

Chapter 8

Human Suffering and the Four Immeasurables

A Buddhist Perspective on Compassion

We must understand the real causes of suffering

Compassion begins with the move from self- to other-centeredness

It is important to be mindful of far and near enemies of compassion

Diego
Hangartner



Human Suffering and the Four Immeasurables

“We all want happiness and do not want suffering.”

(His Holiness the Dalai Lama)[1]

This simple but profound truth lies at the core of our daily life. If we step back for a moment and consider, it becomes evident that most of our activities are indeed aimed at the avoidance of suffering and the creation of happiness. While everyone wants happiness, for some reason this is not how things turn out.

There are basically two kinds of happiness we seek: physical happiness and mental happiness. Physical happiness is often related to material things, whereas mental happiness stems from inner or spiritual development. Depending on where we seek, and how we develop those sources of happiness, either in the physical accomplishment of material possessions or in the inner development of mental factors, determines how we lead our life.

Though there are many spiritual and non-spiritual traditions in this world, and each tradition has an answer to the question of what brings happiness, it is evident that a materially-developed environment and lifestyle cannot be fulfilling: it lacks the dimension of mental accomplishment. Physical well-being alone does not eradicate the causes of mental suffering. Since mental happiness mainly derives from inner attitudes, and cannot be limited to providing food, housing, and clothing alone, it must include replacing the fundamental causes of suffering with the essential causes of mental flourishing.

Once we understand that the main sources for attaining happiness and relieving suffering are closely related to our state of mind, we begin to understand where the important change has to happen.

The Tibetan Buddhist Perspective

Among the many existing concepts, views and theories of mind, it is the Buddhist perspective that presents us with a deeper examination of how the mind works. Moreover, it offers an answer to the question of what constitutes the roots of mental happiness and suffering, and provides transformative practices that lead to the alleviation of suffering and its causes.

The framework of Buddhist practice hinges on three fundamental concepts: View, Meditation and Action. The View, or outlook, is based on an understanding of the nature of reality; from this understanding one's outlook and attitudes will be derived, as well as one's aspirations and ethical value system. Meditation can be understood as an intentional formation of habit; it is the internalization and integration through mental cultivation of insight, compassion and other beneficial mental qualities. Action is the conduct that engages in activities from a transformed state of mind, heart and being[2].

What follows is a short essay on how compassion is understood in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition, on the concepts of suffering and its causes, as well as in what way compassion can be trained through the outlined concepts of View, Meditation and Action (see [Box VII](#)).

VIEW

Overview and Sources

The Tibetan Buddhist tradition has a vast number of texts, both translated from Sanskrit into Tibetan and, over centuries, newly written volumes of Tibetan origin. The original canon is organized into three categories: the *Sutras*, the *Vinaya* and the *Abhidharma*. Most of the texts called Sutras deal with the discourses of the Buddha and his life stories, the Vinaya with monastic discipline, and the Abhidharma[3] broadly speaking with Buddhist psychology and metaphysics. Based on those source texts, many commentaries were written with the aim of elucidating the respective meanings and applications. They investigate aspects of reality and expound concepts of mind, metaphysics, philosophical systems and meditation. Some of these texts can be extremely technical, while others are very practical. Among those many texts, two stand out for training meditation and compassion: “The Stages of Meditation”[4], by Kamalashila, and “The Way of the Bodhisattva”[5], by Shantideva. Both texts were written between the 8th and 9th centuries CE and have been very influential in the development of Tibetan Buddhism. They are also very practical since they can serve as manuals for meditation, training mental qualities, and as guidelines for conduct in daily life.

They both elucidate in a clear way what destructive emotions are, why they lead to suffering, and investigate whether there are any forces that oppose these afflictive emotions. Once the mental qualities that oppose suffering-inducing emotions are identified, the texts explain how to develop virtuous qualities of the mind that overcome negative emotions, and also how to stabilize the mind once it has developed these positive mental qualities.

Suffering

In order to understand suffering, we need to look at the different types of suffering. Within the Buddhist worldview, three categories of suffering are identified:

1. Suffering of suffering
2. Suffering of change
3. All-pervasive suffering

The first suffering is the apparent suffering, such as a fever, a bruise or some other ailment. These are also called the obvious forms of suffering, as they are apparent and clearly unpleasant sensations. However, besides being evident, they are often also compounded: on top of feeling feverish, we have a headache. This is why this type of experience is called the “suffering of suffering”.

