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ORIGINAL PAPER

Skillful Means in Interreligious Compassion Education

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Abstract
This article demonstrates how an extensive use of diverse and innovative approaches to compassion cultivation transformed an interreligious compassion training program which took place in the context of higher education and included both religious and secular participants. Using decolonial, contemplative, and participatory scholar-practitioner research methods, this article investigates how aspects of skillful means were uniquely implemented and received by the training participants. The seminar was designed primarily to deepen each participant's personal practice of compassion and to identify creative ways to introduce and deepen compassion with others in their community of accountability. The seminar also devoted special attention to how compassion has diverse expressions in and of itself, depending on the context and situation. The findings from this work further stress the importance of adapting contemporary compassion training programs through embracing innovative pedagogical interventions that are endowed with equity and commitments to belonging, especially in culturally heterogeneous and religiously diverse communities. The results of this are increased discernment and clarity for the facilitator as to how to advance the program with care while minimizing as much harm as possible. The study concludes with opportunities to deepen understandings of how compassion cultivation can take place for the broader aims of greater flourishing within contemporary interreligious, intercultural, and intersectional communities. The article also offers new questions to explore around the ways in which skillful means and compassion can interact with interreligious training programs for the purposes of social transformation.

Keywords Skillful means · Education · Contemplative · Compassion · Interreligious

Contemporary compassion training programs remain relatively under-studied within higher education and researchers have called for further investigations of said programs that are coupled with conscious inquiry of systemic oppression and among more diverse populations (especially with those who are critical of the role of compassion) (Potvin et al., 2022). Within Buddhist traditions, Sallie King and Bhikkhu Anālayo have identified the role of compassion as distinct yet inseparable from other concepts such as skillful means and mindfulness, calling for further inquiries around their contemporary relationship (Anālayo, 2021; King, 2022). Further, King's focus on social transformation as a fruit borne from practicing compassion, skillful means, and mindfulness together sheds insight as to how compassion training programs of all kinds might find further justification within higher educational settings for those who are skeptical. Andrew Dreitcer has shown how one compassion practice as it is taught within the Christian tradition may reveal unique contributions that can strengthen understandings of skillful means in North American Buddhist contexts (Dreitcer, 2022). Therefore, if research on skillful means and compassion is to progress beyond these domains, more diverse settings should be considered. In this article, I will present a compassion training program which took place from an interreligious and intercultural foundation and within an interreligious higher educational community in order to better understand how compassion is cultivated across traditions and suggest ways in which skillful means might also be understood in contemporary settings.

I contend that, if compassion training programs within higher education are to truly be effective in cultivating socially transformative capacities with and for diverse persons out in the real world, then the trainings themselves must be reconsidered. Skillful means is one such angle that can be helpful to provide further encouragement for colonial and racialized legacies to be interrogated. In this article, I depend upon

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Thubten Chodron's definition of skillful means as the methods or actions by which virtuous and compassionate living is best realized and consider how this could practically look like pedagogical interventions and adaptions amidst a contemporary compassion training program (2022, p. 9). I also acknowledge that there are many definitions of skillful means throughout the Buddhist tradition, but in this work I am questioning how skillful means might invite a paradigm forward that invites a facilitator or compassion trainer to more effectively embody compassion while teaching it amidst a diverse audience. Taking this into account, one of the most important aspects of reconsideration in a course is to recognize the power dynamics at play within the classroom setting as well as the social location of the teacher or facilitator and the audience with whom the teaching takes place. In my case, I am an early career racially minoritized (Chinese and Mexican American), cisgender, heterosexual, and male faculty member who is also a Christian that teaches in a historically White and Christian institution. I share these aspects of my social location due to my decolonial commitments which asks for transparency and critical reflection on the ways our own social privilege as educators can hinder our best intentions of teaching. Further, as a Chinese American, I am committed to lifting up traditions and spiritual wisdom that comes from outside the White and Christian hegemonic traditions (Buddhism being a spiritual tradition that hails from East Asia) in my pursuit of teaching religion and the contemplative traditions toward social justice. In this spirit, I propose that skillful means is a powerful way to approach reflecting upon liberative pedagogies of compassion and can enhance facilitators' abilities to teach compassion in contextually appropriate and non-harmful ways. And, with a focus on interreligious compassion training that embraces East Asian philosophical methods, new possibilities for anti-racist compassion training can emerge while also revealing new perspectives on the ways that skillful means can transform our world.

