dalai Lama commended his desire for Tibetan autonomy, but spoke strongly to Tibetans, counseling that it is better to live for Tibet than to die for Tibet.

In all these situations, we see that acting with compassion requires not only the thought caring more about the other than ourselves but also a clear mind unclouded by our own confused thoughts. A solution to all these impediments is mindfulness of our actions, introspective awareness that monitors our motivation, and meditation to develop wise compassion.

How to Cultivate Compassion

To generate compassion, we must first admire this quality and want to cultivate it. Śāntideva in *Guide to a Bodhisattva's Way of Life* (1999) spoke of the benefits of bodhicitta, the compassionate altruistic intention to reach our full potential in order to benefit all sentient beings most effectively. The benefits he describes also apply to compassion.

> Those who wish to destroy the many sorrows of their conditioned existence,
> Those who wish all beings to experience a multitude of joys,
>
> And those who wish to experience much happiness
> Should never forsake the altruistic intention.
>
> If even the thought to relieve living creatures of merely a headache
> Is a beneficial intention
> Endowed with infinite goodness,
>
> Then what need is there to mention
> The wish to dispel their inconceivable misery,
> Wishing every single one of them
> To realize boundless good qualities?
>
> For those who are deprived of happiness
> And burdened with many sorrows,
> It satisfies them with all joys,
> Dispels all suffering,
> And clears away confusion.
> Where is there a comparable virtue?
> Where is there even such a friend?
>
> I bow down to the body of those
> In whom this sacred precious mind is born.
> I seek refuge in that source of joy
> That brings happiness even to those who bring harm (Śāntideva, 1999, 1.9, 1.22-23, 1.30-31abc, 1.37.).

Compassion releases one from the prison of self-centeredness, which torments with its negative self-talk, guilt, shame, regret, grudge holding, rage, and many other disturbing emotions and the actions they motivate. Compassion clears away distraction and gives meaning and focus to one's life. When one has a kind and compassionate attitude toward others, it is natural to feel good about oneself, and death comes free of regret regarding relationships with others.

Buddhist traditions offer several ways to cultivate compassion; all of them center around being aware of *duḥkha* and regarding others as kind and endearing. Tibetan Buddhism contains two renowned methods to generate compassion as well as bodhicitta, the altruistic intention to attain buddhahood to benefit all sentient beings most effectively. One is the Seven Cause-and-Effect Instructions and the second is Equalizing and Exchanging Self and Others. The Seven Cause-and-Effect Instructions have a source in the eighth-century Indian sage Kamalaśīla's *Stages of Meditation II* (Dalai Lama & Kamalashila 2019). The six causes are recognizing that all beings have been our mother, remembering our mothers' kindness, wishing to repay it, heartwarming love, compassion, and the great resolve. They lead to the one result, the altruistic intention of bodhicitta. Equalizing and Exchanging Self and Others contains the steps of equalizing self and others, the disadvantages of self-centeredness, the benefits of cherishing others, exchanging self and others, and taking and giving. This method comes from Śāntideva (1999). These two traditional methods are explained in many contemporary commentaries (Dalai Lama & Chodron 2020; Tegchok, 2005).

This essay follows the tradition of combining and abbreviating the essential points of two methods into the step-by-step contemplation that follows. It begins with freeing the mind from attachment to dear ones and antipathy for enemies to establish a mental state that is neutral regarding all other beings. This is followed by equalizing self and others, which sees ourselves and others as equal in wanting happiness and not suffering. To cultivate compassion, we must see others as valuable and have an open heart toward them. This is done by contemplating their kindness. Awareness of their *duḥkha* is also imperative; this is the next step, which together with seeing their kindness leads to compassion. Compassion is strengthened by the meditation in which we imagine takings others' *duḥkha* and giving them our happiness. These steps are best practiced sequentially as described below (Chodron, 2019).

Equanimity

Both methods of generating compassion are based on equanimity, which here means an attitude that is free from attachment and antipathy and equally open to all beings. To generate equanimity, we must abandon attachment to dear ones, animosity toward enemies, and apathy toward strangers. Dear ones include relatives, friends, and others we feel close to, respect, or favor. Enemies include people we do not get along with or disapprove of, those who interfere with our happiness, and those who actively harm us.

