

An Indigenous Perspective on Cultivation of Compassion: A Qualitative study on Tibetan Buddhist Scholars in India

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ABSTRACT

Our native traditions have rich literature on well-being and cultivation of positive emotions. However very little scientific research has gone into understanding positive emotions or strengths from an indigenous perspective. The objective of this study was to understand Compassion from the lens of people ingrained compassion as a cultural and traditional practices. Awareness about Compassion is much needed for those in the helping professions such as psycho-therapists, nurses, doctors etc as over time, they are at risk for developing Secondary Trauma or Compassion Fatigue which exhausts the ability to work effectively. Compassion is very central to Buddhism, it has been taught and practiced for millennia in three main Buddhist traditions: Theravada, Mahayana, and Vajrayana. In this study five practicing male monks (Geshe-la) and five nuns (Geshe-ma) residing at monasteries and nunneries in Dharamshala, Himachal Pradesh were individually interviewed on the methods they used to cultivate Compassion, the difficulties/challenges they faced and the benefits of Compassion. Further, they were interviewed on how cultivation of Compassion helped dealing with destructive emotions such as anger. The interviews were transcribed and findings are discussed in conjunction with the personal vignettes shared by the monks and nuns. It is hoped that this study throws light on understanding of Compassion from an indigenous perspective and helps those struggling with Compassion fatigue.

Keywords: *Cultivation of Compassion, indigenous perspective, Buddhism, Buddhist scholars*

The word 'Compassion' is related in origin, form and meaning to the English noun *patient* (one who suffers), and is akin to the Greek verb *paskhein* (to suffer). It is ranked as a great virtue in numerous philosophies and religious traditions. Compassion is an emotion that is a sense of shared suffering, often combined with the desire to reduce the suffering of another (Jimenez 2009). Genuine compassion is based on a clear acceptance that like oneself, others too want happiness and have the right to overcome suffering. On that basis one develops concern about the welfare of others. Compassion is nothing but the openness to help other people in need of help in the face of suffering or misfortune (Lama, 1995).

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The healing properties of Compassion have been written about for centuries, it has both psychological and physiological benefits. With increasing evidence it has been found that practicing compassion can act as a buffer against stress and can influence neurophysiological and immune systems (Davidson 2003; Lutz 2008 as cited in Gilbert 2009). A social experiment on compassion training and altruism resulted in bringing more altruism towards victims, even when there is no cue for compassion yet only the mental training received for two weeks during the experiment (Weng et al., 2013).

Research also suggests that compassion may boost our well-being as it can help broaden our perspective beyond ourselves. Depression and anxiety are linked to a state of self-focus, a preoccupation with “me, myself, and I.” When one does something for someone else, that state of self-focus shifts to a state of other-focus increasing a sense of connection to others (Seppala 2013).

Advances in the promotion and practice of Compassion

- **Establishment of World class Centers for research on Compassion:**

The importance of Compassion is evidenced from the establishment of Centers devoted to researching Compassion at the world’s top universities: CCARE (Centre for Compassion and Altruism Research and Education) at Stanford University and CMC (Centre for Mindfulness and Compassion) at Cambridge University, CCSCBE (Centre for Contemplative Science and Compassion-Based Ethics at Emory University.

CCARE was initiated by Dr. James Doty, a Stanford neurosurgeon who started multidisciplinary scientific efforts to understand the neural, mental, and social bases of Compassion and altruism. CMC (Centre for Mindfulness and Compassion) at Cambridge University was founded by CHA (Cambridge Health Alliance) to enhance the health and wellbeing of the local communities by integrating Mindfulness and Compassion into healthcare (Seppala, 2013).