This article's method is qualitative, and more specifically a participatory scholar-contemplative approach (involving the non-linear but interrelated movements of "presence, search, and emergence") (Frohlich, 2020, p. 41), calling for the benefits of the training to be investigated through both first person and third person perspectives. Presence is about the way the researcher shows up to the research in a contemplative spirit, search is the critical engagement through intellectual thought, and emergence is the co-creative new pathways that are formed in relationship between the researcher and the researched. More specifically this article questions how adaptive pedagogical interventions might suggest new insights about compassion training and the ways in which discussion on skillful means can enhance it. The article will conclude by suggesting further research questions around compassion and skillful means and ways it might be studied within pluralistic and educational training.

Putting Compassion in (New) Context/s

If compassion research is to be further developed in conversation with historically marginalized communities for the purposes of empowerment and liberation, multiple methods of investigation must be embraced and woven together. While compassion trainings within higher educational settings have largely been studied in culturally homogenous and predominantly European settings, recent studies have called for more expansive contexts to be explored and representative of people from the global majority (those who are non-White) and whose cultures are not as individualistic (Roeser et al., 2018). It is relatively understood that the meaning (and shape) of compassion training programs necessarily changes based upon who attends, who is facilitating the training, and what explicit goals of said training are named. However, there is a need for greater attention to be paid specifically as to *how* and *what* changes take place within compassion training programs when differing bodies and communities are present in the training. This need presents an incredible opportunity to use a combination of "pre-theological" contemplative research methods, such as that of "presence, search, and emergence" (which focuses on how the contemplative research itself should be done from a contemplative posture within the researcher) (Frohlich, 2020, p. 41), alongside traditional qualitative tools such as surveys, interviews, and written reflections to better understand the transformations taking place. The article's findings arose from personal journal reflections of my own as the contemplative scholar-practitioner and is coupled with informal surveys and written feedback from students in the training program. I chose these methods with the understanding that underrepresented voices are more fully heard when embracing their own terms and representative of their unique cultural commitments (Coghill Chatman et al., 2024).

More specifically, the research context of this article was a hybrid (where students attend physically in person and simultaneously through virtual modality) seminar grounded in the Compassion Practice (Dreitcer, 2022) as well as the interreligious vision of Cosmotheandric mysticism (Panikkar, 2022). The Compassion Practice is a contemplative practice grounded in the Christian tradition but presented in ways that affirm secular spiritual orientations and Cosmotheandic mysticism calls for an interreligious approach to cultivating compassion. While the former is an explicit compassion practice, the latter is an interreligious spiritual vision that seeks to engage deep cultural and religious difference so that more holistic living and connection can be experienced (Panikkar, 1991). For Panikkarian thought, compassion is understood as the often under-developed but all-so-important practice of conscious listening to self and others (including human and more than human life) so that a person might receive and share in diverse experiences, increasing both

knowledge and love (Panikkar, 2022). Combining the secular version of the Compassion Practice with Cosmotheandric mysticism became a novel way of practicing compassionate connection toward all relations—to self (body, mind, and psychospiritual), others (interpersonally and institutionally), and the world at large (especially with more than human beings) amidst such a diverse group. The seminar was taught at an interreligious institution in California where most students are BIPOC (66%) and the majority self-identify as social change leaders.

Results: Challenges to Compassion Cultivation in Pluralistic Contexts

The course in question employed an interdisciplinary and interreligious approach centered around three foci: a novel interreligious approach to compassion integrating elements of the Compassion Practice with Cosmotheandric mysticism (Dreitcer, 2022; Panikkar, 1995; Panikkar, 1999) and social change leadership informed by the spiritualities during the period of the civil rights (Anzaldúa, 1987; Merton, 1965; Thurman, 1996).

