

Compassion

as a means to

Freedom

by Julian Friedland

In the Mahayana Buddhist tradition, compassion is considered the root of all aspects of enlightenment. It begins in its simplest form as sympathy and later grows into higher levels of concentration required to achieve the greatest wisdom. Compassion is an emotive tool of governance that, when used appropriately, guides us along the path of experiential knowledge. It allows us to learn from the conditions of others by remaining open to their own perspectives without being distracted by our personal biases of desirous attachments. Hence the exercise of compassion is twofold in that it has a perceptive role while also freeing us from the frustrations that can stem from the attachments of desire.

The Mahayana tradition, as well as that of humanism, views compassion as the primary motivating force behind all ethical decision-making. It is the root of all our other-regarding concerns. As such, compassion is the foundation of philosophy in its original meaning as the love of wisdom. If the love of wisdom meant the ultimate desire for personal gain, wisdom would lose its independent epistemic value of benefiting all beings. Compassion continually directs our attention toward wholesome activities which have inherent value for everyone. In this way, compassion leads us toward wisdom.

Compassion is an affective attitude that can be considered moralistic insofar as it is by nature altruistic. That is to say, it represents one's consideration for the welfare of others. To have developed a compassionate disposition means to have acquired a particular trait of character that most of us would ideally like to share. A compassionate person perceives interests external to his or her own and integrates them into personal motivations. Though almost everyone does this at least to some extent, it always involves a concern that is to some degree other-regarding. Because of this, compassion is sometimes thought of as the foundation of moral value.

Regardless of its proper place in a hierarchical account of the virtues, compassion is cultivated as are all virtuous dispositions. However, because of its altruistic status, our motiva-

tions toward encouraging it within ourselves may not measure up to those we have for more obviously self-regarding virtues such as patience, temperance, and courage. While it is apparent that the latter function to our own personal benefit, compassion may seem to work only for the good of others. To pursue the cultivation of a compassionate disposition is seen from this perspective as an external demand that constrains one's personal freedom. Some might think of it as a necessary burden for the benefit of society, while others may exercise it only in the most convenient occasions. This most common view is gravely impoverished. Compassion is, in fact, a cognitive disposition with a certain historical life that actually frees us from our own perceptive constraints.

Compassion is traditionally regarded as a mental state in which one takes the suffering of another as her or his own. This is not to say that one actually feels the pain itself. To feel compassion is to have a sympathetic concern for the condition of another, while engaging in some degree of empathy. Compassion, as I see it, combines these two activities so that one person is able to gain a deeper insight into the inner life of another. It is an emotive feeling that looks into the totality of another's condition because it is motivated by a wholehearted concern for that person's welfare. Such a perception can be of a situation that is in the present, past, or impending future. It takes place whenever we are able to share in any of another's interests in both fortunate and unfortunate situations.

Compassion is deeply rooted in the mental state of affect and may thus be precipitated by any number of different empathic triggers, ranging from witnessing the effects of chronic persistent hunger to feeling the seriousness of a tune. It is a kind of skillful awareness that carries the understanding outward in communication that is nondescriptively expressive. Philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein provides some convincing examples in his 1953 book *Philosophical Investigations*:

When it is said at a funeral oration "We mourn our . . ."

this is surely supposed to be an expression of mourning; not to tell anything to those who are present. But in a prayer at the grave these words would in a way be used to tell someone something.

But here is the problem: a cry, which cannot be called a description, which is more primitive than any description, for all that serves as a description of the inner life. . . .

But if "I am afraid" is not always something like a cry of complaint and yet sometimes is, then why should it *always* be a description of a state of mind?

Compassion is a tool we use to grasp expressive meanings. It is not something that relies only upon shared judgments but affects us more deeply in shared sensitivity to the events of inner life.

However, the question remains: what is the structure of this perceptiveness and how do we develop a skill for using it? Examining the latter part of this question will begin to shed light on the former. To become more perceptive in regard to matters of sense means to become proficient at something that requires a certain subjective coordination. Just as learning to pole-vault requires training in kinesthetic awareness of the precise movement and location of the body, becoming compassionate involves what University of California at Berkeley Professor Richard Wollheim calls being clued in to the subtleties manifest in "what it is to lead the life of a person." Although this can be taught, it does not consist of codifiable rules. It is founded on innate dispositions to have certain experiences. However, we do learn to coordinate these dispositions according to shared judgments of how and when it is appropriate.

