

“Why Be Compassionate?”

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Abstract

Compassion is undeniably a humane trait. However it is hard to pin point whether it's a natural characteristic or a moral 'ought'. If natural why doesn't all manifest it? If it's an ethical injunction then also the question remains, why? Again one wonders, is it a gift or is it a skill that can be developed by some esoteric practice like meditation? The bottom line, I feel, is a scientific validation of the fact that somewhere down the line the practitioner must be benefitted himself physically and mentally, in order to aspire for such an elusive quality. That would be a sure justification to the testimonies of spiritual masters of all ages who urged men to practice 'compassion' through such concepts like, ahimsā, karuṇā, prema, dayā, etc. This paper explores (a) the proven methods that are practiced to generate compassion. (b) It also shows the psychosomatic benefits that accrue from such practices. (c) And finally it connects the reader with some philosophical concepts on the academic level, which are definitely worth exploring at length.

KEYWORDS: Compassion; Brain; Neural Correlates; Meditation; Pātañjala Yoga; Vedanta.

Introduction:

Scientists have made great strides in understanding and treating pathologies of the human mind with the recent advancements in medical and cognitive sciences. They have, until recently however, largely avoided examining behaviors such as moral cognition, altruism, and compassion because it is extremely difficult to objectively measure and quantify complex brain mechanisms. Comprehending why or why not humans exhibit compassion or altruism requires a unique collaboration between scientists, who study the brain using objective devices as well as 'contemplative adepts' from traditions that have a long history of investigation into the nature of mind. The Centre for Compassion and Altruism Research and Education (CCARE), a program of the Stanford Institute for Neuro-Innovation & Translational Neurosciences (SINTN), has taken on the mission of not only scientifically studying the neural, mental, and social basis of compassion and altruistic behavior, but also exploring testable cognitive and affective training exercises through which individuals and societies can learn to employ these complex behaviors. The experimental data that follows have been gathered by researches conducted by CCARE as well as The Mind & Life Institute under the umbrage of Dalai Lama. After a synoptic understanding of this form of contemplation in laboratory setups, I have attempted to relate the key concepts and test results with the other dominant sādhanāśāstras– Yoga and Tantra.

The Method:

Three most important meditative states in Tibetan Buddhism are: Focused Attention; Open Presence; and Non-Referential Compassion. Unlike practices oriented toward generating Focused Awareness or Open Presence, the practice of

Non-Referential Compassion aims to produce a specific emotional state; namely, an intense feeling of loving-kindness. The state is necessarily ‘other-centered’, but it is ‘non-referential’ in that it does not have any specific object or focus, such as a specific person or group of persons. Thus, in effect this meditation has two aspects: the cultivation of compassion and the cultivation of objectless/non-intentional awareness (i.e., Open Presence). In Open Presence the meditator does not usually require any particular mental content or event as the context for the cultivation of Open Presence. But in the cultivation of Non-Referential Compassion, one does require a particular mental event – the emotion of compassion – that forms the context for the cultivation of the objectless awareness that is Open Presence. The two aspects of Non-Referential Compassion – compassion and Open Presence – must occur together for the meditation to be successful. Although precise descriptions of this practice are not readily available, it appears that for many practitioners this practice requires a sequence within the session. In some cases, a meditator may first cultivate Open Presence and then cultivate compassion while retaining the state of Open Presence to the greatest degree possible. After compassion has been evoked, the meditator may then emphasize Open Presence once again, because the techniques for cultivating compassion may have led the meditator to stray from an objectless state. In other cases, a meditator may begin by first evoking compassion, and then, while the mind is suffused with compassion, the meditator will cultivate Open Presence.

The sequentiality of the practice, which does not apply to the most advanced practitioners, stems largely from the methods that are initially used to evoke a compassionate mental state. These methods often combine multiple techniques, most especially a discursive strategy (usually the steps of a memorized argument), a set of visualizations, and sometimes a litany or other recitation. These practices, which themselves may be combined in various ways, typically begin with an evocation of equanimity. Often a visualization of three persons is used: a beloved person (most especially one’s mother), a person for whom one has some enmity, and a person toward whom one feels indifference. With a visualization of these persons in place, one then employs discursive strategies – such as the argument that all beings are equal in wanting to be happy and wishing to avoid suffering – that are designed to eliminate one’s bias toward these persons. One is then encouraged not only to see all beings as equal but also to take one’s mother as paradigmatic of all beings. Another set of discursive contemplations – sometimes including specific visualizations – are then used to displace one’s preferential treatment of oneself over others. One contemplates, for example, how despicable one would be to prefer one’s own happiness over the well-being of one’s mother; here, the practitioner might recall a memorized aphorism or the admonitions of his or her teacher. Finally, by recalling or visualizing the intense suffering experienced by others – i.e., all sentient beings who are as if one’s mother – one becomes motivated empathetically to eliminate that suffering.