Raimon Panikkar (1918–2010) was a vital spiritual teacher to draw from in an interreligious compassion setting because of his own interreligiosity combined with the diverse cultural and intellectual streams of his own life. Panikkar's father was Indian and Hindu and his mother was Catholic and Spaniard. He completed three doctorates in science, philosophy, and theology and was a multi-faceted person who some knew as a mystic, some as a philosopher, others as a theologian, even as he understood himself as a priest and monk. Panikkar was made famous for his quote that described the way in which he integrated the rich spiritual diversity of his journey, "I left Europe for India as a Christian, I discovered I was a Hindu and returned as a Buddhist without ever ceasing to be a Christian" (Prabhu, 2010). Panikkar's unique social location made him an exemplar and profound spiritual guide for creating new spiritual practices of interreligious compassion and that are increasingly necessary amidst the twenty-first century realities of plurality, systemic injustice, and experiences of despair (Yong, 2023). Because the philosophy and wisdom of Panikkar was the fruit of his own contemplative practices (such as intrareligious dialogue, eco-theandric eucharist, and interreligious pilgrimages) and advocate for the significance of relationality and interdependence with all of reality, his teachings served as a fertile foundation and invitation for interreligious compassion cultivation to ripen.

For the purposes of the course, compassion was defined as a way of being that promotes the flourishing of "Life" as a whole. I capitalize the "L" in life, following the guidance of Panikkar, who would often use "Life" as a cross-cultural synonym for "God" or "Ultimate Reality," recognizing that some cultural or spiritual wisdom traditions do not have a deity or speak of the transcendent in any personal way. For example, Panikkar recognized that secularity is a vital spiritual path and has something unique and crucial to offer those who identify within particular religious communities (Panikkar, 1973, p. 62). Life signifies that all aspects of reality are included but no single aspect possesses the whole. Consistent with the interreligious context of the course, we presumed that no one group, tradition, or monocultural approach is sufficient to deepen our abilities to live in and with compassion. In other words, no one practice, ritual, teaching, or person carries the totality of what compassion is or looks like. And more importantly, we need one another to grow in our understandings and capacities to practice compassionate living. It should also be named that each of the three foci played key roles in helping nurture an affirmation that wisdom is to be found within and across various cultural, religious, and spiritual positionalities. Further, combining an interreligious compassionate frame with decolonial analysis and social change leadership created space for the wisdom of secular or alternative spiritual understandings of compassion to be cherished.

With this unique contextual backdrop, challenges arose in this interreligious compassion training course and called for "skillful means" as a way of thinking through adaptive pedagogical strategies to better support the contextual needs of those attending the training needs as they unfolded throughout the class progression. While there were multiple challenges faced in the course, five are especially important as related to the goal of interreligious compassion training and the possibility of using skillful means. The five are (1) course participants consisted of such cultural diversity that resulted in no single group "majority" or dominant frame of reference; (2) course participants were predominantly from the global majority and so the burdens of healing racial and social justice were placed upon them inequitably by wider societal forces; (3) evidence of re-occurring collective trauma in the times of the COVID-19 global pandemic was present; (4) the historical White and Christian legacy of the institution where the course took place meant there were many implicit monocultural assumptions in the larger systemic context; and (5) the need for increased, ongoing, and consistent feedback loops became apparent.

As for the rich diverse makeup within the class, the diversity in this case did not just consist of the presence of many cultural, spiritual, and ideological differences, but the complex identities each individual embodied as a result of increasing global migration in late modernity. Similar to what Christine Hong calls *trans-spirituality*, each student embodied a unique multi-dimensional social location and their spiritual questions disrupted traditional monoreligious and monocultural boundaries (e.g., having parents who come from distinct and different religio-cultural backgrounds or having parents who come from differing

racial-ethnic social locations) (Hong, 2020). Multiracial scholars have also called for traditional spiritual identities to be taught in ways that transcend exclusivist and dualistic categories and that there must be new ways of practicing compassion interculturally, integrating multiple traditions while respecting and advocating their differences, as to better support multi-dimensional experiences (Yong, 2020). Additionally, the internal diversity of each student meant that many entered the course with divergent interests in what they hoped a practice of compassion could offer them vocationally. Simply put, the only common denominator in the group was the shared interest in being a spiritually rooted social leader or scholar of spirituality. It is also important to name within this context that there were varying levels of interest in cultivating compassion (some had never even thought about cultivating compassion as an explicit practice until the course!); however, all were interested in various practices and tools from across wisdom traditions that could help them develop broad spiritually rooted social change leadership skills.

