

Chapter 9

Self, Interdependence and Wisdom

A Contemplative Perspective

A unitary, permanent, independent self is a mental fabrication, not real

We mistakenly perceive ourselves as separate and cut off

Buddhist wisdom shows us the way to break our habit of misperceiving reality

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We take for granted a solid, three-dimensional world with us somewhere in the middle. But when we take the time to investigate this, we find it is more confusing. Our mind plays a big role in forming our reality. Our ordinary view of ourselves as a solitary, unchanging ego cut off from others is a fiction. This is a view arising in the mind due to a distorted misunderstanding. It results in a worldview of “us versus them.” Actually, we are all closely connected on many levels. This understanding opens our heart to others, recognizing our connectedness and their kindness. This brings us closer to the wisdom of interdependence. In turn, this feeling of connectedness brings us closer to others, thereby enhancing our compassion.

“Our task is not to seek for love but to find the barriers within that we may have built against it.”^[1] Rumi’s wisdom guides our pursuit of compassion. Breaking down our selfish barriers to compassion allows the natural compassion to flow unimpeded. Sometimes cultivating compassion directly, head on, leads to frustration. At times it can even be counterproductive. Professor Paul Gilbert of Derby, England, has researched people suffering from a strong sense of shame coupled with debilitating self-criticism. His findings suggest that cultivating compassion can be quite difficult, even frightening (see [chapter 3](#)). For them a direct approach to cultivating compassion can turn them away from compassion. For such people, it is better to cultivate compassion indirectly through complementary approaches like anger management, leading to patience, generosity and forgiveness, as well as other methods that work on generosity (see [chapter 4](#)). Complementary approaches enhance the cultivation of compassion not just for some but for all of us. Complementary approaches to compassion open the blocked floodgates, resulting in greater compassion.

So what is compassion? Compassion in its fuller form is altruism. Both share the essential feature of the wish, the commitment and the action to reduce suffering. Initially there is the wish to relieve suffering. As we develop more confidence, our commitment grows. This leads to action. Wisdom helps us see a broader perspective so that our action is successful. This is different from empathy (see [chapter 15](#)). Empathy is feeling what the other person is feeling. There is no commitment or action to lessen suffering (see [chapter 8](#)). Sometimes the term compassion is thought of as a religious term. Of course, compassion is the central theme of all major religions. Yet compassion is not limited to religion. In fact it is, as His Holiness the Dalai Lama says, beyond religion^[2]. It is necessary for life. It is necessary for our survival. A newborn baby would not survive without the kindness, affection and compassion of the mother. Without food, warmth, protection and shelter, the newborn would perish. This compassion of the mother for her child is biological. It helps to maintain and perpetuate the species. Compassion and affection are also necessary for social development. Without love and nurturing, it becomes more difficult to cultivate prosocial behavior and live effectively within society. Such prosocial behavior, like helping, sharing, giving, cooperating and volunteering, are cultivated due in part to the influence of the kindness and affection of our mother or primary caregiver during our early years (see [chapter 4](#)).

Dukkha is Sanskrit for suffering. It means misery. It means angst. It means pain, illness, hopelessness and despair. This level of suffering is easily understood by all of us. Subtler types of suffering are more difficult to recognize. Going out to eat at a scrumptious buffet is pleasurable. But when we go for the third round, the pleasure wanes. This is called the suffering of change, when pleasure turns into misery. There is even subtler suffering that underlies the other two forms of suffering (see [chapter 8](#)). It is the misperception of reality. When we misunderstand ourselves as





unchanging and independent, conflict arises, it feels like us against them. This is referred to as conditioned pervasive suffering. It is a part of being alive and all ordinary beings are under its influence. When we see through the mistaken perception, the distorted ignorance will gradually fade. There was nothing there to begin with. It was always a mental projection, a grand illusion.

Training in compassion can be frustrating. Expecting immediate changes often leads to frustration. We all lack patience. Certainly I do at times. Our busy, stressful lives call out for “quick fixes.” If we do not see significant positive attitudinal changes in a short time, we are prone to disappointment. We may abandon ship and give up cultivating compassion. Therefore, working on many fronts by reducing barriers to cultivating compassion becomes a wise and efficient holistic approach. Simply recognizing these obstacles and working towards reducing and eventually eliminating them enhances our compassion. This is similar to a balance scale. When the obstacles to compassion go down, compassion simultaneously goes up. Our heart opens, making us less selfish. There is more concern for others.