Wittgenstein takes up this issue when considering how we can know the genuineness of expressions of feeling:

Can one learn this knowledge? Yes; some can. Not, however, by taking a course in it, but through 'experience.'—Can someone else be a man's teacher in this? Certainly. From time to time he gives him the right *tip*.—This is what 'learning' and 'teaching' are like here.—What one acquires here is not a technique; one learns correct judgments. There are also rules, but they do not form a system, and only experienced people can apply them right. Unlike calculating-rules.

What is difficult here is to put this indefiniteness, correctly and unfalsified into words. . . .

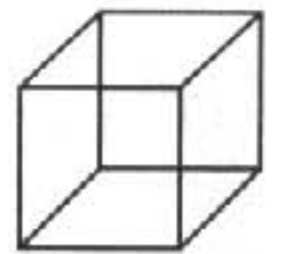
There might actually occur a case where we should

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say, "This man *believes* he is pretending" [to feel the pain].

While each of us has the potential to discriminate between the subtle types of emotive expression, our ability to recognize these events increases with experience. Enhanced sensitivity arises after a new perspective has been brought to our attention. Hence, the knowledge of other's feelings depends on two phenomenological mechanisms: the subjective quality of the experience and the intentionality required to notice it. A good example of this dichotomy is provided by this simple illustration:

The experience of seeing this figure as a cube has both of these aspects. The



quality of perceiving it as such is what I refer to as subjectivity. It requires a

specific way of looking that enables us to see either the higher or lower square as the front of a cube. Each of the two experiences has its own intentionality—its direction of perceiving.

Merely coming across a cube unexpectedly positioned between the lines of a text may have produced a kind of mental feeling reminding us of the radically different intentionalities at work in forcing the mind to recognize these two separate symbolic systems. It would be possible to imagine someone who did not see the illustration both ways, either because that person lacked the ability or had remembered the example from a previous encounter and did not take the time to see if the image still flipped back and forth. The way in which we come to see this figure—that it is a cube and that its front is lower or higher—forms a kind of phenomenology of sense impression.

There is something characteristic about these two factors that is at some level present in all our mental states. How we come to have a given subjective experience depends on our preceding ones, which together make up a particular disposition to have certain impressions. We can now begin to see the role experience plays in our perceptive development. It is possible that someone might have seen the illustration as representing only one cube until the other was pointed out. This could be considered a kind of tip—as Wittgenstein calls it—leading us in the right direction.

Coming to the tip-off constitutes a shaping of our dispositional sensitivity by the onset of an appropriate mental state. Becoming clued in to the overpowering emotion of *Schiller's Ode to Joy* through the dynamic expressions of a masterful dancer will have a persisting effect upon one's future musical encounters. Thus, as our emotions develop, they become an

integral part of our experiences and judgments. Anthony Kenny brilliantly illustrates this point in his 1963 book *Action, Emotion, and Will* in reference to his teacher, Wittgenstein:

All feelings have duration; but perceptions and sensations are much more closely tied than emotions to the time which is the measure of local motion. One can hear a loud noise for just a second, or feel violent pain only for a moment, no matter what precedes or follows; one cannot in the same way feel ardent love, or deep grief for the space of a second, no matter what preceded or followed this second.

Emotions, therefore, are tied to dispositions in a way that cannot be isolated to a specific place and time. They are made up of perceptions we have about the world and have a history that extends throughout our lives. Emotive reactions are built upon the interaction of mental states and dispositions. Just as having a certain mental state requires an appropriate disposition, so are dispositions precipitated by fitting mental states. Together, they form patterns which recur, with different variations, in the weave of our life.

Although compassion is not required for this dynamic to occur, it plays an important part in the processes that shape our emotive experiences. The ability to recognize that someone believes he or she is pretending to feel pain requires being tuned in to the intersubjective subtleties of emotive expression. Compassion is a disposition to feel and reinterpret the recurring patterns of subjective expression that describe the inner life. It is affected by each new manifestation and grows with experience, allowing one to make decisions that take into account more of what is at stake in a given deliberative situation. Compassion puts us more in tune with the interests and intentionalities of others. It is therefore indispensable for making the right ethical choices.

A virtuous person depends upon compassionate sensibility in two very important ways. One is to perceive evidence of others' intentionalities from such things as their subtleties of glance, gesture, and tone. We do this, for example, when seeing anxiety in someone's eyes, though what we are perceiving, of course, is not localized in the eyes themselves. We are gaining an insight into the intentionality of an individual. However, compassion is not all that we use in order to perceive the intentionalities of others and make judgments about what they express. Such distinctions are made according to shared experience of

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what entails living. Nevertheless, compassion allows us to look more deeply into the expressive behavior of others through our empathetic concern for their welfare. Compassion helps us to understand the underlying interests of others when knowing them is crucial to responding in the most beneficial manner.