In our own experience, it is evident that we favor and become attached to those who are kind to us, agree with us, encourage and support us, help us, and agree with our ideas. Contrarily, we feel suspicion and animosity toward those whom we dislike or who harm us or our loved ones. We are indifferent and apathetic toward those who affect us in neither way. This favoritism is clearly centered on *me* and depends on how others treat *me* and *mine*. In addition, our feelings about others and relationships with them are in constant flux. One

day, they are strangers, but after we meet them, they become friends or enemies. Someone may be a friend one day, but the next day, they criticize us and become an enemy. If we meet someone we dislike in a different situation, they may become a dear friend. We may lose touch with a close friend who later becomes a stranger. Our emotions are quite fickle and depend on self-centered and foolish reasons.

Equalizing Self and Others

We see ourselves as unique and special individuals. But how different are we from others? All sentient beings—human, animal, insect, and others—want to be happy and avoid suffering. In terms of the intensity of our wish to be safe and free from misery of any kind, there is no difference between ourselves and others. Although each of us may find happiness from different conditions, the wish for happiness is equal among us. It is like a buffet meal: some people like rice, others prefer noodles, but all of us want and need nourishment from food. Similarly, each of us may face different sufferings—some from physical illness, others from natural catastrophes, and still others from the mental scourge of fear—but the wish to be free from pain is universal.

In light of this fact, how can we claim that our happiness is more important than others' or that our suffering should be eliminated rather than others'? When we look deeply, the only reason we can fall back on is because we consider ourselves more important and worthwhile than others. But that is hardly a good reason for our bias.

The Kindness of Others

The self-centered attitude is expert at seeing the faults of others and dreaming up faults and problems that are not there, but it is blind in terms of seeing the kindness of others and the fact that our lives depend on them. Regularly contemplating the kindness of others opens us to seeing what we have ignored for so long, and in doing so enables us to feel affection and appreciation for all beings.

All sentient beings have been kind to us in the past, are being kind in the present, and will be kind in the future. To see this, we start by reflecting on the kindness of our parents, relatives, or whoever took care of us when we were infants. They fed us, covered us with a blanket when we were cold, or gave us medicine and comfort when we were ill. As toddlers, they protected us when we unknowingly put ourselves in danger by running into a busy street and putting filthy things in our mouth. When we started school, parents, caregivers, and teachers encouraged us to learn, and they had the undesirable task of disciplining us when we behaved poorly.

At this point, our self-centered attitude will usually object: "But my parents, caregivers, and teachers also harmed me. They berated me and sometimes even hit me. They came home drunk, screamed at each other, and told me not to lie although they did." Yes, all that may have happened, but their kindness to us was much greater. Without their kindness and care, we would not be alive today and we would not even know how to talk. They taught us to speak and to express ourselves. Whatever harmful actions they did were due to their afflictions—the ignorance, anger, and attachment that are their inner enemies. They did the best they could considering the family and historical period they grew up in as well as the financial, economic, and medical circumstances they faced while raising a family. It is unreasonable for us to expect them to be perfect. If I cannot accept them for who they are, how can I expect them to accept me for who I am?

Strangers have also been kind to us. They constructed the buildings we live and work in and the roads we drive on. Every bit of knowledge we have was a gift from others, and whatever skills we have were taught to us by others. They encourage our talents; they provide medical care and respond to complaints at customer service departments. If we examine the history of an object we use every day—let us say a smartphone—we will be astonished and humbled by the number of people and animals whose kind efforts were involved in producing it—from the miners in other countries who extract the rare metals, to the tech people who design the phones, to the people who box them and fill the orders, to the farmers who grew the food that all these people eat to stay alive. The extent of our interconnection with others cannot be measured.

Again, the self-centered mind protests: "But they didn't intend to help me, so how are they kind?"

Reply: "They don't have to have the intention to benefit *me* to be kind. The fact is that if they didn't do their job, I wouldn't have a phone. Due to their giving their life energies, my life is improved."

Self-centered thought complains: "Their doing their jobs inconvenienced me. Why don't they repair the roads at 3 a.m., not when I'm driving on them?" and, "Shouldn't I retaliate for the harm they have caused me?".

Reply: "If you really want to use your life to hold a grudge and retaliate for harms caused to you, ask yourself if revenge will really heal your pain. Reciprocating harm often causes us not to feel good about ourselves, no matter how much we brag about getting even. When we're on our deathbed, will we regret that we didn't take revenge or will we regret that we nurtured animosity in our hearts for years? Forgiveness does not mean that what the other person did was good; it wasn't. Forgiveness means letting go of our anger. We are the chief beneficiaries of releasing our anger and forgiving."