Ego and Selfishness

These barriers are rooted primarily in our deep-seated attitude of selfishness. Selfishness focuses tightly on our own needs and desires. Narcissistically we center on I and mine. We are all selfish. We want our own happiness above anything else. In this way, we are all alike. This is our shared humanity. As human beings, naturally we want happiness, and naturally we shun misery. This is true of all living beings. The problem is, we don't know where to find meaningful, lasting happiness. Our inclination is to amass more and more for ourselves. Yet the self we try so hard to feed, maintain, bring pleasure and protect is not real. Nor are the perceived pleasures and threats. They are like dreams. This strong sense of an independent self is based not in reality, but in misconception. The ego is misperceived as unchanging. In reality, our ego changes with each moment that goes by. Over time the continuum of our ego is like beads on a string. Yet we do not see our ego this way. We see it as something unchanging and always the same. But the ego is nothing more than a concept or a name. It is merely the sound, “ee go.” It has no solid objective existence somewhere separate from the name, “ego.”

Sometimes we see our ego as a master or controller over our body and mind. It seems like it is separate, almost hovering over our body and mind. Sometimes it feels like our ego covers our body and mind like a sheath. It seems like a manager dictating how the body and mind will act. Yet when we closely examine and try to pinpoint this ego, we cannot locate it. In this distorted way, we tightly grasp onto something that is not real. These are fictions arising from the deep-seated belief in a solid, independent three-dimensional reality. We are not even aware that we have this belief system; we are so accustomed to it as it is so ingrained. Thus, we never even think to challenge this assumption. We just take it for granted. We never ask ourselves, “Is my perception of my ego correct?” We rarely, if ever, contemplate the nature of our ego. We never check to see if our perceptions are correct.

When we examine the world closely, we see it is always in flux. It changes every moment. The world we live in is based on a subatomic world. There is only the proton, the neutron, the electron and other rather exotic subatomic particles. Empty space makes up 99.9 to the 12th power percent of the atom. These subatomic particles are always in flux. The notion of change is built into the subatomic world along with the principle of relativity. When we try to locate the position of a particle, we cannot know its speed or momentum. Conversely, when we try to measure its speed, we cannot pinpoint its location. This is Heisenberg's uncertainty principle, which led to the development of quantum mechanics. Not only are position and momentum relative, but also the observation of a particle and its behavior are closely interconnected and mutually dependent.

Merely observing a particle influences its behavior. Thus, the world of subatomic particles, which is the foundation of our world, exists only within a network of relationships, both near and far. The notion of them existing in an isolated way, cut off from everything else, is narrow-minded and out of date. This hints at the theory of quantum entanglement, which was scoffed at by Albert Einstein, who called it *spukhafte Fernwirkung*, or “spooky action at a distance.” [3] Entanglement is a term that Erwin Schrodinger used when translating the term *Verschrankung* in a letter written to Einstein. It describes the mutual relationship that remains between two particles that interact after they separate, even at large distances. This relationship between two particles, close together and far apart, becomes the jumping off point from classical to quantum mechanics.

There are many similarities between the world of quantum mechanics and the world of the self. The ego also only exists in mutual dependence, primarily with the body and mind [4]. Of course there are social relationships and relationships with the world. The ego is not separate from the body and the mind, but exists as a network of relationships, primarily with the body and mind. Being a nexus of relationships, the ego cannot be a solitary, independent entity. Rather, it is only a network of dynamic interconnections. Without the body and the mind there would be no ego. And without the ego, there would be no body and no mind. Thus, the ego exists as a relationship and cannot be an independent entity. It must be relative. Thinking that our ego is independent, unchanging, solitary and cut off from others and the world doesn't make sense, just as it doesn't make sense on the subatomic level. Yet this is how the ego appears and feels. This is how we mistakenly perceive our self. Unknowingly, we live shrouded in deception.

An independent and unchanging ego would be inert as if it existed in a timeless, frozen, glacier-like world, cut off from everything else. Thus, our perception must be false. Based on this error of perception and thinking, we artificially divide the world into two solid, three-dimensional camps of friends and enemies. Our world becomes one of conflict, pitting us against them. We frame the world into those who are kind to us and those who appear as threats. Based on this misunderstanding, we create a world of conflict. This leads to fear and suspicion, which in turn leads to mistrust. Yet this world of conflict is simply fabricated by our mind. None of it is real. Our perceived ego is like an image in a dream when we wake up. It is like the water in a mirage when we approach closer. It is like a reflection of a face in the mirror that looks so real until we check behind the mirror.