The second challenge of the course related to the ways in which spirituality and compassion literature has historically centered North American cisgender and heterosexual, landowning, and White experiences (Lee, 2022). Therefore, the current learning processes of compassion which inform the majority of social change trainings tend to be devoid of what Resmaa Menakem calls the wisdom of *bodies of culture* (Menakem, 2017). With this, Menakem is placing emphasis on the importance of reclaiming knowledge, wisdom, and healing potentials that exist from within the rich cultural heritage of historically marginalized communities. The lack of diverse representation within compassion literature was a painful point repeatedly mentioned by many students and resulted in a lot of skepticism around engaging in practice together. Further, because many of the students were racially minortized within their own contexts and organizations, this raised profound contextual questions as to discern the gifts and limits of compassion. As it relates to institutional challenges, many students were concerned that compassion often burdens the oppressed to extend it to those who abuse privilege. Students remarked how this pattern results in compassion being misinterpreted as an excuse to perpetuate the status quo. Many students shared how difficult, tiring, and exhausting the work of healing can become when compassion practice is interpreted spiritually and transformationally primarily through individualistic frames and expectations and without the partnership of those from dominant culture. As one of the instructors, I understood there was a great need to be sensitive when these concerns arose.

The third challenge to name in this course was that it took place during the COVID-19 global pandemic. Of course, the collective trauma of the pandemic created many instances where students became ill or needed to miss class (or assignments) to recover or provide care for someone in their immediate household. In addition to this, inequities within health care including access to vaccines and the presence of widespread misinformation contributed to further harm and stress placed on students. However, it was not just the health care system that created disruptions for the class but also the ways in which the global pandemic led to increased workforce layoffs, disproportionately placing greater labor on BIPOC women who are often bi- or tri-vocational in addition to being graduate students (Yong & Yong, 2022). As an instructor, I was not exempt from these issues either and it required a day-by-day and class-by-class negotiation of how to discern the best ways to show up and gather as a class where the primary aim was to cultivate compassion.

The fourth challenge faced was the larger structural reality of the historically White and Christian institution in which the seminary transpired. As a community who has only recently (within the last 5 years) become more conscious of its problematic and racialized history, many of the course learning outcomes and overall metrics of grading assignments that the course inherited were Eurocentric and based in objectivism rather than participatory inquiry. Therefore, the forms of evaluation used (such as one-way individualistic grading mechanisms and the false binary of "expert" and "non-expert") in the course implicitly ran against the intention I had to affirm and embrace the rich plurality within each person, each community that was represented, and the possibilities for how compassion could play a role in social change. As the instructor, I continually asked myself how I could become a co-learner alongside students and invite the wisdom of the collective more fully into the collective experience rather than the wisdom of only a select few.

The fifth challenge was the absence of ongoing feedback loops throughout the course's progression that continuously invited change to the course content. Because syllabi (the predominant guide map for courses in higher education) tend to be created in a linear, progressive way, they do not tend to leave much room for adaptation, spontaneity, and emergence. As compassion cultivation (as we understood it) relies on both the receiving and transforming of lived experiences, the course needed to have more space and opportunity for the unexpected to occur and help us lead the way as to what compassion truly means and looks like. Subsequently, the "issues, questions, or needs" which arose from students were not an obstacle to the course but a precise path toward the deepest learning. However, structural expectations sometimes made students feel uncomfortable that we were deviating from what was written in the syllabus and therefore we needed to carefully check within the group and ensure a change of direction was wanted and necessary. As the instructor, it was difficult to balance the need of the individual with the need of the collective and this often meant I

had to refer folks in the class to outside networks, resources, or partnerships where they could explore their interests more deeply and in conversation with resonant others.