Toward the endpoint of this process one experiences a visceral, emotional reaction that is said to involve especially a feeling of opening at the center of the chest, sometimes accompanied by horripilation and the welling of tears in the eyes. A more advanced practice, ‘Tonglen Meditation’ involves visualization of giving joy and happiness to others and taking suffering and unhappiness from others and dissolving it into a white orb of light at one’s heart. This state involves both love (*maitrī*) – the aspiration that other beings be happy – and compassion (*karuṇā*) – the aspiration that other beings be free of suffering. At this point the state might involve a

degree of sentimentality, and the final phase of developing compassion is meant to go beyond that state to one that is both more stable and also more engaged with aiding others¹.

Most Tibetan practitioners are trained intensively in this type of contemplation for generating compassion. As a meditator becomes more adept at cultivating compassion through the various techniques mentioned above, the mind becomes more habituated to the state such that an advanced practitioner can induce the state of compassion almost effortlessly. That is, meditation transforms the 'physiological baseline' experience to obliterate the distinction between meditative and post-meditative states. At this stage the practice would no longer require a sequence; that is, compassion can be cultivated directly within a state of Open Presence itself.

Neuroimaging Correlates:

Brain activity was assessed using functional neuroimaging while novice and long-term practitioners generated a Loving-kindness-Compassion meditation, alternating with a resting state. The generation of a state in which an unconditional feeling of loving kindness and compassion pervades the whole mind as a way of being, with no other consideration, reasoning, or discursive thoughts is called in Tibetan "pure" or non-referential compassion. In the resting state the subjects were asked to be in the most ordinary state without being engaged in an active mental state or being in a pleasant or unpleasant emotional state. Subjects were long-term Buddhist practitioners (adepts) and an equal number of age matched healthy control volunteers who were interested in learning to meditate (novices). Buddhist practitioners underwent mental training in the Tibetan 'Nyingmapa' and 'Kargyupa' traditions for 10,000 to 50,000 hours overtime periods ranging from 15 to 40 years. During the meditative state, a common activation in the striatum, anterior insula, somato-sensory cortex, anterior cingulate cortex and left-prefrontal cortex was noticed; while deactivation was seen in the right interior parietal. This pattern was robustly modulated by the degree of expertise, with the adepts showing considerably more enhanced activation in this network compared with the novices.

These data provide evidence that this altruistic state involved a specific matrix of brain regions that are commonly linked to feeling states, planning of movements, and positive emotions. Maternal and romantic love has been linked in humans to the activation of the reward and attachment circuitries, such as the substantianigra and the striatum.²Positive and negative emotions are expected to differentially activate the left and right

Prefrontal cortices, respectively, as suggested by lesion and electrophysiological data.³More generally, feelingstates are thought to be mediated by structures that receive inputs regarding the internal milieu and musculoskeletal structures and include the brainstem tegmentum, hypothalamus, insula, and somato-sensory and cingulated cortices.⁴This view has received some neuroimaging support in a task where subjects self-generate emotional states and more recently in studies using pain experience or 'interoceptive' tasks.⁵

Finally, love and compassion require an understanding of the feelings of others; hence, a common view is that the very regions subservient to one's own feeling states also instantiate one's empathic experience of others' feelings. This framework derives from perception-action models of motor behavior and imitation. The key proposal is that the observation and imagination of another person in a particular emotional state automatically activate a similar affective state in the observer, with its associated autonomic and somatic responses. Thus, experienced and empathic pain commonly activated the anterior insula and anterior cingulate cortex.⁶ The activation in the anterior insula was stronger for the practitioners, an area that some scientists have found to be involved in feelings.

These data are consistent with the view that our experience of another's suffering is mediated by the same brain regions involved in the experience of our own pain. It was further found that brain activity for the long-term practitioners was greater than the novices in several of the commonly activated regions. These analyses indicate that the degree of training, as reflected in the hours of cumulative meditation experience, modulates the amplitude of activation in the brain areas commonly involved in this state.

Scientists at the Institute of Heart Math in California have shown that feeling of love and gratitude boosts the immune system, reduces stress hormone levels, controls high blood pressure and blood sugar levels. And interestingly, experiments proved that the magnetic field of the heart is 5000 times more powerful than the magnetic field of the brain and reaches out several feet from our body!

To summarize, our study of compassion meditation found activation in brain regions thought to be responsible for monitoring one's feeling state, planning of movements, and positive emotions. This pattern was robustly modulated by the degree of expertise. These data suggest that emotional and empathic processes are flexible skills that can be enhanced by training and that such training is accompanied by demonstrable neural changes.

