Chapter 12 **ON COMPASSION AND THE ART OF HAPPINESS**

> Our task is to become good men, or to achieve the highest human good. That good is happiness. Aristotle, *Ethics*
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> The purpose of our life is happiness. Dalai Lama

It may seem strange, given the history of violence in the modern world, the extent of oppression and social injustice worldwide today, and the threat all species now face to their survival and well-being, that we think we could be happy. Freud was of the view that the happiness of the human race was not part of the plan for creation and declared famously that the most that could be hoped for was to convert "hysterical misery into common unhappiness". [1] The cognitive revolution in the second half of the twentieth century has questioned this assumption by suggesting we have more control over our minds than Freud thought. The shift to consideration of our conscious motivation, as well as unconscious conditioning, has given way to more hope and optimism and to the discovery within ourselves of degrees of resilience and resourcefulness we didn't know we had.

That material wealth does not bring us happiness is the theme of many books now being published. [2] Yet these books tend to construct happiness almost as a commodity and, although there is more understanding that money cannot buy happiness, there is a sense that it can easily be obtained if we just follow the rules on diet, non-smoking, exercise, positive thinking etc. The notion that happiness is a state of mind and has to be struggled for, often in the face of considerable suffering, is absent in an approach that emphasises physical well-being and the purely cognitive aspects of the mind.

Much of the thinking throughout history - and across cultures - emphasise that happiness is less about individual pleasure and more about the contentment that derives from leading the good, virtuous, and compassionate life. This was the

essence of Aristotle's *Nichomachean Ethics* and Plato gave his famous account of love in the *Symposium* as an experience that went beyond bodily, sensual, or selfish pleasure. It is also the theme of one of the current books on happiness which draws on many of the world's religious, philosophical and mystical traditions. In *The Secrets of Happiness,* Richard Schoch points out that the pursuit of happiness has been a perennial project throughout the millennia of our history and that there is much which modernity - from the utilitarian Jeremy Bentham on - could learn from all the ancient traditions. [3]

The virtue of compassion is a quality that has suffered from its devaluation in modern times when it has become interpreted either as a weakness in comparison to the instincts of self-assertion and aggression or as a form of sentimentality confined to the feelings parents have for their children or saints practise towards humanity as a whole. The idea that our nature is fundamentally egotistic and selfish runs deep in our individualistic culture. Thomas Hobbes, who perhaps takes the most pessimistic view of human nature of any philosopher, wrote *Leviathan* out of his experience of the English Civil War - civil Wars are the most violent of all. And much of our modern theorising - including Freud's - has been formed in the context of the violent world wars and genocidal events of the twentieth century, to say nothing of the depredations of unchecked modern capitalism.

Yet, these are concepts which have always been challenged, even in modern times. David Hume wrote about the "natural benevolence" of human nature and Darwin recognised "an instinct of sympathy" in humankind. The theory of evolution demonstrates the essential connectedness of all life - mineral, vegetable, animal, and human. Kindness, affection, fellow-feeling, altruism, and philanthropy have long been thought to be original instincts within us in addition –or contrary - to the possessive selfishness which underlies our present outlook. Adam Phillips and Barbara Taylor take the view, moreover, that kindness is humankind's greatest pleasure and provide a history of it to illustrate this. [4] Kind-ness, after all, is a natural manifestation of how we are "kin" to each other. Intense feelings of antagonism and hatred may be experienced within families but these often attest – or are belied by - bonds of deep affection, which can also extend beyond the family into civic and

universal society .

Natural altruism is also evident in communities that have experienced natural disasters. The anarchy, disorder, and break down of society expected after a disaster often doesn't come to pass. Instead, a spirit of mutual aid, cooperation, even joy may emerge. Rebecca Solnit quotes how the radical economists, J.K Gibson-Graham (two women writing under one name), portray our society as an iceberg. The competitive practices of capitalism are visible above the water line while below are "all kinds of relations of aid and cooperation by families, friends, neighbours, churches, cooperatives, volunteers and voluntary organisations ..... a bustling network of uncommercial enterprise". [5] These are not the activities that are depicted by our disaster-fixated press and media.

