

Compassion

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The Dalai Lama once stated, "If you want others to be happy, practice compassion. If you want to be happy, practice compassion" (Tenzin Gyatso, 14th Dalai Lama, as quoted in *Cognitively-Based Compassion Training Manual* OB 4). But just what is compassion? According to the *Cognitively-Based Compassion Training (CBCT) Manual*, compassion entails both action and intention, that is, "Compassion requires the wish to alleviate the suffering of another" (*CBCT Manual* OB 1). Many words are often confused with compassion; some of those words include empathy, sympathy, affection, and love. But these experiences are not compassion. For example, the *CBCT Manual* states that sympathy relies on feelings of pity and sorrow for someone's misfortune while empathy incorporates the ability to recognize and be sensitive to the experience of others, whether that is joy or sorrow. Further, affection is a deep endearment and tenderness for others while, lastly, love is the wish for others to be happy. These states are easily confused with compassion because they share the same basic concept: to show some sort of support for others. With these misconceptions of compassion, according to the *CBCT Manual*, comes the misguided belief that individuals help one another primarily to enhance their own happiness. Sympathy, empathy, affection and love do not enhance an individual's happiness like compassion does; rather, compassion allows the individual to feel a sense of purpose when helping other people for their own good and not for personal gain. Actions alone do not create happiness. There must be a desire for someone else to be happy—or at least not to be suffering. Not only do people have to relinquish their selfish desires, but they must work toward alleviating the suffering of another, regardless of their circumstances and the risks to themselves. This is what constitutes compassion.

Throughout the course of the Methodist University (MU) class, Honors 2000 entitled "Great Books and Compassion," the participants aimed to recognize and feel compassion for themselves and for others. While studying the art of compassion, the class explored various questions, such as "How does compassion lead to personal happiness?," "Why do we need to be compassionate? How do we benefit from compassion?," "Is being compassionate a natural state or something we struggle to attain?," and "How do we cultivate compassion?" The class considered these questions through cognitively based compassion training, or CBCT. This training program was developed by Geshe Lobsang Tenzin Negi, A Tibetan Buddhist teacher and professor of Religion at Emory University, as he tried to find a correlation between compassion

meditation and the reduction of depression levels among students. Over the course of several weeks, trainees learn the six stages of CBCT, which can be summarized as, first, developing the right state of mind in an individual; next, developing appreciation, affection and empathy for others; and, finally, reaching the goal of engaged compassion. The overall intention of CBCT is to

gradually learn to relate to experiences without getting immediately caught up in them, transforming the way an individual experiences craving and aversion. That in turn allows an individual to practice self-compassion, because they now have the tools to gradually wean themselves away from emotions and thought patterns that lead to suffering, by not giving in to them, and instead strengthen constructive emotions and thought patterns that lead to greater well-being and happiness for themselves and others. (*CBCT Manual* section 2)

Self-compassion is the best form of compassion because, at this point in the training, the individual has successfully put others first regardless of personal interest or biases,



CBCT logo. *Compassionatelove.net*, 2013.

promoting a sense of happiness at alleviating others' suffering. The Honors 2000 students used the tools of CBCT to determine how compassionate behavior was exemplified in an MU play, an independent film, and a foreign film, turning for additional guidance to a few Great Books in order to observe the effects of compassion in themselves and in others.

The MU production of *A Young Lady of Property*, written by Horton Foote, revealed insights into compassion. In this play, a young girl lives with her extended family members because her mother has passed away and her father is remarried. Practicing compassion, the family becomes closer when they recognize their similar mindsets, understand their past relationships, and place someone else's needs and desires before their own. The first glimpse of compassion is shown before the events of the story take place. The extended family members have given a home to the young girl, demonstrating that they were willing to put someone else's needs before their own and alleviate her potential suffering as she was not able to take care of herself. CBCT identifies this as the stage of "developing appreciation, affection, and empathy for others" (*CBCT Manual* section 2). Because of the young girl's lack of connection with her immediate family, she is on bad terms with her father and is displeased to find out that he is trying to sell her home. Compassion is again shown when the newly wedded wife urges her husband, the young girl's father, to forget about the home and find money for their future elsewhere. In this way, compassion embodies the cultivation of mindfulness, meaning that in order to incorporate happiness one must be mindful of the actions and/or emotions one projects towards others. The *Tao Te Ching* advises, "Weakness and tenderness may be the pathway to life and the Tao and the mysterious

force of life" (Laozi). The young girl's father shows such "weakness" through his vulnerability to his daughter when he gives in to the idea that he does not need the house to be sold in order to move on with his life. After the father express this vulnerability, the entire family is able to move on and find happiness. Compassion—through intent and action—not only alleviates the young girl's suffering, but brings together the entire family.