The second category is called the “suffering of change”. You may feel cold at one point and you go to a hot place to warm up – but then it gets too hot, and again you want something cooler; you are hungry and thirsty, and after you have eaten and drunk you feel that you have consumed too much; when you are tired from standing you want to sit down, but after a while sitting down you again feel uncomfortable, and you want to get up. The relief from one condition, in itself, can be the cause of suffering after a while. This is why this kind of experience is called the “suffering of change”: a relief from one situation carries in itself the nature of change. It is part of our existence.

Sometimes we experience predominantly the first suffering, the “suffering of suffering”, and sometimes we feel more of the second one, the “suffering of change”. It is important to understand

that there is a clear differentiation between pain and suffering – they are not the same. Pain is the sensation triggered by a physical experience, while suffering is the mental experience of dissatisfaction, displeasure and distress (see also [chapter 14](#)). While these two sensations are often experienced together, they do not necessarily manifest themselves at the same time: pain and suffering can clearly be experienced independently.

Underlying all these superficial and rather coarse forms of suffering, however, is another presence: a constant degree of dissatisfaction, an ongoing sensation of restlessness, a feeling of wanting one thing and not wanting another. This is the third kind of suffering called the “all-pervasive suffering”. This suffering is closely related to our mental tendency towards clinging and aversion. The main cause of its arising and presence is not principally related to the body, but much more to the fact that we fabricate a mental image of reality. We are attached to pleasurable objects, sounds, odors, tastes and feelings, and because of that, we think that they are real and that they are genuine sources of our happiness. Conversely, aversion arises to whatever interferes with and threatens those pleasing sensations and attractive objects. Although we resist it, the evident fact is that nothing is a continued source of pleasure. We accordingly misapprehend reality. Now, if we look closer and deeper, neither sensations nor objects exist independently of each other. Nor do they have an existence that is independent of how they appear to us, how we perceive them, and what we project into them. This misapprehension is called ignorance. In this context, ignorance is not understood to be a lack of knowing everything (such as the content of every book written), but holding a wrong view of reality.

It is important to understand that mental experiences such as sadness, happiness, attachment and aversion, as well as compassion and insight, are not independent phenomena. Although these experiences manifest themselves within the mind, they are not the mind itself. They are caused, and accordingly change, and because they are variable they can be altered and, with the right antidotes, even replaced. On the other hand, it is also a fact that certain mental states cannot exist at the same time, such as hatred and loving-kindness. A deeper investigation of how mental phenomena arise, remain and disappear reveals that mental perceptions are co-dependently produced and empty of a solid quality. In order to overcome suffering, one needs to develop both wisdom and compassion, as it is not possible to understand (=wisdom) and develop the antidotes (=compassion) to one without the other. It is therefore crucial to think of compassion not only as a technique, method or as training, but as something that affects deeper traits of human nature and is closely related to wisdom (see also [chapter 9](#) and [preface](#) on training).

At this point we will not explore the concept of ignorance much further, but suffice it to say that Buddhist practice and studies are specifically concerned with this third level of suffering and its causes. Knowing this third level – understanding reality, interdependence, impermanence and the wrong apprehension of “self” – is at the core of Buddhist practice: not properly understanding how the mind creates an illusion of reality is considered the main cause of suffering. It is the alleviation of this third form of suffering where the Buddhist tradition has boundless wealth and wisdom to offer.

If we look at how the modern world operates, it becomes obvious that it is primarily concerned with the avoidance of the first two forms of suffering, the “suffering of suffering” and the “suffering of change”. This is one of the limitations of a hedonistic self-centered lifestyle, where one is primarily concerned with one’s personal pleasures and where one tries to ensure that the external condition of one’s well-being does not change (and if it does, then only towards more favorable situations, and preferably with our consent). But what happens when a mental crisis hits us? When we lack self-esteem, feel sad, are despondent, angry or frustrated? When our mental balance is thrown out of its temporary poise? What we are experiencing at such unwarranted moments is “all-





pervasive suffering”. While, from a Buddhist perspective, these subtler levels of suffering are always present, skillful mental training, based on compassion and insight, will modulate and eventually even remove all three levels of suffering.