Each of these challenges demonstrate how practices of intrapersonal, interpersonal, and communal compassion heavily relied upon the presence of "skillful means" as adaptive pedagogical interventions so that the contextual needs of the community could be embraced and increased capacities of compassion could be achieved (Schroeder, 2004).

Incorporating Skillful Means as a Strategy in Interreligious Compassion Education

In further reflection upon skillful means as described at the beginning of the article, we turn now to complementary insights from popular mindfulness teacher Jon Kabat-Zinn, who offers two additional aspects. First, he writes about skillful means in the current moment as a way to "…inquire deeply into the inevitable limitations of our individual perspectives and to articulate the tension, mystery, and potential for continually deepening our understanding…" (2011, p. 284). Secondly, he articulates that skillful means in our climate involves "letting [truth] emerge out of the participants' own reports of their experience rather than stated as a fact" (p. 299). Kabat-Zinn's unique takes on skillful means seem to have been birthed deep within the awareness of navigating rich cultural and spiritual diversity as well as the context of postmodernism that recognizes that no one perspective contains the full truth. In the course, both of Kabat-Zinn's perspectives were crucial to the adaptive and "skillful" interventions that were used as the class progressed.

As the instructor, the goal was to skillfully create space to recognize that compassion has many different paths of cultivation and that the various wisdom traditions have important and nuanced gifts to offer in their own rights. For these reasons, the call to cultivate compassion was based in a deep desire to embrace plurality as a sometimes challenging, but important benefit to our lives. In this section, I will share five specific skillful strategic interventions that were taken as a response to the previously aforementioned challenges, and which allowed for a richer contextualization of compassion to be engaged. Each of these interventions also serve to clarify the understanding of skillful means employed as a powerful pedagogical strategy within the context of interreligious training programs of compassion in higher education. The following reflections may invite trainers and facilitators from other settings, especially secular, to consider the importance of skillful methods as a key strategy to strengthen compassion trainings in diverse contexts. This section concludes with a discussion of what could be done differently in the future and also with an invitation to redefine both skillful means and compassion in the context of interreligious compassion training programs.

There were five skillful interventions that emerged from this process. The first change was an emphasis on personal and embodied story-telling. The second adaptation was the affirmation of collective and racial trauma in our bodies and in our midst. The third adaptation was to create multiple, real-time feedback loops inviting more receptivity to participants of the course. The fourth adaptation centered on the power of collective wisdom and referral networks. And the first adaptation was choosing to actively wait, pause, and check in before acting.

The first intervention of emphasizing personal and embodied storytelling came from the idea that no thorough understanding of compassion can be attained without concrete relevance to the lived experiences of the participants. Compassion as a concept alone would be nothing more than an ideology to which one can mentally ascribe or not; therefore, the invitation to learn compassion was to first consider who or what source/s have offered compassion to each person's life up to this point. This changed the initial question of inquiry in the course from "is compassion significant in the work of spiritually-rooted social change?" to "what level of compassion is significant in the work of spiritually-rooted social change?" Notice the second question rooted itself in the only common denominator of the course, a commitment to spiritually rooted social change leadership. The starting question of inquiry also assumed that compassion could be experienced in multiple ways and from multiple sources. While subtle, the question assumes an experience and place for compassion but invites further dialogue as to how it should be developed or deepened for the purposes of spiritually rooted social change. Further, this intervention placed emphasis on the lived and embodied wisdom of the participant rather than any external source (whether instructor or textbook). However, trust could not have been if the course had not first begun with lived experience.

In the second intervention, there was a concerted effort made to name the pain and suffering of racial and collective trauma. While discussing racialized and collective suffering could seem to be unrelated topics appropriate for a separate course, the class felt that any cultivation of compassion in North America could not adequately occur without larger systemic awareness. Further, it was important that these realities were acknowledged to frame compassion as a practice that will necessarily look different based on students' unique positionalities and social locations (including their own axes of privilege and oppression). In other words, the call to compassion was not a call to nice-ness or passivity to injustice but rather to a revolutionary act that counters the ways of dominant forces of oppression and violence (Rogers Jr., 2019, 2019). Ultimately, recognizing suffering often births a desire

to live more compassionately; acknowledging racial trauma helped to make real the practice of compassion. This prevented compassion from becoming a way of spiritual bypassing, gaslighting, or escapism that contemplative practices have long been accused of and embraces an invitation to interrupt the status quo as a vital way to deepen and live out compassionate commitments (Sherrell & Simmer-Brown, 2017; Welwood, 1984).