The independent film *Lars and the Real Girl*, written by Nancy Oliver, focuses on a middle-aged man named Lars who feels isolated and has drifted into a state of hopelessness, which leads to his purchase of an imaginary friend, a sex doll. At the beginning, Lars's sister-in-law invites him over to alleviate his isolation, but the attempt is not successful. Her gesture is not based in compassion, but in sympathy. It is categorized



Poster for *Lars and the Real Girl*. Sinfield Dot Org (Designer). IMP Awards, 2007 Movie Poster Gallery. Web.

as sympathy because Lars's sister-in-law has only her own agenda in mind when scheduling the invitation, not Lars's interests. Her intent is not for Lars to be happy; rather it is to coax Lars into becoming normal. That is, the sister-in-law feels sorry for Lars and, instead of trying to alleviate Lars's suffering, just wants him to conform to her idea of making things better. However, by accepting Bianca, Lars's sex doll, the community shows a form of compassion. The community members understand that, in order to alleviate Lars's suffering, they must accept what makes him comfortable; only that will make him feel more welcomed and hopeful. Lars experiences compassion when

his family and other members of his community struggle to help him feel more comfortable and less isolated. According to CBCT, "Compassion isn't simply a fickle or irrational emotion, but rather an innate human response embedded into the folds of our brain" (*CBCT Manual* section 1B). The more the community accepts and interacts with Bianca, the more Lars relinquishes his obsession and, with it, his belief that he needs someone else to make him happy. CBCT also states, "when people perform behaviors associated with compassionate love—warm smiles, friendly hand gestures, affirmative forward leans—their bodies produce more oxytocin. This suggests compassion may be self-perpetuating" (*CBCT Manual* section 1B).

A similar instance of compassion occurs in the *Ramayana*, an ancient epic poem narrating the venturous journey of Rama (Rajagopalanchari & Valmiki). Rama has done what he thought best to save the family's reputation as a battle approaches and a man from the family must go off to help. Rama's father, much like Lars, experiences isolation when he is left with nothing but the hope that his son will return and restore the family. Rama shows compassion to his father when he willingly takes his place in battle and represents the family. The effect of compassion in the two stories is that both Rama and Lars ultimately regain their place in society, enhancing their relationships and their own happiness.

The Italian film *Terraferma*, directed by Emanuele Crialese, demonstrates an interesting struggle between the laws of the land and the laws of the sea, and how compassion towards the enemy can settle this dispute. Buddhism's advice in such a situation is to address conflicts with both a "soft belly and a strong back." In the movie, the issues between the immigrant mother and the Sicilian mother who is taking care of her are caused by a lack of sympathy and compassion. According to the Buddhist concept of Jen, "a person of Jen or humanity who finds happiness and brings it to others, brings the good of others to completion and does not bring the bad in others to completion" (Keltner & Simon-Thomas 8B). This message from Buddhist scriptures denotes that in order to create happiness in a world that is corrupt, such as the one in the movie, one must work toward alleviating the suffering of others. Compassion is given to the immigrants when they receive help from a Sicilian family who could have easily thrown them off the boat. Not only does this compassion alleviate suffering, but it also creates happiness for the immigrants and allows the family to grow closer together. According to Keltner and Simon-Thomas's course, *The Science of Happiness*, "Kindness, often motivated by compassion, significantly boosts happiness" (Keltner & Simons-Thomas section 3). When the local people learn that the unborn child the immigrant mother is carrying was conceived through rape in a forced bargain for her family to gain freedom, the Sicilian mother is more willing to offer compassion to the immigrant and her family. Because of the sadness that the immigrant mother feels, the relationship between the two women grows stronger. The "soft belly and a strong back" guidance from Buddhism highlights how the Sicilian family's compassion leads them to take risks: they could have easily reported the immigrants to the police, but instead show compassion and take care of these strangers even though they know how dangerous it could be. These dynamics also reveal the distinction between compassion and sympathy. The Sicilian mother feels saddened by the rape the immigrant mother suffered and is later able to find compassion to help the woman, without expecting anything in return; sympathy would not have entailed such active assistance and risk-taking.

In order for these stories to gain a "happily ever after" ending, compassion is needed. None of these situations could have had happy outcomes without some form of deliberate struggle to alleviate others' suffering. These films, this play, and some of The Great Books help the audience to view compassion as challenging but rewarding. In an article titled "Can Compassion Change the World?," Daniel Goleman tells an interviewer that "[w]e need to get all of our destructive and disturbing emotions under control before we act in the world... If we can manage our distressing emotions in advance, and have calm, clarity, and compassion as we act, then we'll act for the good, no matter what we do" (Suttie). Certainly, leading a compassionate life is not easy, but striving to alleviate someone else's suffering demands accepting the necessary risks in the hope of bringing others happiness. Again, the reader may recall the words of the Dalai Lama: "If you want others to be happy, practice compassion. If you want to be happy, practice compassion" (Dalai Lama XIV, as quoted in *CBCT Manual* OB 4). It is important to realize that selfishly pursuing happiness on one's own will not garner long-term happiness, but focusing on someone else's happiness may. When an individual commits to compassion—the deliberate intent and action to reduce or alleviate someone else's suffering—he or she just may reap happiness. For these reasons, practicing compassion is something that every individual needs to pursue.

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