CCSCBE was the result of the vision of H. H. the Dalai Lama in promoting secular ethics based on compassion. The Centre for Contemplative Science and Compassion-Based Ethics has designed a project known as SEE Learning (Social, Ethical and Emotional) which was headed by Dr. Lobsang Tenzin Negi and it is an international educational curriculum that can be applicable for all levels of education, from kindergarten to higher education. The SEE learning method is based on three dimensions, namely, awareness, compassion, engagement (Borden, 2019). Which are perhaps the main components in the definition of compassion. To be able to generate compassion one needs to be aware of the suffering in others and self. At the same time, it is also important to engage in compassionate action to alleviate the suffering.

- **Compassion focused therapy (CFT):**

Within the Cognitive Behavior Tradition, Compassion Focused Therapy (CFT) has been developed by Gilbert. Central to CFT is compassionate mind training: Compassion is understood in terms of specific attributes and skills which can be developed. The client is helped to develop an internal compassionate relationship with themselves to replace the blaming, condemning and self-critical self (Gilbert 2005). It is found that using CFT on people with eating disorders has significant improvements on the symptoms. At the same time, the CFT program targeted self-criticism, shame and self-compassion (Gale et al., 2012).

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CFT is especially appropriate for people who have high levels of shame, self-criticism and who have difficulty in feeling warmth and being kind to themselves or others. It was found that a brief exposure to a CFT can effectively lower the levels of psychopathology (Craig et al., 2020). There are patterns of change found due to CFT measures on self-criticism and the independent measures of self-criticism and shame. There was preliminary evidence supporting CFT in reducing the clients' fears of compassion and engagement in compassion may lead to improvement in self-criticism and shame (Fox et al., 2020).

● Research and intervention programs on Compassion fatigue:

Medical professionals such as physicians, nurses, psychotherapists, and emergency workers who help trauma patients may develop their own Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) symptoms as an indirect response to their patient's suffering. This phenomenon has been referred to as compassion fatigue or secondary traumatic stress. The symptoms may range from anger, anxiety, sleep disturbances, nightmares, to feeling powerless, nausea, headaches, dizziness, and fainting spells. Nowadays a lot research and intervention programs are being conducted to address this issue that might otherwise might lead to burnout.

Compassion from the perspective of Buddhism:

Compassion has been taught and practiced for millennia in the three main Buddhist traditions: Theravada, Mahayana, and Vajrayana. These approaches to the removal of suffering are more similar to Psychology and Philosophy than religion as they do not require a belief in a higher power (Makransky, 2012).

Compassion in Theravada Buddhist tradition:

Compassion in Buddhist psychology involves a wish for beings to be deeply free of their sufferings (Pali '*dukkha*'). Theravada traditions of Southeast Asia, describe three levels of suffering (Harvey 1990):

1. Obvious suffering
2. Suffering of transience
3. Suffering of self-centered conditioning

Obvious suffering includes all the miseries of illness and physical injury, of old age and dying, of mental distress. The suffering of transience is the futile attempt to hold onto pleasant things as if they were a stable source of security and well-being. The suffering of self-centered conditioning is the impression of a separate sense of self surrounded by a stable unchanging world clinging to whatever seems to affirm it and, fearing whatever seems to threaten it (Makransky 2007)

The Buddha's concept of compassion is in wishing persons to be free from suffering, focused on all three levels, especially the last two which are not very obvious on the surface. The Buddha's compassion is extended to all beings equally- it is impartial, unconditional and all-inclusive.

The four Immeasurables Attitudes:

Theravada Buddhism has emphasized the cultivation of the four immeasurable attitudes, which are explained systematically in Buddhaghosa's classic text *The Path of Purification* (Makransky 2007). In early Theravada understanding, Compassion is most fully realized when cultivated in close connection with the related attitudes of Love, Joy and Equanimity.

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Figure 1 The four Immeasurables



In Buddhism, loving kindness is unconditional love towards other beings and wanting them to be happy. This love is free from any kind of attachment where there is no give and take but only giving away without expecting anything in return. *Compassion (Karuna)* is wanting others to be free from suffering and working towards helping them. This compassion is extended to all beings everywhere—becoming all-inclusive, stable, and joyful (Makransky 2007).