As mentioned before, when there is a temporary state of balance, without manifest problems, we may call this happiness. When you don’t experience suffering on the surface, in other words the coarse levels of suffering, you may not be aware of the nature of your condition and all may seem fine. But that temporary state of happiness is not stable: we immediately experience a strong emotion when a thorn pricks us, or when we cut our finger. If we look closely, we will see that the first experience is “I have a new condition, I am suffering”. What is the immediate response to such a sensation? “I don’t want this, I want to get rid of it.” This immediate response can be considered as a rudimentary form of renunciation, the wish to overcome this unpleasant situation.

Why Cultivate Compassion?

The importance and value of loving-kindness and compassion cannot be overstated. All spiritual traditions speak of it. Within Buddhism, the cultivation of compassion stems from a conviction that by moving from self-centeredness to other-centeredness, one sees the world more clearly. Only by seeing reality more clearly and accurately do we begin to recognize the actual condition of our existence, and this understanding will lead away from suffering. Consciously developing concern for others is an integral part of one’s own growth. Since compassion builds on unmistakable insights through investigating existence, compassion is not naive but very realistic.

From a self-centered perspective it is characteristic to think: “I am suffering enough as it is, why should I care about the suffering of others?” This is a reaction that shows how limited our ordinary perspective is, and is evidence that we don’t know how deluded we are. We misapprehend reality and think of our “I” as an independently existing entity. We are suffering precisely because of our self-centeredness, and it is this faulty clinging to an independent “I” that is the main source of our mental suffering (not pain). Wisdom is the sustained insight into the wrong understanding of, and clinging to, an independent “I” (for more details about wisdom, see [Chapter 9](#)). The antidote to our erroneous clinging to an autonomous “Self”, and to the sufferings that stem from this, is compassion. Therefore, developing both wisdom and compassion forms the core of practice, and it is only with both of them together that the mind can be cleared – like the two wings a bird needs for flying.

A further reason is more practical in that there is less personal suffering once you move away from a “me, I, poor me”-centered worldview. If we really look closely, most of the suffering and frustrations we experience are related to questions like, “Why do I not get what I want?” “Why did I get something I did not want?” “Why me?” Besides the simple fact of getting something we did not want, and not getting what we wanted, we have a strong habit of compounding the situation with additional mental distress.

As pointed out above, there are many discrepancies between the way things appear and how they really are. It is an undeniable fact that we are not independent of others. Since we survive thanks to the generosity, kindness and support of others, our personal happiness and our well-being – directly and indirectly – depend on their well-being.

Because of our dependency on others, once we seek to benefit them, our own happiness will emerge as a byproduct. This is important to understand: happiness is not the primary reason why we develop compassion, but arises as a secondary benefit. We all know how good it feels to have been kind to somebody. Wanting happiness is not the primary reason, because there is one small

catch to this equation: if you want to have happiness, there is still an “I” that clings to the wish to be happy. Anything that threatens this “I” that wants to be happy will be perceived as hostile, and this often creates more anxiety and agony. Developing compassion goes further than just creating happiness: it uproots our deluded clinging to the “Self”, the main cause of suffering.

In the Buddhist tradition, compassion tends to be much more focused on the causes and conditions of suffering rather than the actual suffering that is occurring. This is because the suffering that is already taking place is considered a resultant state. In some sense it is already a consequence of many conditions that have preceded it. When you look at the causes and conditions preceding the suffering, the realization arises that this person, or being, can be helped because by changing the causes and conditions one can alter and prevent the current of the resultant suffering[6].

The Four Immeasurables

When we look at the notion of compassion, it is important to understand that compassion is not just one isolated skill or trait, independent of others. In the Buddhist context, compassion is considered one of four *Brahmaviharas*, or

Four Immeasurables: together with compassion, the other three are loving-kindness, joy and equanimity. They are called immeasurables because they are virtuous qualities of the mind that can be developed limitlessly.

The four *Brahmaviharas*, with their respective Sanskrit terms, are defined as follows:

- **Loving-kindness** (Skt. *maitri*) is the deep-felt thought, “May all beings have happiness and the causes of happiness.”
- **Compassion** (Skt. *karuna*) is the felt thought, “May all beings be free of suffering and the causes of suffering.”
- **Joy** (Skt. *mudita*) is the wish, “May all beings have joy and flourish, and continuously increase their well-being.”
- **Equanimity**, or impartiality, (Skt. *upeksa*), is the understanding that each and every single being wants happiness, and is therefore the wish, “May all beings everywhere experience well-being and flourish.”