Solnit is of the view that in the wake of almost every major disaster that she has studied a wave of altruistic and courageous improvisation saves lives, forms communities, and shapes many survivors' experiences. From her study of a series of "disaster communities", stretching from the 1906 San Francisco earthquake to New York's 9/11 and Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans, she concludes:

> These remarkable societies suggest that, just as many machines reset themselves to their original settings after a power outrage, so human beings reset themselves to something altruistic, communitarian, resourceful, and imaginative after a disaster, that we revert to something we already know how to do. The possibility of paradise is already within us as a default setting. [6]

Buddhism on Happiness

Happiness, and its source – compassion - have also been perennial themes in Buddhist thinking. They were taught by Shakyamuni Buddha, himself, as described in the opening lines of the ancient *Dhammapada,* which are said to be the original sayings of the Buddha:

We are what we think.
All that we are arises with our thoughts.
With our thoughts we make the world.
Speak or act with an impure mind
And trouble will follow you
As the wheel follows the ox that draws the cart.

We are what we think.
All that we are arises with our thoughts.
With our thoughts we make the world.
Speak or act with a pure mind
And happiness will follow you
As your shadow, unshakeable.'

The Buddhist monk, Matthieu Ricard, regarded happiness as a skill which can be developed, and his book on happiness, drawing on his knowledge of Buddhist ideas and contemplative practice - particularly within the Tibetan tradition - is a step-by-step guide for anyone wishing to train the mind in its pursuit. [7] The Dalai Lama had already emphasised this. In the classic *The Art of Happiness,* written by the American psychiatrist, Howard C. Cutler, as a decade-long dialogue with the Dalai Lama, the latter emphasises happiness as a "right", which we can train ourselves to reclaim. [8] In the Dalai Lama's view it is essentially connected to the development of compassion and the transformation of suffering and cannot be reached without confronting the basic instincts of anger, hatred, and anxiety within us.

Compassion and skilful means

Compassion is commonly understood as concern for other people but many of the guides underline that you have to start with compassion for yourself. Unless you do, you are less likely to experience true compassion for others. In the Mahayana tradition of Buddhism wisdom and compassion are traditionally 'the two wings' of enlightenment. Without compassion, wisdom can be useless. But without wisdom,

compassion can be misguided, even stupid. The "skilful means" – *upaya* in Sanskrit – that Mahayana Buddhists employ, enables them to harmonise these two. Compassion is about feeling for others while wisdom begins with self-knowledge.

There is a paradox here. Thinking about yourself can lead to self-centredness and away from feeling for others. But for the Tibetans it is all a question of how you understand yourself. In addition to their more elaborate teachings, they have a highly original, direct and practical tradition of "essential mind training" called *Lojong* – the path of awakening – and it is expressed in the form of pithy slogans which go to the heart of compassionate mind. [9]

One of the earliest and most well-known works in this tradition is Chekawa's "Seven-Point Mind Training", written in the twelfth century but itself based on the work of Atisa, the eleventh century Indian sage who in his later life taught *Buddha Dharma* in Tibet. Chekawa's seven "points" - or chapters – consist of some forty-eight concise one-line instructions – pithy slogans – which embody the kernel of Tibetan wisdom. Some of these are difficult to understand at first – *Look upon all life as a dream* or *Examine the nature of unborn awareness,* while others may make more obvious sense - *A joyous state of mind is a constant support* or *Don't talk about others' shortcomings.* [10]

The third chapter of Chekawa's text - "The Transformation of Adversity into the Path of Awakening" – is about turning difficulties and adverse conditions into opportunities for developing awareness and growth. In this chapter there is one instruction which is central to the whole training: *Drive all blame into one o*r, in an alternative translation: *Blame everything on one thing*. The intended meaning of "the one thing" sounds like "take all the blame on yourself". While modern psychologists may react critically to this advice, in the many commentaries that have been written to accompany Chekawa's root text the meaning is carefully clarified. Alan Wallace, for instance, in his commentary, explains "the blame" is intended, not for the self, but for self-centredness. [11]

Wallace illustrates this with a simple example. Suppose someone dents or

crashes into your car. You will instinctively feel anger and hostility for the person responsible, as well as grief and anxiety depending on the extent of the damage to yourself and your vehicle. Yet the degree to which we suffer doesn't just depend on the actions of the other person. We are not just a victim. We do have control over how we, personally, respond to the accident, and the degree to which we suffer depends how much we identify with the car – and oneself – as a personal possession.

This may seem obvious but, as Wallace points out: "The real source of my suffering is self-centredness: *my* car, *my* possession, *my* well-being". It is very difficult for most of us to avoid identifying with personal possessions but the degree of anger, hurt, and anxiety is increased by our doing so. If we could step back from our possessive instincts we could save ourselves a lot of grief:

> Blame everything on one thing. It simplifies life incredibly, and yet it truly is not simplistic. If we believe from our hearts that all of our misfortunes can be attributed to self-centredness, this must radically transform our lives. [12]

It goes without saying that this message applies most to our consumer-driven society and its possessive materialism. And of course it should be remembered that, If you do not have a roof over your head or suffer from chronic starvation, you will not have the luxury of stepping back from your personal possessiveness!