Empathetic joy can be defined as experiencing pleasure due to the accomplishments or success of other people. They are not likely to benefit directly from this success, but they just feel happy because somebody else is feeling happy. *Equanimity* is neither a thought nor an emotion, it is rather the conscious realization of reality's transience. It is a state of psychological stability and composure which is undisturbed by experience of emotions, pain, or other phenomena that may cause others to lose the balance of their mind. *Equanimity*, Buddhagosa says, is established on the highest level of meditative absorption, based on absorption that were attained in the prior three meditations (Nyanamoli, 1964).

Compassion in Mahayana Buddhism

Movements in the development of Indian Buddhism emerged from the first century B.C. that constellated under the term “Mahayana,” the “Great Vehicle.” The Buddha’s long training in impartial compassion was viewed as the means by which he deepened his wisdom so that he could know others profoundly and teach them skillfully. Compassion is thus viewed as very important in Mahayana traditions for the fullest form of awakening (Harvey, 2000). Those who choose to follow the Buddha’s path of awakening—to realize and communicate wisdom and compassion for the sake of others—are called *Bodhisattvas*.

Emptiness (Shunyata) & Compassion:

Shunyata in Mahayana traditions means that there is no independent existence of any kind. On the level of deep insight, no independent, separate thing can be found anywhere—every seemingly separate “thing” is empty. For example: a simple table’s existence depends on so many factors the trees, carpenter etc. The wisdom of Emptiness recognizes all beings as undivided from oneself in the interdependent ness (Sanskrit *dharmadhatu*), of all things which supports an all-embracing, unconditional compassion for all creatures.

Compassion in Vajrayana Buddhism

Further traditions of Buddhism emerged in India from the eighth century that came to be called “Vajrayana” (“Diamond Vehicle”), which became central to the spread of Buddhism to Tibet and Himalayan regions of Asia.

Our fundamental awareness, Vajrayana asserts, is essentially unconditioned, pure and already endowed with wisdom and compassion. Individual and socially conditioned habits have hidden much of this underlying potential. To cultivate compassion and wisdom, therefore, is not to generate new states of mind and make them grow stronger (as was understood in Theravada and some earlier Mahayana traditions), but rather to help the mind give up its

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deluded tendencies so that its innate, unconditioned power of boundless compassion- it's Buddha nature, can spontaneously manifest.

In summary, systematic ways of cultivating wise compassion have been developed within each of three leading Buddhist traditions. In our modern global culture, psychologists have the opportunity to consult with experienced teachers of these meditation traditions, and explore how these techniques may be adapted to their settings and which approach is most suitable for themselves and their clients.

Rationale and need of the present study:

Figure 2 Figure illustrating rationale of the present study



Research on Compassion is much needed in this century where day by day people are becoming more intolerant, aggressive and violent. With the advancement in technology, people tend to become more self-occupied mainly having less concern about their surroundings. To remove the root of the unrest and destructive emotions, we need to develop Compassion.

As the Buddhist monks and nuns have dedicated the majority of their life in understanding and practicing Compassion, their personal knowledge and expertise is valuable.

Even in our profession as psychologists, Compassion is one of the professional skills that we require. Many psychologists and psychiatrists are facing Compassion fatigue and burn-out in today's high pressure job environment. An indigenous view of Compassion is necessary to broaden our understanding rather than just a clinical perspective.

Objectives of the present study:

- To explore the methods Buddhist monks and nuns use to cultivate Compassion.
- To explore the difficulties/challenges they face in the cultivation of Compassion.
- To explore the positive effect of the cultivation of Compassion.
- To understand the role of Compassion on destructive emotions such as anger.

METHODOLOGY

Sample

The sample consisted of ten participants: five monks (Geshe) and five nuns (Geshema). The title Geshe (male) and Geshema (female) is a graduate degree. "Ge" means "virtue" and "she" means "knowing". All participants belonged to the same sect of Buddhism that is Gelug.

