

PHILOSOPHICAL PERSPECTIVES OF SECULAR PROGRAMS OF COMPASSION TRAINING

Ihor Kolesnyk

Ph.D., Assistant Professor, Ivan Franko National University of Lviv, Ukraine

e-mail: ikkimarsan@gmail.com, orcid.org/0000-0001-5189-3804

Summary

The article discusses key meditation-based programs aimed at nurturing and training the ability to empathize. Historically, these programs have been drawn to Buddhist teachings and traditional meditation practices, but in the process of adapting to global world and a secular context, they separate themselves from religion.

In the process of research, I try to demonstrate the importance of these methods for philosophy, ethics and education, since the cultivation of compassion helps to better and more deeply understand the nature of a person, motivation and improve social interaction. Important for the modern world can be not only the therapeutic effect of the mentioned methods, but also their application in the field of philosophy. Although the vectors of Buddhism as religion and humanistic ethics may differ, they seek to improve the quality of human life, develop compassion, respect, trust to the world, and complement each other in conditions of environmental, social, and psychological crisis.

For Ukraine, methods of compassion training are very important in the context of war and post-war healing of society. Education in general, and philosophical education in particular, will need a wide range of tools for healing collective trauma, returning to oneself, finding the home of being.

Key words: philosophy, compassion training, meditation, Buddhism, ethical enhancement.

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1. Introduction

The dialogue between the West and the East, and particularly, between Western science and Buddhist teachings, created conditions for the appearance of various interesting and useful phenomena. One of the powerful directions of productive interaction is Buddhist meditation and its secular forms. It is no coincidence that the pilot studies on the application of Buddhist meditation were precisely in psychology and psychotherapy, because it has in its core the issue of practical healing of a person is most acute. Over time, Buddhist meditation in the form of secular programs gradually entered a wider range of fields: medicine, philosophy, neuroscience, education, etc.

In general, the history of secular or worldly methods of meditation begins in the late 80s of the XX century. since the emergence of John Kabat-Zinn's Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction program. He combined psychotherapy, elements of yoga, Buddhist meditation to support people in difficult conditions, to adapt to pain and strengthen stress resistance. Over time, the number of techniques has increased, and in the last decade several key programs have emerged, whose teachers offer different approaches to human healing by cultivating the ability of compassion to other people and living beings. Among the researchers of this topic, it is

important to acknowledge Bhikku Analayo (*Analayo, 2015*), Anne Gleig (*Gleig, 2019*), James Kirby (*Kirby, 2017*), Jennifer Mascaro (*Mascaro, 2022*), David McMahan (*McMahan, 2017*), Emma Seppälä (*Seppälä et al., 2017*), Edo Shonin (*Shonin et al., 2015*), etc. Also, in the article, I researched works of meditation teachers who are key figures in the history of the development, adaptation and improvement of contemplative practices according to the demands of the era: Mathieu Ricard (*Ricard, 2015*), Tara Brach (*Brach, 2020*), Pema Chödrön (*Chödrön, 2017*), Bhante Gunaratana (*Gunaratana, 2017*), Sharon Salzberg (*Salzberg, 2002*), etc. Although their approaches occupy different positions on the secular-religious spectrum, it is their authority that adds dynamics in this area. The final block of sources is the works of the founders of secular meditation programs, where they manifest their own ideas, approaches, methods and application results (John Makransky, Paul Condon (*Condon & Makransky, 2020*), Ralph DiClemente, Lobsang Negi (*Ash et al., 2021*), Anam Thubten (*Thubten, 2019*), etc.

2. Buddhist roots of secular meditation trainings

Meeting of the Western audience with Buddhist meditation was uneven. At first, the discoveries related to the two major Buddhist schools of Theravada and Mahayana (here we are talking primarily about the Japanese schools of Zen). In the process of colonization of Southeast Asia, there were complex processes of rediscovery of Buddhism, as well as modernization of its forms, which became not only an opportunity to revive the meditative tradition, but also a source of national identity for the people of Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, etc. The Vipassana movement, which began in these countries and brought together prominent Buddhist thinkers, became the foundation for secular meditation techniques aimed at a wider audience. Among the most famous in the world from this movement is vipassana in the tradition of S.N. Goenka, the centers of which can be found in many countries of the world.

Subsequently, the Vipassana movement continued to the West through the Insight Meditation Society and its founders J. Kornfield, J. Goldstein, S. Salzberg. Between the secular and religious poles, the teachers of this community are placed in intermediate position, as they do not reject the connection with Buddhism, but at the same time demonstrate an interest in the well-being of people, in the combination of psychology, psychotherapy and meditation in the conditions of ordinary, non-religious lifestyle. All these ideas and changes in the attitude to meditation were reflected in the first appearance of the secular program of John Kabat-Zinn (*Kabat-Zinn, 2011*), and later in various programs that used Buddhist practices of nurturing wholesome emotional states or the “Four Immeasurables” (pali. *appamaññā*) qualities of consciousness, the list of which is supplemented in modern psychology (loving-kindness, compassion, empathetic joy, equanimity, stress resistance, resilience, etc.). The common desire of Buddhist teachers and founders of secular programs is to provide access to the meditative heritage to people from different backgrounds, with different views on life and religious identities.