Afterthoughts & Philosophical Abstractions:

- I. Equanimity, the feel of 'One-ness', is the essential feature of Compassion Meditation. This identity/One-ness is between subject and the object - which includes all that exists outside the realm of the first person; identity is between the macrocosm and the microcosm. This identity has been established in the ontology of the Śaiva-Śākta Āgamas in their theory of 36 cosmic principles/tattvas which also includes the pañcabīmsatitattva of Sāṃkhya cosmology. Concept of Oneness also abounds in Vedānta in dictums like 'jīvobrahmaivanāparah'. Scientific understanding of reality is possible in an Advaita framework whether that be called Brahman (Veda) or Parasamvit (Tantra). It is that absolute One which functions in dual modes in the phenomenal world. Like the 'Grand Unification Theory' the 'One' unites all possible duality – subject-object, man-world, word-meaning, matter-consciousness⁷
- II. The possibility of non-intentional objectless awareness shows that there is a fourth state of consciousness apart from the three - waking, dreaming and deep sleep – which are our phenomenal states of awareness

and falls within the ambit of pancavṛttis(Y.S. I.5). However, in the state of yogascittavṛttihnirodha(Y.S.I. 2) thepurasais said to abide in Itself (tadādṛṣṭuhsvarūpehavasthānam– Y.S.I.3). As long as there is even the meta-awareness “I am aware that I am aware”, it cannot be truly described as objectless. Hence only asamprajñātasamādhi, the state where the triad of jñātā-jñeya-jñānacomes to a halt, can be described as the state of ‘pure consciousness’, jñā-mātra.⁸

- III. The meta-awareness, contemplation on the minimal subjective ‘I-ness’ or ‘ipseity’ related to Open Presence meditations is similar to sāmītabhāvanā, where the object of concentration is asmitā. Asmitāor I-ness is identification of the puruṣa(pure consciousness) with buddhi, the evolute of Prakṛti, and constitutes the phenomenal self or ego.⁹
- IV. In Y.S. I 5 Patanjali had divided vṛttis as kliṣṭaand akliṣṭa. In order to control and sublimate negative emotions (kliṣṭavṛttis), the concept of pratipakṣadhāraṇā(focusing on the opposite-positive emotion) is mentioned. “Maitrīkaruṇāmuditopekṣāṇām.....” (Y.S. I.33). Thus practice of ‘compassion’ in meditation is very similar to sādhanā described in Yoga darśana, in as much as it transforms the cittabhūmifrom samalato nirmala.
- V. Compassion meditators generally feel extreme pathos in the region of the heart, as mentioned above. It is said in the Tantraāgamaśāstrasthat the center of the chest is the region of the Anāhatacakra. It is described as the ‘psychic’ center and its associated powers are: control of prāṇa, ability to heal others, cosmic love and elimination of ego selfishness. The soul is said to have emerged from the ānandaaspect of Mahāśaktiand its seat in the human organism is in the anāhatacakra.¹⁰ Yogins believe that this cakraawakens refined emotions in the cittawhich is characterized by the generation of universal, unlimited love for all beings. They also confirm that prior to awakening of this cakrafrequent pain in the chest and/or irregular pulsations of the heart is experienced. Hence I hold that ‘compassion meditation’ has a direct relevance to anāhatacakraactivation.
- VI. ‘Neuroplasticity’ proves that mind can change matter. The process of cognition as described in Yoga Sutra involves modifications (vṛttih) of the psychical stuff (citta). Thus, a vṛttihis a mental modification quite of the nature of the object of cognition – (Vijñānabhikṣu, SamkhyapravacanaBhasya). Thus it is held, that the mind which thinks of Divinity is, at length, through continued devotion, transformed into the likeness of that Devatā. This significant principle can now be empirically verified when sustained emotions directed ‘outside’ actually creates the same manifestations in the brain functions ‘inside’.¹¹ Precisely, meditation on others’ happiness positively makes one happy.
- VII. ‘Mindful’ contemplation of compassion (a particular emotion) finally leads one to ‘mindlessness’ (annihilation of ego) of cosmic awareness: a journey from samprajñātato asamprajñātasamādhi. Starting with the phenomenal small ‘i’ it culminates in the capital ‘I’, the omnipresent

ātman/Self. Śraddhā, vīrya, smṛti, samādhi and prajñā are the direct aids to asamprajñātasamādhi (Y. S. I. 20). Swami Hariharananda has uniquely interpreted smṛti as 'samanaskatā' (mindfulness) which is one of the aids that leads to cittalaya (termination of the mental stuff).¹²

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