An example of this enhanced awareness might be present in the situation of sensing that a child is taking something for granted. Compassion may not be necessary for perceiving the child's behavior as such, nor for acknowledging the inappropriateness of encouraging it. But without having compassion for the child, we risk engaging in some corrective or disciplinary action that may not take into account the child's reasons for acting ungrateful or which may not recognize the educational response that is most

sympathetic to the child's point of view. Instead of reacting merely out of annoyance, we might feel compassion for the child's state of ignorance and respond in a manner that has a more positive influence by appealing to the child's own desires and impressions revealed in expressive behavior.

The other way in which compassion is necessary to the virtuous person is that it continually redescribes her or his own conception of how to live. It performs this function because it characterizes our judgments of what is the most admirable way of living, in every exemplary action. In his 1979 *Monist* journal article, "Virtue and Reason," John McDowell succinctly explains how we come to understand the actions of a virtuous person in the Aristotelian sense:

We do not fully understand a virtuous person's actions — we do not see the consistency in them—unless we can supplement the core explanations with a grasp of his conception of how to live. And though this is to credit him with an orectic state, it is not to credit him with an externally intelligible over-arching desire; for we cannot understand the content of the orectic state from the envisaged external standpoint. It is, rather, to comprehend, essentially from within, the virtuous person's distinctive way of viewing particular situations.

This comprehension deepens through the perception of each successive virtuous reaction. Judgments of what is and is not compassionate are essentially uncodifiable. In other words, they cannot be conclusively determined in complete abstraction from the situations in which they arise. This is not to say that they do not involve reason. In fact, a person who is com-

passionate by character is in principle committed to as rational and as intelligent a course of action as possible. Compassion feels the virtue of each new beneficent action as it occurs. Thus, it serves as an evolving perception of what is essentially imponderable.

While I doubt that German philosopher Immanuel Kant would take any judgment as being imponderable, in his later writings he points out the importance of having something like a compassionate disposition. In *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*, he writes:

The man who wants to spare his wife or children trouble or pain must have enough fine feeling, to judge their sensibilities not by his own strength but by their weakness, and his delicacy of feeling is essential to his generosity.

The point Kant is making is that there is a way of cultivating a disposition to be affected by the welfare of others that is essential to our being able to make the right decision. This entails sharing similar desires and wishes, or at least perceiving them in others in order to be able to act according to their best interests. Although this knowledge may not involve compassion, "feeling" is being used in a way that connotes empathy and sympathetic concern. Taken together, they amount to an emotive disposition to act in a way that feels for the interests and conditions of the family in each interpersonal occasion.

Aristotle supplements this point in *Nicomachean Ethics* by noting the role emotions play in the character of a trained virtuous disposition:

In the development of the orectic soul there is a hexis when a permanent attitude towards his emotions (towards any possible disturbances of his orectic self) has been reached—an attitude which expresses itself in actions which are either the right or the wrong response to such disturbances.

Hence our overall interpersonal deliberative capacities hinge upon the degree to which we have developed a sensitivity to the intersubjective qualities of any given social atmosphere. Compassion is a permanent emotional investment in developing such a sense. Being free in this way means being able to respond appropriately to the ethical situations we find ourselves in, by taking into account all the relevant evidence.

At the most obvious levels, the experience of compassion

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is so striking that it is almost impossible to ignore. We can think of many examples of such feelings—from uncontainable grief at another's grave misfortune to sympathetic joy for the success of a close friend. However, in the more ordinary occurrences of daily life, the exercise of compassion requires a state of mind that is free from the clutter of personal preoccupations. Cultivating a compassionate disposition not only involves becoming privy to the expressive signals of the inner life but also entails being free of distractions caused by desires.

Hence the achievement of a compassionate way of life requires developing a balanced state of mind in which one is focused without being fixated on any particular impermanent phenomenon. In Buddhism this is called *equanimity*. Equanimous aware-

ness is open to acknowledge events as they occur instead of being biased by some intimate set of distractions. Cultivation of equanimity begins the process of mental transformation, culminating in an altruistic aspiration to enlightenment. Thus, as Jeffrey Hopkins explains in his 1980 book *Compassion in Tibetan Buddhism*:

Equanimity prepares the ground for love and compassion which in turn induce this altruistic aspiration, the precious source of the qualities of buddhahood. The actual meditation of equanimity is cultivation of the thought, "May all sentient beings abide in an equanimity free from intimacy and alienness, desire and hatred. May they not fight, considering some to be alien and others to be intimate. May they value everyone equally."