Mind and Life Institute founded by F. Varela, Dalai Lama XIV and A. Engle, also exerts a powerful influence on the formation of secular meditation programs for the compassion training. Within this institute, regular conferences, seminars, and summer schools are organized, where participants from various fields of science, education, and healthcare exchange knowledge. It is no coincidence that the founders of three of the four programs I reviewed have ties to this institute or participated in various projects. This institute also complements and strengthens the voice of Buddhism in global world with the tradition of Vajrayana (or Tantric Buddhism).

It should be noted that in this article I am not focusing on all forms of meditation, but in particular on those related to emotional intelligence and ethical enhancement. In the Buddhist tradition, the practice of metta-bhavana (or Loving-Kindness Meditation) and the cultivation of certain states of mind are separately distinguished, which help a person to recognize and further develop useful qualities of the psyche to get rid of suffering. Mahayana and Vajrayana meditation practices are also related to this topic.

3. Review of compassion training programs

The topic of compassion in science is gradually gaining wider interest. The crisis in which modern global humanity finds itself prompts the search for different approaches and new ethical foundations. The study of compassion, its role in dialogue between cultures, establishing a balance between homo sapiens and the environment is a topic that worries many psychologists, philosophers, and religious thinkers. One of the significant contributions to the topic is the *The Oxford Handbook of Compassion Science* edited by E. Seppälä. There we can find a “working” scientific definition of compassion: “1. Awareness of an antecedent (i.e., suffering or need in another individual); 2. Feeling “moved”; that is, having a subjective physical experience that often involves involuntary arousal of branches of the autonomic nervous system; 3. Appraisals of one’s own bodily feeling, social role, and abilities within the context of the suffering; 4. Judgments about the person who is suffering and the situational context; and 5. Engagement of the neural systems that drive social affiliation and caregiving, and motivate helping” (Seppälä et al., 2017: 27).

The same topic is in research interest of J. Mascaro, who tries to define compassion and, thanks to her awareness of the topic, demonstrates qualitative studies of the effects of compassion practices in various areas. She defines compassion as process that involves “1) an awareness of another’s suffering, 2) a benevolent emotional response to this suffering, and 3) a desire or motivation to help relieve that suffering” (Mascaro, 2022). In her own research, she also draws attention to the evidence base, methodological difficulties, and perspectives of scientific interest in compassion studies. For a deeper understanding, I refer the reader to these two sources, which are not only about meditation and compassion, but about a much wider range of fields, researchers and current topics.

There are important and significant works in the studies of compassion. In particular, the study of altruism and compassion by M. Ricard (2015) and Bhikku Analayo (2015), who present an interesting combination of scientific (Western) and Buddhist optics in their writings. J. Kirby (2017) demonstrates the effectiveness of compassionate interventions for psychology, and the team of authors E. Lang, P. Kasmar, L. Negi and others. give an example of the positive results of cultivating compassion in the treatment of veterans with PTSD (Lang et al., 2015). Compassion cultivation programs and their evidence base are systematically monitored. For example, A Systematic Review by E. Shonin, W. Van Gordon, A. Compare, and others (Shonin et al., 2015).

Next, I will briefly review the main compassion-training programs that currently exist and have a presentation in scientific research.

The first program that integrated Buddhist meditation with modern psychotherapy is Paul Gilbert’s Compassion-focused therapy, founded in 2000. The purpose of this program is to supplement cognitive-behavioral therapy with an emphasis on human emotions and feelings. In particular, it is about psychological work with self-criticism and feelings of shame.

The methodology of P. Gilbert belongs to the most secular, that is, separated from religious ideas and traditions, although the author recognizes Buddhism as one of the sources of his own inspiration (Kolts *et al.*, 2016). Returning a feeling of self-respect, dignity, and skill of selfcare in a world of anxiety and stress are the key tasks of this program.

The Cognitively-Based Compassion Training program was developed and first implemented at Emory University (USA) by Lobsang Negi (Ash *et al.*, 2021) in 2004. The methodology is based on modern scientific knowledge about the human psyche and on the traditional Buddhist Lojong tradition. This is an attempt to combine Buddhism and science to help people who need healing, additional tools for self-care and helping others. It is about a paradigm shift in thinking and worldview. The foundation of the program is meditation practices that stabilize attention and nurture positive, favorable qualities. In total, the program contains 8 modules, each of which deepens the personal experience of the participation and provides a theoretical basis for a better understanding of the changes that occur in the learning process. The program was applied to training healthy adults, medical professionals, schoolchildren and teachers, cancer patients, war veterans, etc.