In short, when we reflect deeply and repeatedly about how dependent we are on others to have what we need, use, and enjoy in every aspect of our lives, we will come to see ourselves as the recipients of tremendous kindness

throughout our lives. Automatically, we will see others as kind and wish to reciprocate by being kind, generous, and considerate toward them.

The Disadvantages of Self-Centeredness and the Benefits of Cherishing Others

A major obstacle to compassion is self-centeredness. The purpose of contemplating its disadvantages is not to feel guilty for being self-centered but to show that the self-centered attitude, not other sentient beings, is the actual enemy causing us much grief and misery, and we would be much better off subduing and eventually overcoming it. Some of its defects are:

- It makes us extremely ego sensitive, interpreting everything in terms of how it affects us. This leads to anxiety, worry, and fear.
- It is the basis for greed, jealousy, arrogance, and anger. Anger especially is antithetical to compassion.
- It motivates us to engage in harmful actions, which not only harm others but also create the cause for us to experience problems in this life and to have an unfortunate rebirth in the future.
- Self-centeredness leads to discrimination, oppression, the uneven distribution of wealth in society, and thus to interpersonal conflict and international war.
- It obstructs our spiritual practice, impeding the cultivation of virtuous qualities.

Then contemplate the benefits of cherishing others:

- Having a kind heart creates peace and harmony in our families and workplaces.
- It creates a sense of satisfaction in our lives. We feel good about ourselves and our self-confidence increases.
- Loneliness is banished and we feel connected to others.
- Cherishing others counteracts the obsessive focus on self that leads to anxiety and worry.
- It reduces crime and oppression and leads to generosity, which values equity in the distribution of wealth and resources in a country and among all nations.

These meditations on the disadvantages of self-centeredness and the benefits of cherishing others are not theoretical abstractions. The key is to apply the points to our lives and to make examples from our own experience. As you do this meditation, you will come up with more disadvantages of self-centeredness and more benefits of cherishing others.

Awareness of Sentient Beings' Duḥkha

Being aware of our own and others' *duḥkha* or unsatisfactory experiences, from horrible pain to a bad mood, is an important cause to generate compassion.

Contemplating misery—whether it be of one being or of the world—requires great inner strength. We must be able to face *duḥkha* squarely, without falling into despair or hopelessness. Through training, bodhisattvas can do this. The key is knowing that *duḥkha* has causes, that these causes can be stopped, that the deeper causes of *duḥkha* (our ignorance and afflictions) can be eradicated, and there is a path to do this.

Awareness of others' *duḥkha* begins with recognition of our own *duḥkha*, accepting its existence, and using that awareness to generate the determination to free ourselves from cyclic existence. We then apply this knowledge to others. We experience the *duḥkha* of pain—our body falls ill, ages, and will die—and the duḥkha of change—all sense pleasure is transient, doing a pleasurable activity repeatedly will eventually bring pain or boredom. We also fall prey to the pervasive *duḥkha* of conditioning—that fact that having a body and mind under the influence of afflictions and karma is oppressive and unsatisfactory. We try to avoid suffering but problems come uninvited; we have dreams that we wish to be fulfilled but obstacles arise; we may get what we want but be disillusioned by it. We would all like to have a body that did not suffer and a mind that was not subject to anger, rage, low self-esteem, loneliness, anxiety, and fear. But at this moment, we have a body and mind that are not ultimately under our control.

After contemplating our own *duḥkha*, we extend love and compassion to ourselves. We then contemplate the *duḥkha* of all sentient beings, allowing compassion, which wishes them to be free of suffering, and love, which wishes them to have happiness and peace, to arise. When we recall that all sentient beings have been kind to us and that our lives depend on their kindness whether we personally know them or not, we want to do something to remedy their situation. Our perspective expands from caring principally for ourselves to caring for all beings and resolving to put our love and compassion into action to improve their situation and eventually to help liberate them from cyclic existence. As Śāntideva says:

> Hence I should dispel the misery of others
> Because it is suffering, just like my own,
> And I should benefit others
> Because they are sentient beings, just like me.
>
> When both myself and others
> Are similar in that we wish to be happy,
> What is so special about me?
> Why do I strive for my happiness alone?

And when both myself and others
Are similar in that we do not wish to suffer,
What is so special about me?
Why do I protect myself and not others (1999, 8.94-96)?