All the monks and nuns were affiliated to monasteries and nunneries in Dharamshala, Himachal Pradesh.

Purposive sampling technique was used. The sample for knowledgeable Geshe la was based on the recommendations of The Director, Tibet House, New Delhi who is a respected scholar

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of Buddhist studies. Four of the monks (Geshe la) were affiliated to the Institute of Buddhist Dialectics and one monk belonged to Tse-chok-ling Monastery. The sample of the Geshema was taken from Dolmaling Nunnery in Dharamsala, selection of the knowledgeable Geshema was recommended by the Director of Dolmaling Nunnery.

Tool:

Among the various techniques available, an individual in-depth interview method has its own advantage in exploring individual perceptions. A semi-structured interview approach can be very useful in keeping the focus of the interview intact. Thus, a semi-structured interview schedule was developed for this study based on the review of literature, discussions among the authors and keeping the present study's aim and objectives in mind. To tap the objectives of the study, the interview schedule consisted of mainly open ended questions and probes.

Procedure:

The research proposal was presented before the Departmental committee and their suggestions were incorporated. The help of two experts was taken to recommend the knowledgeable participants for the interview. The interviewer was introduced to the interviewee by an intermediary in each case and were explained the aim and purpose of the study. For the convenience of the participants, the interviews were conducted in their own quarters in Dharamshala.

Participants were ensured that their identity will be kept confidential and that their responses will be used only for academic purposes. Prior consent for audio recording was taken. The interviews lasted around 30-120 minutes and were conducted in the Tibetan language. The monks and nuns were encouraged to reflect and share all of their thoughts, feelings, and perceptions.

Analysis:

The interviews were conducted in the mother tongue of the participants (Tibetan) and later transcribed in English. Thematic analysis was done for the responses that were gathered in the ten interviews that were conducted. The six phases approach given by Braun & Clarke, 2006 was referred to for doing the analysis.

Each participant's interview was read and re-read in entirety to get a holistic understanding of their lived experiences and key phrases were highlighted. The responses with similar key phrases were placed under the same code. Codes which were thematically overlapping or similar were collapsed to form broader themes.

RESULTS & DISCUSSION

The monks and nuns shared their thoughts, feelings and personal experiences in their own words and in as much detail as possible. Themes emerged over time as data analysis proceeded as illustrated in Table 1 below:

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Table 1 Illustrations of the themes below:

Themes	Sub-components of the themes
<i>Cognitive strategies in Cultivation of Compassion</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Reflecting deeply on the nature of Compassion ➤ Perception of friends and enemy as same ➤ Focusing on the person’s suffering ➤ Belief that ALL human beings want to mitigate suffering
<i>Specific Techniques used</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Four Immeasurables ➤ Seven step method ➤ Five step method
<i>Sustaining compassion</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Self-discipline- Daily Practice ➤ Removal of negative emotions from one’s mind
<i>Challenges faced in cultivating Compassion by monks and nuns</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Influence of past negative emotions ➤ Attachments ➤ Self-focus
<i>Obstacles for non-monastic persons</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Difficulty in sustaining practice ➤ Excessive Entanglement in day to day hassles ➤ Limited knowledge
<i>Benefits of Compassion on self</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Enhanced immunity ➤ Broadened thinking ➤ Increase in positive emotions ➤ Decrease in negative emotions ➤ Enhanced coping ➤ Inner peace
<i>Perceived effects of compassion on anger</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Reduction in anger and aggression ➤ Increased reasoning capacities

The sub-themes are explained with specific illustrative quotations below:

Cultivation of Compassion:

Few cognitive schemas emerged in the cultivation of compassion as reported by the monks and nuns.

- Deep reflection: The monks and nuns stressed on the importance of deep reflection on the nature of compassion. Without knowing the nature of Compassion, it is difficult to think and act compassionately.