Instincts and the wheel of life

Buddhism - and other mystical ways - are sometimes thought to advocate a life in retreat from what they call "the three poisons" – greed, hatred, and ignorance. To us, on the other hand, they are the instinctual drives of desire, hostility and delusion - all an essential part of us. We cannot avoid them, even if we wanted to. In fact, in Buddhism – particularly the schools of Mahayana and Zen – the challenge is to transmute them, since they are viewed as the distorted forms of more fundamental qualities. In Buddhist iconography these three are represented symbolically by the cockerel (desire), pig (ignorance) and snake (hate or aggression), which chase each

other endlessly around the hub of the famous *Bhava-chakra*, or wheel of life. They comprise the dynamo, as it were, of the wheel.

The poisons are also known as 'the magic potions' - the elements which keep the wheel endlessly rotating. Without them life would be inconceivable but, as depicted in the *Bhava-cakra,* the wheel is embraced by *Yama*, the god of death, who holds it in his claws and consumes it even as it rotates. The cycle of existence is a continuous arising and dying – an eternal recurrence. Neither birth nor death ultimately prevail but endlessly circle each other and cause suffering to all species on account of the transience and impermanence of everything.

But even as we are subject to the suffering which change brings, Buddhism holds that we have an antidote inside us which can free us from the effects of the three poisons. In the Buddhist view this antidote is Buddha nature – compassionate mind - more fundamental than the more selfish, egocentric elements of human nature we so often regard as innate and unchanging. Buddha nature is present in all human beings and, though obscured by our drives, helps us gain detachment from the wheel of life even while subject to it

Compassionate mind and the enchanted loom

Buddha nature - or compassionate mind - goes by many names. Compassion is the knowledge of the truth of our fundamental interdependency and of the inner connection between all living and "non-living" phenomena, the antidote to separateness. Psychological science shows increasing interest in this today. In addition to our instinctual drives psychologists are beginning to recognise we have an affective, fundamental capacity enabling us to understand and empathise with others and, in doing so, to experience states of peacefulness, calmness and interconnectedness.

Remarkably, modern neuroscience has also shown that the capacity to feel compassion leads to physiological changes in the body, strengthening the immune system and other systems relating to general health. This applies to compassion for

oneself as well as to others. The psychologist, Paul Gilbert, has also written extensively about the part compassion plays in our personal sense of well-being and, interestingly, in his latest book he has teamed up with a former Buddhist monk to write about mindfulness and compassion. [13]

The Dalai Lama agrees that instincts like anxiety and aggression, far from being innate, are contingent on ever-changing biological, social, situational, and environmental factors. Our nature, as modern neuroscience also now suggests, is not a fixed, innate given but has a plasticity that can be moulded by our minds. The human brain is - they have discovered - a plastic organ, essentially connected, and responsive to the life around it and the mind within. Sharon Begley, for instance, challenges the accepted scientific view that the brain is hard-wired from birth. For her it is "the enchanted loom", demonstrating a plasticity all the way from birth to old age: "The brain is sculpted by life and retains the imprints of experiences an animal has had and the behaviours it has carried out". [14] This is particularly evident in a child when the "sculpting" of the brain crucially depends on the quality of love and nurturing it receives from its parents. As Sue Gerhardt explains in *Why Love Matters*, the love of parents for their child directly enhances the inter-connective potential of the child's brain as she grows up. Conversely, emotional neglect stunts it. [15]

The Tibetans emphasize the importance of awareness of what they term "the four immeasurables", the four infinite qualities of the mind - joy, compassion, kindness, and equanimity - fundamental qualities we are all heir to. They may not come spontaneously, but we can train ourselves to experience them. The Tibetans offer ways of doing so - training in the power of the mind. But we can also begin to see and experience it today in the practice of "mindfulness", a meditation technique which is now offered to help people cope with many of the symptoms of physical and emotional pain - anxiety and panic disorders, stress, and relationship difficulties etc. Jon Kabat-Zinn's *Full Catastrophe Living*, for example, has shown how this power of the mind, when harnessed and directed, can transform "ordinary" people's lives. [16] In Britain this has been taken up by the work of Mark Williams and colleagues at their centre in Oxford. [17]

Indra's net

In his book, *The Joy of Living*, Yongey Mingyur Rinpoche writes of the connections, or "entanglements" - as they are known to physicists - between subatomic particles that aren't readily apparent to the human mind - or to a microscope - and refers to the scientific belief that all matter was connected as a single point at the start of the big bang that created our universe. Scientists even suggest that it is theoretically possible, though unproven so far, that whatever affects one particle affects every other.