The third intervention attended to the larger systemic factors in which the course took place, a historically White and Christian institution of higher education that has long held monocultural assumptions and biases. Taking historical awareness into account, the class intentionally incorporated multiple feedback loops which allowed for reflection upon the course in more nuanced ways that included the dynamic experiences of students. The feedback loops were implemented every 2 weeks (the course was 15 weeks long) and took many forms that included: anonymous online surveys, optional synchronous check-ins over zoom, and in-class activities that involved asking what insights, challenges, and resistances students were experiencing in the course. The course intentionally recognized that not everyone learns or communicates in the same way and therefore multiple feedback loops were essential to ensure each person had an opportunity to authentically share their experience in a way that would be non-punitive. While post-course teacher evaluations are required of students for accreditation purposes, the insistence on creating multiple feedback loops throughout the course allowed for more comprehensive and real-time adaptations to be made along the way. Some of the emergent changes that were shared through these feedback loops included the need to have alternative assignments and grading mechanisms that would allow for students' own communities of accountability to participate in their "compassion" evaluation, a request for students to select alternative texts, materials, or sources to go alongside the required readings that were more reflective of their vocational interests and concerns, and a call to repair and/or admit when something in the course did not seem to land well with the group. So often, instructors are expected to have a certain level of expertise that is a historical feature of White supremacy and disallows for true co-learning to exist. When it comes to compassion, the contrary is true. The course showed that one of greatest ways to teach and experience compassion is to be open to failure (as in moments as to when compassion was not fully embodied) and to invite relational repair.

The fourth intervention was to continually acknowledge that the practice of compassion relies on community participation. In other words, compassion is not one-directional or something that the "leader" performs toward the people. Instead, compassion is a practice that is relational, participatory, and co-created through bonds of trust. Therefore, part of what the course intended to embody was that wisdom of the group emerges when we each share our experiences with humility, sincerity, and openness. Building upon Raimon Panikkar's metaphor of "the window," it was the affirmation that no one person, group, religion, or practice contains the whole and therefore we need each other to realize the fullness of our potential (Panikkar & Stillpoint, 2015). In this sense, it was stated that the classroom context itself cannot fully manifest compassion on its own terms alone and desperately needs greater connections to other networks of care. When difficult experiences, questions, or challenges came up in the class, there was a large referral network offered to students that included spiritual care practitioners from diverse spiritual traditions, and from psychological and secular educational contexts.

The fifth intervention was what could be called an embrace of pace. Drawing inspiration from Bayo Akomolafe's posthumanist critique of the rapid acceleration of life's patterns and rhythms due to the age of technocracy and the age of the Anthropocence, so there was desire to resist rushing (Akomolafe, 2022). While this was difficult due to the demands and expectations placed on higher education to be resourceful and profitable, the course affirmed that these capitalistic ideals may not ultimately be most beneficial for cultivating compassion. In many ways, learning to practice compassion meant to go against the grain, challenge the status quo, and live together counter-culturally. Rather than attempting to get through all our material each class, the idea was for the class to simply practice being with what was presenting itself and allowing for the discussion of the group to move at the pace of relationship, accepting "relative completeness." According to Raimon Panikkar, "relative completeness" is a paradoxical (and compassionate) embrace of what it means to be authentically human amidst life's changes and contradictions (Panikkar, 1990). In this intervention, the skillful means of moving slowly were necessary to compliment the practice of compassion so that there was an increased consciousness of our contingencies and the larger systemic forces that impose upon us ways of being and relating that are not conducive to compassion.