Barry Kerzin
"Guided Death of the Ego Meditation"

9:28 min

Interdependence

To truly possess wisdom, one must have the knowledge of interdependence. There are several levels of subtlety. Primarily it means that our own happiness is tied to others. Thus, caring for others becomes an important method of caring for ourselves. Interdependence is also a significant characteristic governing our world, as we have mentioned before. This is seen in many fields. In global finance and economics, interdependence is very important. In this age of globalization, with the world getting smaller and more dependent, interdependence plays a pivotal role. In the natural world, interdependence is the means for things to change. Evolution of species is highly dependent





on complex inter-relationships. In the field of biology, food chains and symbiosis are based on interdependence. Climate change affecting regions far apart is another system based on interdependence. In the field of physics, subtleties of nature, the theories of quantum entanglement and the general theory of relativity are based on interdependence. Einstein's general theory of relativity explains the relationship between gravity and space time. Interdependence is also fundamental to the understanding of the origin of the universe. All these various systems and fields require interdependence for their functioning. Recognizing that relations of mutual dependence characterize so many aspects of our life moves us towards a more realistic understanding of the world we live in. It also helps us better negotiate our own place in this complex world. This kind of understanding is a strong catalyst to cultivate compassion, as it is more in tune with reality. Recognizing interdependence reduces our selfishness, thereby enhancing our compassion. Understanding interdependence gives us the panoramic view required to see the whole situation clearly. This allows us better decision making.

Usually, we are wrapped up in our own feelings. Feelings of hurt take center stage. We rarely move beyond our feelings and try to understand the feelings of the other person who has harmed us. What are the circumstances in their life that led them to become a bully? And what are the consequences for them of bullying others? If the other person were happy, there would be no reason for them to act in a hostile manner towards me. So what difficulties are they facing? By thinking from this panoramic perspective, more understanding and compassion naturally arise. This wider perspective based on the understanding of interdependence is more balanced, offering a more complete picture. As self-centeredness reduces, more humility arises. And compassion is automatically enhanced, like a balance scale. In this way, understanding interdependence increases our compassion.

Wisdom

This illustrates the very important role played by wisdom. Examining the ego thoroughly becomes an important method of cultivating deeper, unbiased, universal compassion. This universal compassion is not based on others' response to us. It is not "If they are kind, I will be kind; and if they are mean, I will be mean". Rather, it is based on a more detached, thoughtful attitude from our inner mental consciousness. Detachment frees us from taking things personally. It gives us the freedom to act in an unbiased way. This is cultivated through wisdom. A detached attitude allows our compassion to spread out further to more and more people. Eventually, our compassion will spread to everyone equally. This is what is meant by great compassion. Great refers to the number of those receiving our compassion, which eventually becomes almost limitless. At least, our attitude is one of supporting everyone.

Everyone wants to be happy. No one wants pain. Recognizing repeatedly this similarity we share with others brings us closer to them. We feel a shared humanity. At a deep level, we understand we are all the same. Regardless of whether we are a man or a woman, young or old, or have other differences, we all share this deep sameness of wanting to be well and not wanting to hurt. We become a member of the large human family. No matter whether this person is a friend, stranger, or even an enemy, they will all feel like new friends.

Adopting a wider perspective gives us the emotional space to distance our self from feelings of anger. Having emotional space, we learn not to identify with the anger. We can just let the feeling of anger go without clutching on to it as mine. We simply imagine the anger floating away like a cloud drifting naturally across the sky. There is no need to identify with the anger as "me" or "mine."

When people harm us in some way, it is helpful to recall that a vast array of factors have

contributed to their behavior. This is the practice of wisdom; adopting a broad perspective on the situation. When we face aggression or disrespect, it is worth considering why the aggressive or disrespectful people are acting that way. Very likely their behavior reflects difficulties they themselves are experiencing. This could also reflect difficulties from their past. For example, they may be harboring dysfunctional family-of-origin issues. Often, dysfunctional strategies adopted during childhood, when trying to cope with unhealthy family dynamics, stay with us like a rotten apple at the bottom of the barrel. This rotten apple spoils all the healthy apples nearby. These dysfunctional strategies often go unnoticed throughout our lives, although they often create turbulence beneath the surface. This can manifest as irritability, depression, sadness, anger or other negative moods. These influence our relationships throughout life. Similar emotional response patterns based on childhood dysfunctional strategies seem to surface again and again. Recognizing these can modulate our instinct for revenge. That other person is not actually my older brother who bullied me when I was young, even though it feels similar. Furthermore, understanding similar negative family influences and difficulties in the perpetrator makes it easier for us to understand the person that harmed us. Through understanding, we are more able to forbear and forgive.