“When we say meditate on Compassion first thing, we need to know is nature of Compassion”

- Perception of friends and enemies as same: All of the participants stressed that while cultivating Compassion we need to think about friends, strangers and enemies as the

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same. They all are to be perceived equally on the basis that everyone desires happiness and none wants suffering. As illustrated below,

“Compassion has to be felt for everyone your enemy, your friends equally”

➤ Focusing on one’s suffering aids in developing compassion.

“Compassion will always be generated through focusing on someone who is undergoing some kind of suffering”.

“To develop such a nature, one needs to bring that person who is suffering near to your heart through thinking that everyone is seeking happiness and we are all the same”.

Specific techniques used for cultivating compassion

➤ Techniques used: Practicing the four Immeasurables, seven step method and five step method was reported by many of the participants to cultivate compassion in themselves.

The seven steps to cultivate Compassion can be found in the Buddhist texts such as The Perfection of Wisdom as elaborated upon by Maitreya in the Abhisamayalamkara and Dharmakirti’s Pramanavartika. The five-step method is very similar, it is a condensed version of the seven step method.

Figure 3 The seven steps of cultivating Compassion



- 1) The first step is to view everyone as equal in your eyes. We should always keep our friends, strangers and enemies the same and equal. This is also known as equanimity.
- 2) The second step is called “mother recognition.” We take the feeling about remembering a mother, and we defuse that to all beings in this meditation. The mother is the model of all altruism for human beings, in spiritual traditions. And so, we reflect until we can sort of see that motherly expression in all beings.
- 3) In the third step, we develop “a feeling of gratitude.” We repay the kindness that all beings have shown to you.
- 4) And then the fourth step, we go to what is called “unconditional love”. We see beings in their potential happiness and feel a love toward them and want them to be happy, even the enemy.
- 5) And then finally, the fifth step is Compassion, “universal Compassion” where we then look at the reality of all the beings we can think of. And this is where we feel real Compassion for them.
- 6) And so, the sixth step is where we have Compassion even for ourselves.
- 7) And then, finally, that leads to a new orientation in life where we live equally for ourselves and for others and we are joyful and happy (Babauta, 2007).

None of the monks or nuns mentioned Mindfulness as a specific technique for cultivating compassion. However, literature states that through mindful awareness, we become aware of our tendencies to cling to illusions of permanence and how much anxiety and unease our clinging has generated. We then start to recognize the same sub-conscious layers of suffering

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operating in all others. Thus, compassion for self and others emerge as we gain insight into impermanence and the constructed nature of self.

Sustaining compassion

- Self-discipline and removal of impurities from mind were reported as crucial to sustain the compassion one cultivates. The discipline should come from within rather than being imposed by an external agency. The importance of efforts to remove negative emotions was also stressed. Impurities of mind such as hatred, jealousy and ignorance should be deleted entirely from the surface of the mind to practice the most genuine Compassion.

“For those who are seriously meditating on Compassion have to practice like three times in a day”.

“Self-discipline is very important while practicing Compassion because without self-discipline one is unaware of the negative outcome of our unconscious thinking pattern”.

“Removal of the three basic impurities of the mind is very important thus, one should abstain from ignorance, anger and jealousy”.

Challenges/ difficulties the monks and nuns faced in cultivation of Compassion:

- Negative emotions: The monks and nuns reported that being human they have all the elements that oppose Compassion such as ignorance, hatred and attachment which always hinder the judgment and make them unable to focus. Their personal experiences are shared below:

“I have experienced being brutally beaten and exploited back in my childhood in Tibet and those memories come and I become less compassionate as hatred blocks it away but I always try not to remember them at all”.

“I was very aggressive from my childhood and it has always been a challenge for me to practice Compassion so I try to subside anger and work towards developing Compassion”.

“The most difficult part of cultivating Compassion is working towards completely free oneself from hatred, ignorance and attachment which is developed during the course of our life span”.

“The imperfections such as unable to listen to others well and the ability to mix negative emotions with what we hear always make it difficult to practice Compassion”.