Mingyur Rinpoche defines compassion as "essentially the recognition that everyone and everything is a reflection of everyone and everything else" which he explains by reference to the mythical story of the Hindu god, Indra's net, described in the ancient *Avatamsaka Sutra*. [18] According to the legend, at every inter-connection in this infinite net hangs a polished and infinitely faceted jewel, which reflects all the facets of every other jewel in the net. Since the net, the number of jewels, and the facets of every jewel are infinite, the number of reflections is infinite as well. Any alteration of any of the jewels shows up in all the other jewels. Such is the potential, Mingyur Rinpoche believes, of the jewel of the human mind.

NOTES

1 The exploration of happiness and joy is, in fact, often felt to be absent from the orthodoxies of the psychoanalytic project.

2 See, for instance, Richard Layard's book, *Happiness. Lessons from a New Science ,* in which he draws on cognitive science to suggest how the conscious direction of the mind offers to bring us a degree of psychological control and security in place, and independent, of reliance on material possessions.

3 Ricard Schooch *The Secrets of HAPPINESS: Three thousand years of searching for the good life.* London: Profile books, 2006, 2007.

4 Adam Phillips and Barbara Taylor, *On Kindness* London: Hamish Hamilton, 2009.

5 Rebecca Solnit, *A Paradise Built in Hell. The Extraordinary Communities That Arise in Disaster.* Viking, 2009 p 94

vi Ibid. This passage also quoted in Bill McKibben's review, 'In the Face of Catastrophe: A Surprise' in the *New York Review of Books* November 5, 2009 pp 50-52

[7] Matthieu Ricard, *Happiness: A Guide to Developing Life's Most Important Skill.* Translated by Jesse Browner. Foreword by Daniel Goleman. Atlantic books, 2007. Published in the US, 2006, in France, 2003.

[8] HH Dalai Lama and Harold C. Cutler, *The Art of Happiness: A Handbook for Living.* Coronet, 1999, 1998. See also their *The Art of Happiness in a Troubled World.* Hodder, 2009.

[9] There are a growing number of English translations and commentaries but see Jamgon Kongtrul, *The Great Path of Awakening: The Classic Guide to Lojong, a Tibetan Buddhist Practice for Cultivating the Heart of Compassion,* translated by Ken McLeod. Shambhala Classics, 1987, 2005. Also Chogyam Trungpa, *Training the Mind and Cultivating Loving-Kindness,* Shambhala 1981, 1986, 1993.

[10] The quotes are from Jamgon Kongtrul/Kevin McLeod but see also *Essential Mind Training: Tibetan Wisdom for Daily Life* translated, edited and introduced by Thupten Jinpa. Wisdom 2011.

[11] B. Alan Wallace, *The Seven-Point Mind Training: A Tibetan Method for Cultivating Mind and Heart* Snow Lion, 1992, 2004, 2012, pp 59-67.

[12] Ibid. p 61.

[13] Paul Gilbert, *The Compassionate Mind: A New Approach to Life's Challenges.* Constable, 2009, 2010, 2013, p 48, see note 12. Paul Gilbert and Choden, *Mindful Compassion: Using the Power of Mindfulness and Compassion to Transform Our Lives,* Constable & Robinson, 2013. You can see these themes also emerging in his earlier *Overcoming Depression*, based on his extensive clinical experience within the mental health services.

[14] Sharon Begley, *The Plastic Mind: New Science Reveals our Extraordinary Potential to Transform Ourselves,* foreword by the Dalai Lama, preface by Daniel Goleman, London: Constable 2009, (New York: Ballantine, 2007). P 44-45.

[15] Sue Gerhardt, *Why Love Matters: How affection shapes a baby's brain,* Brunner-Routledge, 2004.

[16] Jon Kabat-Zinn, *Full Catastrophe Living: How to cope with stress, pain and illness using mindfulness meditation,* Piatkus, 2006, 1990 and his more recent *Coming To Our Senses: Healing Ourselves and the World Through Mindfulness* Piatkus, 2005.

[17] Mark Williams and Danny Penman, *Mindfulness: A practical guide to Finding Peace in a Frantic World,* foreword by Jon Kabat-Zinn, Piatkus, 2012, 2011.

[18] Yongey Mingyur Rinpoche with Eric Swanson, *The Joy of Living: Unlocking the Secrets and Science of Happiness,* foreword by Daniel Goleman, Bantam 2009, 2007. Pp 173-4