Integrating Compassion with Equanimity

During the preceding talk of August 7, 2024, the topic focused on the integration of lovingkindness with equanimity, and this review develops the concepts and practices described then further, to include a “subset” of lovingkindness, compassion. It is important to realize that the practice of meditation cultivates kindness and compassion—every time attention is returned to the clarity and peacefulness associated with the sensation of breathing, the mind is relieved of craving and clinging.

During that talk, Peter suggested that lovingkindness is “hard-wired” into humans--we are social animals, born with the capacity for empathy. Compassion is also fundamental to successful human interpersonal relationships. Paleontologists have discovered evidence that humans were providing care for significantly impaired tribal members tens of thousands of years ago. Compassion is at the core of all of the religious traditions of the world—“Do unto others as you would have them do unto you”—is but one example.

This talk will describe the concept of compassion from a Buddhist perspective, along with various meditative practices that effectively develop, monitor, and regulate its expression. The review will repeat some of the contents of the talk regarding lovingkindness, to illuminate the spiritual and evolutionary benefits of altruistic behaviors.

First, some terminology: The Pali word for compassion is karuna (kah-roo-nah)—the Access to Insight website has this translation—"Compassion; sympathy; the aspiration to find a way to be truly helpful to oneself and others.” The word *aspiration* is key to understanding how karuna works effectively. We aspire towards realizing the goal of helpfulness—an orientation of attention with the potential for effective and benevolent action, depending upon circumstances and available resources.

The human brain and nervous system emphasizes with the distress of others. There are two areas of the brain that contain what are commonly called “mirror neurons”. We learn many of our behavioral patterns and social understandings through mimicry—behaviorally comparing oneself to another, and then acting accordingly. Additionally, neurological research suggests that when a person witnesses another person who seems to be in pain, certain areas of the brain are activated that reflect empathy, whether that witness is even consciously aware of this reaction!

Compassion operates in the brain in such a way that we empathetically feel a mental and emotional response when noticing another being’s painful experience. This empathetic attunement can be stimulated by witnessing physical injury or some mental distress in another being, human or of another species. The neurochemical associated with distress is cortisol, which functions to increase the experience of alarm and an associated emotional reactivity. This cortisol generating process is experienced by the individual in distress as well as someone who is empathetically attuned. The empathetic response is ethically malleable—I can respond to this subjective experience in ways that are beneficial or harmful, depending on how I interpret and respond to the situation. Compassionate behavior, *when skillfully managed through an associated function of equanimity and lovingkindness,* benefits the altruistic person, who can then potentially be of service to the distressed person(s).

When altruistic compassion is experienced by someone, an innate reward system is activated:

*Dopamine* an activating neurochemical associated with motivation, supporting a wholesome mental and behavioral response. It functions in the brain and body towards reward-seeking actions.

*Oxytocin* is associated with feelings that reinforce interpersonal confidence and comfort, soothing the body and mind.

*Serotonin* functions to create and sustain a feeling of satisfaction.

Lovingkindness and compassion act as emotional filters that, in their purest form, bring a person’s consciousness to a heightened level of spiritual functioning. This operates as a beneficial alternative to other instinctual drives such as fear, anger, and aggression can distort a person’s understanding and response to the built-in empathetic response. Meditatively contemplating lovingkindness and compassion trains the mind to disregard more primitive, harmful reactions and instead develop wholesome response to the empathetic attunement.

Buddhism describes unwholesome reactions to empathy as the *near enemy* and *far enemy* of karuna, which comes about when the skillful benefits of mindfulness, investigation of mental phenomena, Right Action and equanimity are not effectively cultivated.

The *near enemy* occurs when a person’s empathetic aspiration is conditioned by *pity*, which creates disrespect for the person who is distressed, confused, and in pain—“You poor thing.” One of the aspirations associated with lovingkindness is a dissolution of the subjective experience of separation, and the near enemy operates from the assumption that there is a separation between myself and another person. Everyone wants to be safe, happy, healthy and content, and we all get our turn as being unsafe, unhappy, unhealthy and discontented. The more Wisdom is accumulated, the harder it becomes to feel disconnected and uncaring regarding other living beings on this planet. One quote from the 12-step movement applies here: “There but for the grace of God go I” We are all subject to injury, illness or loss of some kind over the course of a lifetime.

The *far enemy* occurs when we respond with *harshness and/or cruelty when witnessing the distress and confusion of oneself or another*. This is often experienced as anger or hatred when witnessing or being subjected to someone else’s behavior, either directed toward oneself or another, or when another person’s appearance or behavior doesn’t mirror our expectations. Here is a quote from Gil Fronsdal’s translation of the Dhammapada: “Hatred never ends through hatred. By non-hatred does it end. This is an ancient truth.” Non-hatred is another rendering of lovingkindness.

The first application of skillful means regarding lovingkindness and compassion is focused on one’s own internal response to distress, either directly experienced or through empathetic attunement to the distress of others. Here are suggestions regarding the cultivation of these altruistic states of mind:

* Establish an intention to focus attention on the sensations that might be noticeable in the middle of the chest—not the beating of the heart, but mindfully focused attention in that area.
* Investigate what might be noticed in that area in an ongoing way
* Silently and persistently repeat this phrase: “May I/you be happy, peaceful and free from distress and confusion”.
* Investigate the effect of sincerely contemplating the results of this practice—don’t become attached to instant results. Investigate your chest to notice any changes there. See if the ability to stay with the sincere repetition changes how your consciousness operates.
* When the mind wanders away from attending to the center of the chest and/or the repetition of the phrase, apply Right Effort to disregard the distraction and re-direct the focus of attention back to the targeted process. Notice and reframe the experience of frustration, impatience or boredom as distress and confusion. Practice allowing the mind to disregard the near or far enemy conditions in order to purify the aspiration organized around compassion.

You can focus these functions on your own distress and confusion, a particular person, or a category of people--examples could include the homeless, those whose home life is blown away by a tornado, or the suffering of corporately farmed animals. This is where the cultivation of equanimity is crucial for successful cultivation of compassion. What is appropriate when confronted by witnessing someone who’s experiencing chronic pain, and you can’t “fix” it? Should you send money to a nonprofit organization whose mission is to alleviate suffering for a specific circumstance?

The cultivation of equanimity regarding compassion requires the same processes as mentioned previously: mindfulness, investigation of what the mind is creating, and exercising internal self-regulation in order to let go of any attachment to being successful or even appreciated.

For example, consider living with a person with chronic pain when they are not benefitted by medical intervention. That person might experience irritability, despair, or some other mental affliction. Buddhism frames this situation as “the second arrow”. The first is the chronic pain sensation, and the second arrow is the emotionally painful story associated with the physical discomfort. Notice the distress and confusion arising in your own empathetic body and mind (In this case, this empathy is the first arrow), realizing that within yourself, you are only dealing with the second arrow. Let go of the notion that you are responsible for alleviating the suffering of another person. You might have even offered some intervention, but that person angrily rejects your attempt—there anger is the first arrow, but you can recognize the potential strike of the second arrow and mentally “step aside”.