The Taking and Giving Meditation (Tonglen)

The taking and giving meditation stems from a verse in *Precious Garland*, a text by the second-century Indian sage, Nāgārjuna:

May I be beloved of beings,
And may they be more beloved to me than myself.
May their bad deeds ripen upon me,
And may all my virtue, without exception, ripen upon them (Tegchok, 2017, 382).

The taking and giving meditation involves cultivating such strong compassion that we are willing to *take on others' duḥkha* so that they are free from it and such powerful love that enables us to *give our own possessions, body, and virtue to others* so that they will experience joy. This meditation, done by visualization, is designed to increase our love and compassion so that when we encounter actual situations where we can help, our wish to do so remains steady, undeterred by fear or laziness. The explanation below outlines this meditation (Tegchok, 2005).

Begin by observing the breath for a few minutes to calm the mind and then do the above meditations to generate love and compassion. It is recommended to begin taking *duḥkha* and giving happiness with your future self. After you are familiar with the steps of this meditation, progress to taking the suffering from and giving your happiness to others, who are the chief objects of your meditation.

Imagine your future self in front of you and think of the difficulties that person will experience. With compassion, wish to take her *duḥkha* so she will be free from it. Imagine the disappointment and suffering of your future self leaving her in the form of pollution. As you inhale, imagine the pollution entering you. It transforms into lightning which strikes a solid lump at your heart center (in the center of your chest) that is your self-centered attitude and self-grasping. The lightning destroys that lump, leaving your heart center open and spacious. Stay in that open, spacious state, free from self-grasping and self-centeredness. Through compassion you have taken the *duḥkha* that your future self does not want and used it to destroy the self-grasping and self-centeredness that you do not want.

Within that open space, great love for your future self appears at your heart in the form of brilliant, yet gentle, light. With the wish for your future self to have happiness and its causes, imagine your present possessions and body transforming into whatever your future self may need and your merit manifesting as excellent circumstances needed to attain all the realizations of the spiritual path—qualified spiritual teachers, good companions on the path, and so forth. Give these to your future self who happily accepts them. Imagine your future self practices the path diligently and joyfully, free from obstacles, and becomes fully awakened. Rejoice and experience the fulfillment of your own and others' aspirations, your spiritual transformation and excellent qualities that will benefit others and guide them to freedom.

Doing the taking and giving meditation using your future self is a "warm-up" exercise to learn the meditation. The heart of the practice is to follow the steps above using other people as the ones whose suffering you take with compassion and whose happiness you foster by giving your possessions, body, and merit with love. You may do this meditation with one individual, a group of people who suffer from a particular illness or oppressive conditions, beings in one realm of existence, or sentient beings in one or more directions.

Some people resist doing this meditation, worrying that if they visualize taking on others' sufferings, they will get sick, have problems, or inherit others' negative karma. Such anxiety is unnecessary—karma and *duḥkha* are not transferable from one person to another. On the contrary, when done properly, this practice will bring a sense of spaciousness and joy, and a great sense of relief knowing that you have a heart connection with others that simultaneously helps them and loosens the hold of your self-centered attitude that is the cause of our misery. This meditation is good to do when you want to help others but is unable to.

Should your determination to take suffering on yourself or to give your happiness to others weaken or fail, do not criticize yourself. This meditation is designed to help us see our self-preoccupation more clearly so that we can overcome it. Simply go back to the equanimity meditation and contemplate the sequential steps to renew and fortify your love and compassion. If anger arises toward a particular person or group because you think they deserve punishment and suffering for the harm they have caused, pause your meditation and instead meditate on fortitude and patience to overcome anger and resentment. Descriptions of meditations on anger are available in a variety of contemporary sources (Chodron, 2001; Dalai Lama, 1997; Śāntideva, 1999, VI).

These verses from *Lama Chopa* by the fifteenth-century Tibetan master Jetsun Chokyi Gyaltsen sum up the above meditation. You may wish to recite them before beginning the series of contemplations or after the taking and giving meditation as a summary. Reciting these verses daily plants the seeds to realize uncontrived love and compassion.

Reflecting that all these tormented beings are my mothers
And have repeatedly raised me with kindness,
Inspire me to develop authentic compassion,
Like that of a mother's love for her precious child.

Others and I are no different;
No one wishes even the slightest suffering
Or is ever content with the happiness they have.
Inspire me to find joy in giving happiness to others.