The definitions of loving-kindness, compassion and joy each have two parts. The first part of the definition addresses the motivational aspect, the aspiration that you wish for something to be a certain way. It is important to realize that in this understanding and definition of compassion you are not excluding yourself. Compassion is not about excluding, or sacrificing, yourself at the cost of others’ well-being. This is why it speaks of all beings, including yourself: “May I also be free of suffering and its causes.” However, by the same token, one should not understand it as: “May I be free of suffering at the expense of others”. It cannot be stressed enough how important it is to think that others too want to be free of suffering, be that the person in front of you or any being with whom we share a moment in life.

The second part of the definition speaks about the causes. Adding the causes becomes the concrete action: it is the step that manifests the aspiration, when you engage in realizing the wish. It’s not just the wish that will make a difference, but primarily changing the causes will contribute to the well-being of oneself and others. When somebody is sick, a doctor is not just wishing for that





person to be well and free of suffering, but acts as best as he or she can to correct the condition. From a Buddhist perspective, the ultimate cause of suffering is ignorance – a misapprehension of reality's interdependence, and bringing insight and clarity into that delusion will lead to the eradication of suffering and its causes.

As we can see from the explanations above, the development of compassion does not follow a single path. Compassion is not an independent skill, nor is it a tool that creates happiness; it is more a way of being. Hence one should not think of having compassion, while useful, but rather of being compassionate. Accordingly, compassion is closely related to ethical behavior and conduct. Since they are highly correlated and co-dependent, the four Brahmaviharas are always taught, trained and remembered together, as they benefit and strengthen each other.



Diego Hangartner
"Loving Kindness Meditation"

16:39 min

Enemies of the Four Immeasurables

When we think of compassion, we need to be aware that there are also opposites and enemies to compassion. Some of these enemies are very obvious, while other antagonists are often not easily identified: they are disguised, deceiving and look similar to the positive emotion itself.

Correspondingly, one speaks of far and near enemies. It is important to be mindful of both far and near enemies – otherwise the practice is tricked and the application misled.

When we look at loving-kindness, the obvious far enemies are hatred, enmity, aversion, anger and hostility. When we are in a state of hatred it is impossible to be loving and kind at the same time. However, there is another emotion that disguises itself as loving-kindness. This feeling is desire, or in a weaker form, attachment; both are near enemies of loving-kindness. At first, attachment in disguise might appear to be alike, but it is not the same because of its motivational factor. In relationships, for example, we may see the partner as the cause of our own well-being. When there is no true loving-kindness, the wish of “May you be happy and have the causes of happiness” ends up being “May you be the source of my happiness”. This is attachment masquerading as loving-kindness. Many relational problems, or relationship breakdowns, are due to attachment and desire in disguise. Desire, attachment and, related to that, expectations, are often the underlying dynamic forces behind what we believe is love. It's very important to identify these traits in one's consciousness and to differentiate these near enemies clearly from loving-kindness.

The same dynamic is true of compassion. The far enemy of compassion is cruelty, which again is obvious: you cannot wish for some being to be free of suffering and at the same time cause it harm. Cruelty can also appear as a mere wish, such as “May you experience suffering” or “I will annihilate you”. In close vicinity to compassion, and often understood as compassion, another emotion can appear: it is pity, the near enemy disguised as compassion. Pity is the feeling of sorrow for the misfortune of oneself, or others. Pity is not useful. It engenders a sense of superiority, and that feeling of supremacy is a cause of arrogance and countless related problems. Pity also blocks one's impulse and activities to alleviate suffering in an appropriate way, and it can even lead to more sorrow. It seems that in our culture pity is often misunderstood for compassion: “If you don't feel pity, you are indifferent to distress, and cannot feel compassion”. Using pity in this

context is not properly understanding the causes of compassion. Pity is present when we feel sorry for somebody's unfortunate situation – and go on minding our own business. This is why pity is not compassion, because it does not lead to actively alleviating suffering. Pity also deludes our clarity, and correspondingly, our so-called helpful and compassionate act might even increase misery. While pity and sorrow are human emotions and, combined with empathy, can be a cause of compassion, sorrow can also act as a trigger for anger and rage.

