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Cultivating Compassion

Compassion, like meditation, is a practice

By Kristin Vukovic

The Dalai Lama said, “If you want others to be happy, practice compassion. If you want to be happy, practice compassion.” Merriam-Webster defines compassion as “sympathetic consciousness of others’ distress together with a desire to alleviate it.”

Simply put, compassion is concern for others. People who practice compassion shift the focus outside themselves; they choose to identify our commonality versus our difference. By showing kindness to those who are suffering, people can even reap physical benefits: Scientific studies indicate that people who practice compassion produce 100 percent more DHEA, a hormone that counteracts the aging process, and 23 percent less cortisol, the “stress hormone.”

In his new book, *Joy on Demand: The Art of Discovering the Happiness Within* (HarperOne), Chade-Meng Tan—a former award-winning Google engineer turned bestselling author, thought leader and philanthropist—says that practicing loving-kindness leads to compassion. Loving-kindness is the wish for self or others to be happy, and compassion is the wish for self or others to be free from suffering. Unlike loving-kindness, compassion involves a motivational component and the courage to come face-to-face with suffering. Tan writes, “The sense of self-importance fades out, a feeling of interconnectedness fades in, and with that, selfless love is awakened. The Greek word for selfless love is *agape*, which some have described (correctly, in my opinion) as the high-

est level of love known to humanity, one that is committed to the well-being of others. I think this selfless love is the heart of compassion—it gives compassion its divine quality and yields profound joy.”

Tan was inspired by a Buddhist monk from France, named Matthieu Ricard, who, while meditating on compassion, was deemed the happiest man in the world. Ricard’s brain was measured with fMRI (functional magnetic resonance imaging) during a 12-year study on meditation and compassion led by Richard Davidson, a neuroscientist from the University of Wisconsin. “Learning about Matthieu gave me a new angle to look at my work,” Tan said during his TED talk, *Everyday Compassion at Google*. “Matthieu’s brain scan shows that compassion is not a chore. Compassion is something that creates happiness. Compassion is fun.” The conclusion? It is the happiest mental state ever measured in the history of neuroscience.

Buddhist teacher Dzigar Kongtrul Rinpoche explores the Tibetan training method known as *lojong*, or mind training, in *The Intelligent Heart: A Guide to the Compassionate Life* (Shambhala, 2016). The crux of this training is *tonglen*, the practice of exchanging the self for other—for taking others’ pain and suffering and sending out kindness and consolation. In order to feel compassion, we need to know how others suffer, and the only way to understand their suffering is to learn how we ourselves suffer. →

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He writes, “In its most well-known form, tonglen is a meditation technique that involves coordination with the breath. Breathing in, we visualize ourselves taking on the suffering of others; breathing out, we visualize ourselves giving others happiness.” Joy is the key to tonglen; it has to be the motivating factor in both giving and taking. When you do something for a loved one, even if it brings you some pain or hardship, your joy generally overrides that hardship.

Meditation master Orgyen Chowang Rinpoche explores a “good heart” in *Our Pristine Mind: A Practical Guide to Unconditional Happiness* (Shambhala, 2016). “A good heart originates from paying attention to and understanding other people’s situations in life,” he writes. “It comes from recognizing what we all have in common. We realize that all those we see—including the old man, the small child, and the middle-aged woman—are exactly like us. They, too, just want to live happily in this world.”

We’re all on the same flight, literally and figuratively; even among strangers, there’s some sense of caring about each other and a feeling of being part of a larger group. “All of humanity wants to try to live in this world and to have happiness and the conditions for happiness... Nobody wants suffering or the conditions of suffering.”

The Buddhist monk, author and peace activist Thich Nhat Hanh said, “Compassion is a verb.” As with meditation, the path to compassion involves practice. And to practice compassion toward others, we must first practice it toward ourselves.