The function of the unique Buddhist wisdom is to lead us beyond our illusions of reality. Buddhist wisdom shows us the way to break our chronic habits of distorting and misperceiving reality. Due to strong self-grasping and strong self-cherishing, we cling to a distorted view of reality. So the ego becomes narcissistic. It feels like it is the center of the world. Actually we are a 'blip' within infinite universes embedded in infinite time! Self-grasping means identifying and clinging to a distorted perception, thinking it is real. This is especially true of our ego. We grasp it so tightly that we identify with this distorted perception of our ego as if it were our self[5]. Wisdom breaks through the world of illusion. Understanding brings freedom. Uniting wisdom with compassion broadens our compassion. It deepens our ability to help others find happiness. This key of wisdom unlocks the door to happiness. Self-cherishing is self-centered and selfish. It is narcissistic, thinking we are the center of the world and that the whole world revolves around "me, me, me." We all fall into this narrow mindset much of the time. We get trapped in this ingrained habit. Certainly I do. It takes work to free our self from this strong preconception. Sometimes we are thinking about the welfare of others. But usually we are taking care of number one. We spend an inordinate amount of time thinking about our own needs. We get trapped in this narrow-minded attitude. Trying to find more happiness actually leads to more dissatisfaction.

The opposite of self-cherishing does not mean neglecting ourselves. Rather, it means adopting a wider perspective, recognizing the needs of others, thereby ensuring our own happiness. By focusing on the hopes and needs of others, an attitudinal paradigm shift takes place. We begin deeply taking care of ourselves. By helping others and being concerned about others, we also reap the benefit. We feel more relaxed, open and peaceful. A sense of meaning fills our life. We feel happy and more content. The recipient of our compassion also feels good.

Letting go of self-grasping is profound. Letting go of distorted perceptions brings a freedom that is delicious[6]. All our perceptions, thoughts and feelings are merely fabrications projected by our mind. Letting go of self-grasping brings us in line with how things actually are. This reality is much softer and gentler. It feels intricately interwoven. The world becomes systems of relationships. Everything feels balanced and joyous. It is the reality of interdependence. Emptiness means interdependence. Both reject the notion of a reality that is unchanging and independent. Both accept a reality that views everything as existing solely in relationship, only in dependence on other things. This understanding is shared by modern quantum physics. Both quantum physics and Buddhist science understand reality to be interdependent. There is nothing more than that. There are no solid entities. There are only relationships. Everything in the universe, subatomic world and

our selves exists that way. Still, understanding interdependence is not practicing and realizing it. The *sine qua non* for realizing interdependence is our behavior. We become patient, loving and kind. A new sense of courage and strength overtakes us. Life becomes meaningful.

A strong sense of ego separates us from others. It creates an “us versus them” life struggle. The wisdom of interdependence reconnects us with others. Life’s struggles transform into joy and meaning. Conflict and anger evaporate. Jealousy and competitiveness disappear. Our hearts open. Everyone we meet feels like a new friend. Mutual respect and trust blossom. Genuine friendship replaces artificiality. Everything hums with joy.

Understanding and practicing wisdom is a lifelong endeavor. With it comes newfound love and compassion. Wisdom and compassion are two sides of the same coin. Both lead us, as well as others, to rich meaningful lives.

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2. Dalai Lama XIV (2011). *Beyond religion: Ethics for a whole world*. New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.

3. Letter from Einstein to Max Born, March 3, 1947; The Born-Einstein Letters: Correspondence between Albert Einstein and Max and Hedwig Born from 1916 to 1955, Walker, New York, 1971 (cited in M. P. Hobson, et al., "Quantum entanglement and communication complexity (1998)" pp. 1/13)

4. Dalai Lama XIV (2005). *The universe in a single atom: The convergence of science and spirituality*. New York: Morgan Road Books.

5. Dalai Lama XIV (2006). *How to see yourself as you really are*. New York: Atria Books.

6. Dalai Lama XIV (2006). *Kindness, clarity, and insight*. Ithaca: Snow Lion.

Further Reading

Beginner / Intermediate

Yeshe, Thubten (1982/2012). *Wisdom energy: basic Buddhist teachings*. Somerville, MA: Wisdom Publications.

Advanced

Hopkins, Jeffrey (1983, 1996). *Mediation on emptiness*. Somerville, MA: Wisdom Publications.

Tsong Khapa, Cutler, Josua (2002). *The great treatise on the stages of the path to enlightenment*. Ithaca: Snow Lion Publications.