Knowing that this chronic disease of self-centeredness
Is the cause of my unwanted suffering,
Inspire me to put blame where it is due
And vanquish the great demon of self-centeredness.

Seeing that the mind that cherishes mother beings and
Secures their happiness is the gateway leading to infinite qualities,
Inspire me to hold others more dear than my life,
Even if they rise up against me.

In brief, foolish beings work only for their own ends
While Buddhas work solely to benefit others.
Comparing faults and benefits,
Inspire me to equalize and exchange myself with others.

Self-centeredness is the doorway to all torment,
While cherishing my mothers is the basis of all qualities.
Inspire me to make my core practice
The yoga of exchanging self for others.

Thus, venerable compassionate spiritual mentors,
Inspire me so all negativities, obscurations and sufferings
Of mother beings ripen upon me right now
And I give my happiness and virtue to others,
Securing all wanderers in bliss (Gyaltsen, 2014, 8).

Although cultivating compassion may sometimes seem daunting, it is possible to do and with consistent practice of these meditations and mindfulness of being compassionate in our daily lives, our compassion will definitely increase. Knowing that the causes of *duḥkha* can be eradicated and every being has the potential to develop their excellent qualities limitless, we will maintain an optimistic attitude.

At the conclusion of the above meditations, dedicate the positive energy (goodness) you have created for the happiness and alleviation of all *duḥkha* of all sentient beings. To be able to benefit sentient beings most expansively, aspire as Nāgārjuna does in *Precious Garland*:

May [all beings] be adorned with love, compassion,
Joy, [the ability to] remain equanimous in the face of hardship,
Generosity, ethical conduct, fortitude,
Joyous effort, meditative stability, and wisdom.

As long as even one sentient being
Has not yet been liberated,
May I remain in the world for that being's sake
Even if I have attained unexcelled awakening (Tegchok, 2017, 385).

Skillful Means as the Expression of Compassion

The Buddha explained skillful means as the expression of compassion. This emphasizes the necessity of a compassionate motivation to act skillfully. In the bodhisattva practice, skillful means is the method aspect of the path and includes the practice of the six perfections—generosity, ethical conduct, fortitude, joyous effort, concentration, and wisdom—and helps to fulfill the collection of merit. Skillful means is not just a clever way of masking our tendency to manipulate other people with a selfish aim. The ends do not justify the means. T.S. Eliot's (1964) words from *Murder in the Cathedral* are haunting:

The last temptation is the greatest treason:
To do the right deed for the wrong reason.

From a Buddhist perspective, our motivation is the crucial point determining the ethical value of our actions. This is contrary to the usual societal view where self-benefit is the crucial factor to determine the value of our actions; but here "value" does not indicate ethical value, but self-interest. In societal affairs, a wealthy person who donates a million dollars to a hospital with the thought that building will be named after them are lauded for their generosity. But someone of modest means who gives $20 thinking, "May everyone who comes here recover from their ailments and live happily," goes unnoticed. But who is the generous person? Certainly not the person who *appears* generous but is *motivated* by attachment to reputation.

Declaring our actions to be skillful means must not be used to rationalize seemingly magnanimous actions done with an underlying motivation to glorify ourselves or to cover up a self-serving motivation. A virtuous motivation is essential for an action to be skillful means. The "skill" in "skillful means" is proficiency in accomplishing the virtuous aims of ourselves and others. The *Lotus Sūtra* (*Saddharmapuṇḍarīka Sūtra*) describes skillful means as motivated by compassion, adapting teaching methods and behavior to suit the needs and dispositions of various sentient beings. The sūtra gives the example of a father who returns home to find his children playing in a burning house. He tells them to escape, but they refuse because they are busy playing with their toys. The father describes many colorful carriages outside, which convinces them to leave the house. There they find an ox cart, symbolizing the one final vehicle, the Mahāyāna, that will not only rescue people from the burning house of saṃsāra, but also enable them to

attain buddhahood and be of the greatest benefit to all others (Reeves, 2008). Thus employing methods and teachings to benefit their current audience, teachers will explain points briefly or in depth and give examples that fit the culture of that audience. For example, when asked about the self, the Buddha gave one answer to one group and another answer to another group according to each group's spiritual capacity.