Each of the previously named interventions demonstrate that incorporating skillful means as a pedagogical strategy can help grow capacities of justice and flourishing uniquely through cultivating interreligious compassion. Participants expressed greater appreciation toward themselves, and particularly difficult experiences, as well as increased abilities to engage others with conviction, openness, and dialogue. More importantly, it seems that skillful means is a helpful way to think through adaptive pedagogical approaches and is paramount for any facilitator to enhance ability to teach compassion. Although the five interventions reviewed were each important, three specific points stand out: (1) the uniqueness of each participant's community of accountability; (2) sharing earlier and more frequently about our own

struggles with compassion as to normalize the racial trauma that is prevalent; and (3) encouraging self-compassion in how students choose to complete assignments so there is more flexibility with what aligns and speaks to them the most. As to the uniqueness of each student's community of accountability, one way to address this could be to create a "relational map" that allows the student to get a better sense of relationships important to them and in which they desire to inquire about what an increase of compassion might look like. Relationships can take all forms (intrapersonal, interpersonal, structural, ancestral, etc.) but taking a step back to discern what areas the student would like to focus on could be more beneficial and gives the student more agency in how to move with the training. As to sharing more personal experiences of compassion challenges, early and frequent sharing could recognize more explicitly the heavy and difficult systemic constraints placed upon BIPOC persons and communities. It is also important to go beyond an intellectual articulation of pain but to share stories with another as stories can reveal aspects of experience in ways that factual data does not (Dreitcer, 2022). The program would greatly benefit from increased attention to the stories of racial trauma. For the final suggestion, the ability for students to exercise greater choice around assignments (both in terms of which assignment they choose but when they complete it) could provide opportunities to practice greater self-compassion in real time. Rather than having one assignment for each outcome, a class could offer a "choose your own adventure" model where students can select from a list of options. Similarly, rather than having something due at one specific time, what if the due date were more open (for example, having it due between Weeks 2–3)? In this sense, students could choose what speaks to them, what their holistic needs in the course (and life) are and take times to rest when appropriate. In this way, the very structure of the course becomes an invitation to practice greater self-awareness and self-compassion. While these modifications may not apply to every compassion training, perhaps they can spark a potential for others to consider how to diversify the offerings as to make them more flexible, relevant, and impactful to participants.

Finally, let us reconsider how skillful pedagogical adaptations might be reinterpreted in the context of interreligious higher educational settings that have populations that are majority BIPOC. First, an embrace of skillful means asks that facilitators of compassion trainings take seriously the historical legacies of colonialism and White supremacy and how those formations have been fueled by Protestant Christian higher educational institutions throughout North America that prioritize the individual, are monocultural, and assume a certain relationship with time as linear. Compassion trainings in interreligious contexts must be cultivated by becoming more conscious of these unjust histories, becoming more open to radical religious and cultural diversity, interrogating more deeply the power of social location, and integrating collectivist understandings of liberation. This means that definitions of compassion will vary and that in practice it may look completely different from person to person and from context to context, but in each case some sort of skillful intervention is necessary. For example, compassion for a person who has experienced historical discrimination and prejudice means a call to thrive (not just survive), rest, and set appropriate boundaries (Thurman, 1996). On the other hand, for a person who experiences social privilege due to their social location, it means a call to listen, defer, and resist taking up space so as to live in greater solidarity with those who are oppressed. Skillful means allows for a true practice of compassion to occur as it takes in the contextual, embodied, and other relational information as its basis of discernment. Skillful means in an interreligious educational context also refuses to minimize the presence of trauma, distrust, failure, and/or institutional skepticism as it relates to religious (and especially historically White and Christian) institutions. Skillful means recognizes that sometimes the best way to learn compassion is not to insist on one definition of a "practice" per se, but rather to meet others halfway, acknowledging limitations, and relying upon the wisdom of the group rather than any one individual. Skillful means invites a deeper look into compassion trainings and how they can "fail" well and learn how to better approach the trainings.