The Compassion Cultivation Training program was founded in 2007 at Stanford University (USA) by Thupten Jinpa and his team (Goldin, & Jazaieri, 2017). The methodology is based on similar practices as CBCT: Buddhist traditional practices and scientific research. It was used in the field of education (for teachers and students), in work with war veterans, for the training of medical workers, etc. The structure of training in the program includes “6 steps”: 1) focusing and calming the mind; 2) cultivation of compassion for loved ones; 3) cultivating self-compassion; 4) expansion of compassion for other people; 5) cultivation of compassion for all living beings; 6) practice tonglen (compassion in action). For both mentioned programs, analysis, analytical meditation on the results of the application of compassion, the consequences of its application, responsibility for the future is important.

The “Sustainable Compassion Training” program was founded in 2007 by J. Makransky and P. Condon. Their approach is an adaptation of practices from three Buddhist schools: Kagyu, Nyingma, and Gelug. The goal of the program is to help people develop unconditional, inclusive and sustainable care for themselves and others. Also, SCT seeks to restore important contextual factors of meditation that meet the diverse needs of lay and religious people, regardless of confession (Condon & Makransky, 2020): 1). Initially, the program was used in three environments: 1) to train health care workers; 2) Buddhists who seek alternative, non-confessional approaches to the nature of consciousness; 3) among a wide audience of lay people, adherents of various religions and spiritual traditions. In the process of learning, participants are offered the development of receptivity (susceptibility) to self-care, deepening of experience and inclusiveness, that is, the ability to extend compassion to other living beings.

There are already several compassion-training programs, which have a different position between the secular and religious poles. To a large extent, it was Buddhism and Buddhist forms of meditation that influenced the founders of the programs. In scientific studies of programs and their application, different results can be seen. For example, the review article by E. Shonin and his team mentions the positive impact of methods based on the cultivation of compassion in the following positions. Their study of compassion interventions “demonstrated a broad range of psychopathology-related salutary outcomes that include improvements in the following (for example): (i) schizophrenia symptomatology; (ii) positive and negative affect; (iii) depression, anxiety, and stress; (iv) anger regulation; (v) personal resources; (vi) the accuracy and encoding of social-relevant stimuli” (Shonin *et al.*, 2015: 1161). Although the training methods are

based on Buddhist meditation practices, this does not prevent them from performing important therapeutic functions in various environments. I hope that further studies of these programs and similar ones will give even more optimism about the prospects of application.

4. Philosophical prospects

In the considered compassion-training programs a psychological emphasis is noticeable. It is mainly about practical application in those spheres of human activity where we need additional resources, tools for stabilization and helping others. However, in my opinion, these programs and methods can be applied in philosophy and its disciplines.

For example, in the "Ethics" and "Applied Ethics" courses, we can supplement the topics of ecology, sustainable development, and human values with a personal experience of compassion. Practices can become a kind of laboratory of mind and values, where students and teachers participate in a deeper study of the nature of compassion, empathy, interaction between people and other living beings. Joint research on the topics of xenophobia, racism, ostracism, bullying, mobbing can also be integrated with compassion as a fundamental component of human emotional intelligence, and ethical enhancement. Courses such as "Philosophy of Law" receive additional means to demonstrate the human-centeredness of the legal system.

In the courses dedicated to philosophy of mind, mind/body problem or phenomenology we can try to study the affective, sensory and emotional component of the human mind. We, as embodied beings, experience the world emotionally, which is also an opportunity to understand the inseparable connection with other embodied beings with brain, and cognitive abilities. In the context of the theory of embodied cognition, the emotional nature of a person affects cognitive abilities, worldview, and the ability to distinguish defilement from truth.

It is important that meditation practices that cultivate compassion can become a necessary response to the challenges of our time: ecological, psychological, social crisis. Philosophical reflection supplemented by practices of compassion training could create an environment for a deeper understanding of the foundations of being, rootedness, embodiment and intersubjectivity. If we can really improve emotional education, a better understanding of the nature of values and weave it into global history, then the prospects of philosophical approaches also acquire more qualitative, applied characteristics.

Compassion meditation practices also add a participative touch to philosophical intellectual education, the possibility of deeper immersion in the nature of human being, its mental universe. Building an educational community based on compassion training, we can also rethink the principles of interaction, leadership, possibilities of healthy, creative atmosphere.

5. Conclusions

Buddhist meditation has come a long way from a religious to a secular context. Practices that used to be used to end suffering nowadays perform a psychological, therapeutic function outside the boundaries of Buddhist teachings. In the article, I reviewed several major programs that use compassion meditation to support people in a variety of settings and professions.

In my opinion, the practices of cultivating compassion can be especially useful for philosophy education, where students and teachers are given additional tools for the inner exploration of consciousness, emotional nature, and their connection to the cultural world that we

create together. Meditation can become an opportunity for changes in thinking, a deeper understanding of human nature and the inseparable unity of a person with the world in general. This will contribute to the formation of environmental awareness.

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