The fourth-century Indian Buddhist sage Asaṅga (2016) in *Bodhisattva Grounds (Bodhisattva-bhūmi)* gives examples of this. To accomplish the qualities of an enlightened being, sincere practitioners train their minds to view all sentient beings with compassion, to investigate the ultimate nature of reality, and to avoid forsaking sentient beings' welfare in order to attain their own liberation. To accomplish the aims of others, compassionate practitioners encourage others to engage in virtuous activities, cause them to abandon anger and practice rejoicing at the virtues of all, and guide them to accomplish the path to awakening.

At times, a wise and compassionate person skillfully gives seemingly contradictory advice to people. The twentieth-century Theravāda teacher Ajahn Chah gave the example of someone walking along a narrow path with precipices on either side. If that person is dangerously close to the left side of the path, he shouts, "Go right, go right!" but if she is veering toward the right edge of the path, he calls out, "Go left, go left!" In other words, the measure of skillful means depends on the context (Chah, 2004).

Two precepts of engaging bodhicitta touch on tricky situations that require correct understanding of skillful means. The tenth auxiliary bodhisattva precept is "to abandon doing only limited actions to benefit sentient beings, such as strictly keeping the Vinaya (monastic) rules in situations when not doing so would be of greater benefit to others" (Chodron, 2014, 80). At the beginning of the path, to diminish our attachment we have a simple lifestyle and keep the prātimokṣa monastic and lay precepts. After generating bodhicitta, our interest grows to focus on benefitting others. To do so, we are permitted to do actions that were formerly prohibited, such as having more possessions that we then use to benefit others. However, doing this without an altruistic motivation is a transgression. This bodhisattva precept is not permission to disregard the Vinaya precepts.

The eleventh auxiliary bodhisattva precept is "to abandon not doing nonvirtuous actions of body and speech with loving compassion when circumstances deem it necessary to benefit others" (Chodron, 2014, 80). This brings up the question: Can acting with skillful means sometimes require nonvirtuous action? A well-known example is the story of the Buddha in a previous life as a bodhisattva. As the captain of a ship with over five hundred merchants sailing the seas in search of jewels, he realized that one passenger had the murderous intention to kill the others and abscond with the jewels. Thinking that not only would five hundred people lose their lives but the would-be murderer would also create immense negative karma that would ripen as a rebirth in hell, the bodhisattva felt compassion for all of them—would-be victims and perpetrator alike. Willing to experience the pain of a lifetime in hell as the result of murder, the bodhisattva decided to take the life of the would-be killer. Although the bodhisattva was later born in hell, due to the power and purity of his compassion and his willingness to happily bear pain for the sake of others, his time in hell lasted only a moment. Commenting on this precept, Dagpo Rinpoche says:

> Killing a living being is a serious act for anyone, even bodhisattvas. The *Great Way* adds that those who intend to carry out such grave deeds must not only be true bodhisattvas, having realized spontaneous bodhicitta, they must also have trained in the six perfections at length and be motivated by very intense compassion at the time of the action. Furthermore, there must be no alternative solution to help the being and the deed must not harm the bodhisattva. On the contrary, it must increase their merit (Dagpo and Patton, 2021, 55).

This precept applies only to lay bodhisattvas. Ordained bodhisattvas would create a root transgression of their monastic precepts by doing the action. They are advised to return their monastic precepts before engaging in one of the seven nonvirtues of body and speech—killing, stealing, unwise or unkind sexual behavior, lying, divisive speech, harsh words, and idle talk—to benefit others. Dagpo Rinpoche continues:

> Moreover, [someone who commit such a nonvirtuous action] must be entirely free of the slightest selfish motives and be moved to act by pure compassion… Some people imagine that bodhisattvas are allowed to do anything and have no rules to live by. Others assume that in Mahāyāna Buddhism we may do anything as long as our motives are pure. Hopefully, it is now clear that this is far from true (Dagpo and Patton, 2021, 55).

We ordinary beings may think our motivation is compassionate when it is not; we may also justify harming others in the name of benefiting our side. European history is littered with corpses from wars conducted "in the name of God" and "for the benefit of the people" when in fact "love" is extended only to one's own side and hatred toward the other.

Skillful means requires wisdom, both the wisdom knowing conventional truths and the wisdom knowing the ultimate truth. These wisdoms take time to develop—often multiple lifetimes. We ordinary beings do the best we can, but it is important to be humble, exercise caution, and continually examine our physically, verbal, and mental actions. If we err, we must purify by engaging in the four opponent powers:

regretting our nonvirtuous actions, mending relationships that were harmed by them, doing our best not to repeat them, and engaging in a remedial virtuous action (Dalai Lama & Chodron 2018, 303).Rather than feel guilty for our mistakes, which only obscures our mind more, learning from our mistakes is the way to grow and be more skillful in the future.