Following this lead, compassion in an interreligious training program can be reframed as the multiplicity of practices that begin with embodied experience and require a high degree of openness to the unknown or the beyond. Compassion as openness to the beyond could also be considered a spiritual practice of inquiry around radical difference searching for the gifts and limitations of each experience. Compassion in this fashion also involves respect for another's freedom and choice to act. Compassion is willing to let life be rather than seeking to win another over to a particular point of view. Lastly, compassion in an interreligious context cannot overstress the power of self-compassion. While compassion has often been taught as forgetting oneself to connect to another's experience, in this context there is a special invitation that the "other" be experienced in the interiority of each person and also that each person's context is important. Internal family systems is one psychospiritual compassion-based approach that easily integrates and adapts to the reality of inner multiplicity in non-pathologizing ways (Schwartz, 2021). Therefore, when one experiences resistance within, the invitation is not to power through the discomfort and dismiss personal experience, but rather to acknowledge the difficulty, extend self-compassion, and learn from it. The imperative is that compassion in an interreligious context requires that the depths from which one can be open to

others is related to the depths of openness one extends to their own interior experience.

In conclusion, I would offer that by researching diverse and innovative compassion training programs, new possibilities of understanding skillful meanings may emerge and that through this process, greater capacities of compassion will arise amidst a world that suffers. In addition, understandings of skillful means and compassion are also greatly enhanced when differing contexts are centered and it would be prudent for further research to be carried out, on, with and for the benefit of those from the global majority.

Limitations of Qualitative Methodology

This theoretical framework is not without limitations. This work describes research that employed both first-person and third-person qualitative methods. The first limitation is that this article revolved around dynamics of one specific course context. It does not take into account how skillful means could have been used in transforming the larger organizational context, in this case, the institution of higher education at large. The second limitation is that the feedback loops, in which much of the data is grounded, were not a course requirement. Therefore, some of the findings reported may be missing key information from those who chose not to participate. The third limitation is that the participants described in this work were pre-disposed to spiritually rooted social change leadership as they were enrolled in a graduate degree program devoted to this topic. While not all participants viewed compassion cultivation positively, it meant that all were at least open to learning about various spiritual resources to equip them to lead more effectively.

Albeit despite these limitations, the framework provides further opportunities to explore how skillful means and compassion might be re-imagined in the context of interreligious (or even secular) higher educational settings where there is no cultural or religious majority. It should be noted that this course presumed a foundational embrace of the practice of mindfulness. This aspect was not foregrounded due to pragmatic reasons as the course did not explicitly refer to it. However, it could provide another avenue of inquiry into how compassion, skillful means, and mindfulness each have roles to play in contemplative education and holistic flourishing. Additionally, this work demonstrates that teaching on compassion alone is not sufficient in interreligious educational communities striving to prioritize the need of historically marginalized and oppressed groups. Skillful means is one such important lens to provide ways of appropriately attending to the various needs of vulnerable populations.

A few possibilities for further inquiry include (1) how does skillful means encourage facilitators of compassion trainings who come from dominant cultures to explore their own bias and privilege? (2) How does skillful means call for greater accountability of those who lead compassion trainings to ensure a more diverse representation of stories as they lift up "compassion" exemplars and wisdom teachers? How does centering those from the margins transform our definitions of what compassion feels and looks like amidst the major inequities of the world? (3) How does the notion of skillful means call for more collaborative and intercultural approaches to compassion cultivation trainings? (4) How does diverse pedagogical approaches help tease out the ways in which skillful means calls for greater trust to be developed between the participants of compassion trainings and the teachers of the program through consideration of space, pace, and consent? It seems further studies could respond to some of these questions as they investigate how compassion functions in other pluralistic settings that center on social transformation such as in community organizing, interfaith dialogue groups, and among those who are committed to spiritually rooted social change leadership. The key is that the study of compassion should not be divorced from its practice. Skillful means calls for compassion to be taught through embodying it and thus it is imperative to resist over-individualistic and completely secularized (while not rejecting the secular ways it can be offered) versions of it. When we do, the richness of understanding among diverse traditions can teach us a bit more about what compassion means and more importantly, what it feels like and looks like in everyday life.

Declarations

Artificial Intelligence was not used in the preparation of this manuscript.

Conflict of Interest The author declares no competing interests.

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