The far enemies of “sympathetic joy” are cynicism and despair combined. If you are cynical, or in despair, you don't really experience joy; again, it is impossible to feel both opposites at the same time. Although the Tibetan tradition speaks of “sympathetic joy”, it more often talks about rejoicing in virtues. Virtues are defined as the causes of happiness, and when rejoicing in virtues we are taking

delight in the other person's joy and fruition of their causes of happiness. The near enemy of “sympathetic joy” and rejoicing is frivolity, such as the feeling that “all are happy, all is well and all is good”. It may appear as if one experiences joy, but it is superficial and it lacks the depth of joyfully rejoicing and resonating with the other. With the feeling of sympathetic joy, there is not much that needs to be done – one just enjoys the delight of the others. It is the feeling we experience when our dear ones experience a happy moment, when we are thrilled for them and genuinely feel, “May your happiness increase and continuously grow” – like parents feel for their children's happiness.

Equanimity, or impartiality, too, has a set of enemies: the far enemies of equanimity are attraction and revulsion, while the near enemies are indifference or carelessness. Both attraction and revulsion pull us away from our mental calmness, and under the influence of both attraction and aversion we do not feel balanced and we lose our composure. The evenness of temper is destroyed by our mind's demanding of “I want” and “I don't want”. During impartiality you keep your senses open, and it contrasts with the bias we usually feel towards one or the other form of wanting. This is true for beings, for things and for circumstances. The near enemy to impartiality is indifference; it closes our mental receptivity and motivates us to say, “I don't care”. This mental state is not equanimity, because during impartiality you still care – you care for all in a similar way. Caring is the opposite of being indifferent (for more details about these differences, see [chapter 15](#)).

Furthermore, expectations regarding outcomes are often additional causes of disappointments. In many situations, expectations are the biggest obstacle to personal well-being and flourishing, since they are – if we look honestly – rarely met anyway. In being compassionate it is critically important to recognize the reality of things, and to be compassionate with oneself and accept where one's own limits are. It is additionally helpful to always remember that compassion is one of the Four Immeasurables, together with joy and equanimity; in many contexts it is particularly beneficial to be mindful of joy. Without joy, a possibly compassionate act will be more like a sacrifice and, in the long term, a lack of joy is exhausting and leads to fatigue.

Traditionally, when contemplating one of the Four Immeasurables, one is advised to alternate one's meditation. Focusing too much on compassion alone may indeed lead to gloom and sadness; if that happens, one should shift one's meditation, and focus on joy; if one meditates too much on joy, and becomes restless, one should focus on equanimity; and if impartiality feels too dull, one is advised to concentrate on loving-kindness.

To develop these abilities, the corresponding positive mental qualities, and the necessary clarity to discriminate, one needs to train them. This is why meditation as a mental training, and intentional formation of habit, is considered an essential resource.

References

1. His Holiness the Dalai Lama (2011). *How to be compassionate: A handbook for creating inner peace and a happier world*. London: Random House.

2. Thupten Jinpa, Mind and Life conference, Dharamsala 2011

3. *Abhidharma*: a type of Buddhist 'Psychology' that includes epistemology, language, metaphysics, analysis of mental factors, etc. See also Gethin, R. *The foundations of Buddhism*, Oxford University Press, 1998

4. Kamalashila, *Stages of Meditation*, Commentary by The Dalai Lama, Snow Lion, 2001

5. Shantideva (1999/2006). *The way of the Bodhisattva*. ORT: Shambhala.
Another influential text often taught and studied is *The 37 Practices of the Bodhisattvas* by Gyelsay Ngulchu Thogme Sangpo. Based on Shantideva's *The way of the Bodhisattva*, it is a much shorter text. For a brilliant commentary see Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche (2010) *The heart of compassion: The thirty-seven verses on the practices of a Bodhisattva*, Shambhala.

6. His Holiness the Dalai Lama, Mind and Life Conference, Mayo Clinic, Rochester 2008

Further Reading

Dalai Lama, & Bstan-'Dzin-Rgy (1984). *Kindness, clarity, and insight*. Ithaca: Snow Lion. (2006)

Khyentse, R. (2007). *The heart of compassion: The thirty-seven verses on the practices of a Bodhisattva*. ORT: Shambhala.

Pelden, K. (2007). *The nectar of Manjushri's speech: A detailed commentary on Shantideva's way of the Bodhisattva*. ORT: Shambhala.

Ricard, M. (2010). *Why meditate: Working with thoughts and emotions*. ORT: Hay House.

Salzberg, S. (2010). *Real happiness: The power of meditation*. New York: Workman Publishing.

Wallace, B. A. (1999). *The four immeasurables: Cultivating a boundless heart*. Ithaca: Snow Lion.

Wallace, B. A. (2006). *The attention revolution: Unlocking the power of the focused mind*. Boston: Wisdom.