Acting with skillful means entails being sensitive to the culture of the audience. What is considered an appropriate action in one culture is inappropriate in another. Assuming our cultural values and customs are the same as those of other culture is the path to conflict. For example, democracy works in certain cultures but thinking that it is the best form of government at this time does not fit all cultures. Tibetans comprising the Tibetan refugee community in India in the late twentieth century constituted the only culture I knew of where an unelected political leader—in this case the Dalai Lama—wanted to relinquish political power and the people wanted him to continue to head the government. Democracy could not be forced on the Tibetans. It was through the Dalai Lama and others educating the Tibetan community over many years that Tibetans in exile came to accept a democratically elected prime minister.

A compassionate motivation is not sufficient to act skillfully. Sensitivity to timing is also needed. We may be so eager to refute someone's idea that we interrupt and speak strongly in a meeting, which may spark a personal conflict and disrupt the meeting. It often helps to wait a while and see if anyone else advocates that idea. If not, it may slip into obscurity without our saying anything. When someone errs, in general it is better to speak with them afterwards in private, rather than correct them in front of a group. Although criticizing someone in public may score political points, it generally does not change the other person's mind and may cause the group to view the one who criticizes with disdain.

Skillful actions must also concord with what the situation requires. Some situations reach a better conclusion when the problem is confronted directly and swiftly; other situations require gradual change with respect and tolerance for everyone involved. Some people are in a better position to deal with a situation than others, and in such circumstances, skillful action requires us to step aside and let others be the active players.

Communication between parents and their teenage children is an example. Wise parents help their young children develop close and trusting relationships with several adults. Then, when the child becomes a teenager and wants to assert their independence or push back against parental authority, they can confide in and seek advice from other trusted and wise adults. People can sometimes accept certain statements or advice given by one person but reject them when spoken by another person. Skill in means entails awareness of such individual idiosyncrasies so that with compassion, we can act and speak in ways that actually communicate our purpose. Just blurting out thoughts without sensitivity to how they are being interpreted and understood by others will often get us into trouble.

Suggestions for Applying These Meditations and Ideas in a Secular Context

I hope that those of you who wish to teach compassion and skillful means in a secular context have benefited from this explanation whose source lies in the Buddhist teachings as practiced in the Tibetan tradition. You will also gain from studying love and compassion as presented in the Theravāda tradition (Buddhaghosa, 1991, IX; Gunaratana, 2017; Salzberg, 1999; Salzberg, 2002).

When teaching a secular course on compassion, explain that the course is meant for anyone who wants to increase their compassion and altruism. These qualities are stressed by all faiths as well as by secular ethics. The source of these ideas and practices lies in Tibetan Buddhism, from which certain points have been extracted to explain love, compassion, and skillful means to a secular, contemporary audience. However, if you are not a Buddhist teacher, recommend that members of the audience go to a Buddhist center or monastery if they are interested in learning Buddhism.

The best thing you can do to help students training in secular compassion become more self-aware and compassionate is to do these practices yourself. The kind of human being you are and how you treat others teaches them in a way that words cannot. Have compassion for the students and be interested in their lives.

In secular settings, all mention of rebirth and karma can be omitted, and the gist of each topic can be explained in the context of this life.

At the beginning of teaching and meditation sessions, ask people to observe their breath for a few minutes to calm their minds. Follow this by leading people in cultivating a good motivation for doing the session: For example, begin by saying we want to learn methods to cultivate compassion so that we can become kinder and more compassionate human beings, as well as to make a positive contribution to the well-being of everyone we meet and to society and the world in general.

For each point you explain, give real-life examples. Tell a story from your own life or one you have heard from others that illustrates what compassion is not or the way to subdue feelings of attachment, anger, and apathy for friends, enemies, or strangers respectively. In meditation sessions, instruct people to think about the meaning of the teachings and to make examples from their own lives. Since cultivating compassion is not an intellectual pursuit, they should apply the teachings to their own relationships and dealings with

others. Encourage them to allow their hearts to open with compassion for others. As you instruct students, challenges will arise. When they do, ask questions and seek advice from those who taught you and share experiences with others who teach compassion and skillful means. You will learn more than you teach.

Declarations

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