Developing equanimous compassion has the benefit of freeing us from all the frustrations that come from such desirous biases as intimacy and alienness. Ultimately, enlightenment is achieved by freeing the mind from the cycle of continually striving toward attachments and attempting to escape suffering. This cycle of distracting mental engagement is referred to as the vicious state of *samsara*. It is symbolized by a wheel depicting how pain becomes amplified into a vicious circle when we have the wrong psychological disposition. Basically, the more we try to escape the characteristic pains of life, the more miserable we become, each time we are confronted by our disappointments. The goal is to rid ourselves of attachment in order to be free to accept unpleasantness instead of continually striving in the other direction.

The self-direction which fuels *samsara* is overcome through the teachings of the *dharma*. The *dharma* represents

the method by which liberation is achieved. It acknowledges suffering as taking place in three different categories: all pervading suffering, the suffering of alternation, and the suffering of suffering. Taken together, they represent all the suffering of the birth-to-death continuum. Coming to terms with these natural truths allows us to move more freely in everyday situations of unsatisfactoriness without becoming frustrated with them—in the thought of some future goal that is consequently being missed.

All pervading suffering—or the misery of conditioned existence—represents the most fundamental struggles of life in which we are forced to work to protect and preserve ourselves. Chögyam Trungpa, founder of the Naropa Institute, characterizes all pervading suffering in his 1976 book *The Myth of Freedom* with the following examples:

This fundamental pain takes innumerable forms—the pain of losing a friend, the pain of having to attack an enemy, the pain of making money, the pain of wanting credentials, the pain of washing dishes, the pain of duty, the pain of feeling that someone is watching over your shoulder, the pain of thinking that we haven't been successful, the pain of relationships of all kinds.

Next is the suffering of alternation—or the misery of change. It is the unpleasantness of realizing that we are carrying these burdens. It occurs when we must go back and forth between carrying and escaping them. We may feel relieved to have been set free of one, but this satisfaction is only temporary. Soon we have to go back and reshoulder at least one or more of these burdens. This continual process is the insidious decay of happiness due to impermanence. Lastly, there is the suffering of suffering—or the misery of misery. It refers to the plight of being born, growing old, and dying. This is the most basic form of suffering, for it does not depend on externals.

All three pains are intertwined as part of everyday experience. Trying to escape them only amounts to more pain. If we spend all our time seeking happiness or security, then we are deceiving ourselves and will only become progressively more dissatisfied every time we are confronted with the recurrent pains of life. Ultimately, freedom lies in accepting such pain as a companion, so that it no longer controls our moods, giving us the liberty to improve the moments that we would normally be filling with revolt. Being trapped in samsara is to be governed by the constant striving for further situations that will temporarily free us from burden. Conversely, becoming accustomed

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to the presence of suffering in a habitual way is to begin the exercise of compassion. Having recognized the misery inherent in our existence leads to a philosophical attitude of acceptance from which to perceive the suffering of others without considering it as a sacrifice.

Equanimity allows one to feel compassion for the suffering of others without becoming overwhelmed by or neglecting it. It constitutes a precise awareness of present situations in which there is no grasping. Being thus free of mental attachments, it is possible to have a much greater sensitivity to all the interpersonal events of inner life. This completely open mental atmosphere depends on achieving a state of emotional nonattachment in which perception is not directed by our self-ascribed interests.

At the level of enlightenment, emotions are chosen to be experienced at the most appropriate times. That is to say, emotions become fully willable. Enlightened beings are able to express their emotions how and when they want to, in order to produce intended effects. Consequently, such beings are fully responsible for their emotional reactions and take responsibility for their consequences. An example of this would be a Zen master's angry shout and slapping of a student at a time when it is thought to produce a mental awakening in that monastic trainee. In such circumstances, the teacher chooses to manifest the emotion of anger because he or she believes it will lead to an amount of learning that greatly outweighs the suffering used as an educational vehicle. Hence, the anger is itself the result of the master's supposed compassion for the student's condition.

On the more common level, compassion provides similar insight into the conditions of ourselves and others, though we have less control over its arousal. Through the exercise of compassionate awareness, we are pulled progressively farther away from our own desirous preoccupations so that we are less bound to the frustrations of self-regarding disappointments. Consequently, we come to expect the recurring unsatisfactoriness of life and learn to make our peace with it. Eventually, frustration simply wears itself out like an old shoe. From here, we have room to develop our emotions freely without having them prefabricated by our desirous attachments. It then becomes possible to guide our emotive dispositions instead of being guided by them. ▣

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