“We face problems in cultivating Compassion because we cannot stop thinking about ourselves”.

Challenges that could arise for non-monastics in cultivating Compassion:

Non-availability of time, not engaging in regular practice, half-baked knowledge about compassion, engagement in day to day hassles are the challenges that could arise for people who are not monastics.

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“People tend to think themselves as foolish if they practice Compassion due to lack of understanding the benefits of cultivating Compassion”.

“It is difficult to cultivate Compassion if there is limited practice because Compassion should become your habit to occur naturally and to make it a habit one should practice it every day”.

Four of the nuns mentioned that the people tend to forget to practice Compassion in their everyday life where they are preoccupied with their work. In rearing a child also, they were left with no time to think about the welfare of other people.

“The difficulty in rearing children and looking after every need of them demands extra time and it is reduced from the time in which we can actually practice Compassion towards others”.

“In many developed countries people don’t even have time to see their parents. And it is very sad to even think about how parents feel about it. So, the scope of Compassion lessens with the advancement of technologies”.

The benefits of Compassion on mental, physical and emotional wellbeing

All the participants spoke about the benefits of Compassion in terms of physical, emotional and psychological benefits. Many of the participants spoke about the increase in positive emotions and decrease in negative emotions due to the cultivation of Compassion. A senior monk spoke about the benefit of Compassion on one’s immune system which corresponds to Barbara Fredrickson’s Broaden and Build theory of positive emotions. Inner peace and enhanced coping were the other benefits reported. Their personal experiences are shared below:

“I experienced that whenever I meditate on Compassion there is a different kind of happiness that surrounds me throughout the day”.

“Compassion in me gives rise to a positive mentality which generates good health”.

“It is scientifically proven that those people who make so much self-references are prone to all kinds of illnesses including heart attack. Being compassionate you will think big and in turn you will be much happier and healthier not only physically but also mentally”

Many researchers report on the positive benefits of compassion. A research by Hofmann et al. 2011 suggests that Loving-kindness meditation and Compassion Meditation are associated with an increase in positive affect and a decrease in negative affect.

Reddy & Thuptan (2013) worked on youth in foster care who has experienced multiple psychological difficulties due to exceptionally high rates of maltreatment. The results indicated that participants found Compassion based Cognitive therapy (CBCT) useful for dealing with daily life stressors (as cited in Seppala 2013).

Compassion and Anger

All the participants agreed on the inverse relation between anger and Compassion. The participants stated that compassion reduces anger and aggression. With cultivation of compassion, one can reason more calmly. As shared below:

“I started reasoning everything and moved on with more positive feelings towards them”.

“Compassion actually kills the aggressive nature of humans into a more calm and stable personality”.

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Personal observations and experiences: Reflexivity of the researcher

Researchers' reflections on their actions and observations in the field, their impressions, irritations, feeling, and so on, become data in their own right, forming part of the interpretation, and are documented in research diaries or context protocols (Flicks U,2009).

During the interview sessions, the researcher observed that the participants were welcoming and warm which made the researcher feel at ease and comfortable asking questions. The participants were patient in answering all the questions and clarified any doubts that the researcher had. When the researcher did not know about a particular Buddhist concept, they took pains to explain it in detail. Thus, the researcher experienced their compassion first hand.

Summary of findings

- Buddhism offers a variety of specific techniques to cultivate compassion.
- The cultivation of Compassion has physical and psychological benefits such as decrease in negative emotions, better physical health and an increased sense of connectedness with others.
- Common challenges faced in cultivation of compassion are the influence of negative emotions, attachments and irregular practice.

Implications of the study:

- Understanding Compassion from an indigenous perspective.
- This study might be useful for professional psychologists who are experiencing Compassion fatigue.
- This study will complement those on the path in development compassion curriculum.
- This study might be beneficial for educators who would like to encourage youth to cultivate compassion.

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Conflict of Interest

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