

Self-Compassion i: Spiritual and Psychological Roots

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— His Holiness the Dalai Lama —*

Introduction

Over the past decade, the practice of self-compassion has emerged as one of the fastest growing and most promising areas of Positive Psychology research. In psychological terms, self-compassion is most commonly defined in three parts as follows:

“Self-compassion entails being kind and understanding toward oneself in instances of pain or failure rather than being harshly self-critical; perceiving one’s experiences as part of the larger human experience rather than seeing them as isolating; and holding painful thoughts and feelings in mindful awareness rather than over-identifying with them.” Neff K (2003). [Self-Compassion: An alternative Conceptualization of a Healthy Attitude Toward Oneself](#).

Researchers have developed instruments for measuring this important human capacity, explored its relationship to a variety of other psychological constructs as well as mental health issues, and begun to develop interventions that bring it into the clinical setting.

The Buddhist Background of Self-Compassion

As you will see in Lesson II, the two American pioneers in this field, psychologists Kristin Neff and Christopher Germer, both came to their personal interest and practice of self-compassion through their connection with the Buddhist Insight Meditation tradition. The roots of each of the three parts of Neff’s definition can be traced to Buddhist practice and philosophy.

At the core of the Buddha’s teachings is his approach to suffering as expressed in The Four Noble Truths. The First Noble Truth is simply an acknowledgement of suffering as the single most cogent common denominator of the experience of all human beings. The Buddha’s traditional definition of suffering includes forms of suffering commonly addressed in Western psychotherapy: “sorrow, pain, lamentation, grief and despair” (Bhikkhu Ñanamoli and Bhikkhu Bodhi (trans.) (1995). [The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha: A Translation of the Majjhima Nikaya.](#)) The First Noble Truth is thus a parallel to the second aspect of Neff’s definition. As human beings, we are united in our encountering of suffering. None of us are left out. We’re all in it together.

Mindfulness, the third factor in the definition above, is the central Buddhist practice of insight meditation, or *vipassana*. Mindfulness is traditionally defined as a key element in the Fourth Noble Truth where it is viewed as the antidote to the dis-ease of suffering. In the Buddhist scriptures mindfulness is defined in terms of contemplation or attentiveness to four aspects of human experience: the body, the pleasant, neutral or unpleasant feeling tones of our subjective experience, the mind, and the experiences of mind ([The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha](#), p. 1100) Mindfulness involves intentionally and non-judgmentally paying attention to one’s present moment experience. It is this process of stepping back, so to speak, to be the witness of the flow of one’s own conscious experience, including one’s thoughts and emotions, that protects against over-identification. The cultivation of this non-judgmental approach undermines our tendency to be self-critical. (For more on mindfulness see our courses on this topic under the course category [“Mindfulness.”](#))

Other Buddhist practices such as *Metta*, which translates to Lovingkindness, increase compassion including self-compassion. The third quality in Neff’s definition of self-compassion is roughly equivalent to the capacities of lovingkindness which starts with compassion directed towards oneself and one’s own suffering. For example, to develop compassion, the practitioner begins with a focus on someone they know who is experiencing great physical or mental pain. The instructions involve visualizing that person as best as you can then mentally reciting a simple phrase, such as “may you be free of pain and sorrow,” while directing the feeling expressed by that phrase towards the visualized person. (Salzberg S. (1995). [Lovingkindness: The Revolutionary Art of Happiness.](#) p . 116.) Next the practitioner shifts to direct compassion towards the following recipients: “self, benefactor, friend, neutral person, difficult person, all living beings, all females, all males, all beings in the ten directions” ([Lovingkindness](#) p. 116). With these latter focal points, the practice moves into what could be called the boundless stage where compassion is directed towards particular classes of beings without number and infinitely in all directions (to the north, the northwest, above, below, etc.)

These then are self-compassion’s three Buddhist roots: 1) That suffering is a universal human experience, 2) Our common experience of suffering connects us with others, and 3) Coping with our own suffering with both mindful attention and a kind and compassionate attitude reduces suffering. According to Buddhist Insight Meditation teacher, Sharon Salzberg,

What we are doing in compassion meditation is purifying and transforming our relationship to suffering, whether it is our own or that of others. Being able to acknowledge suffering, to open to it, and respond to it with a tenderness of heart allows us to join with all beings, and to realize that we are never alone. ([Lovingkindness](#), p. 117)

In a passage that presages Neff’s contrasting of self-compassion with self-esteem (See [Self-Compassion II](#)), Salzberg writes “If you are filled with judgment or condemnation of yourself or of others, can you revise your perceptions to see the world in terms of suffering and the end of suffering, instead of good and bad?” ([Lovingkindness](#), p. 117)

Similarly, Neff sees such judgments as an inherent problem with self-esteem. (Neff K (2003). [Self-Compassion: An alternative Conceptualization of a Healthy Attitude Toward Oneself.](#)) Along these lines it is also interesting to consider the Buddhist notion of *mana*. Mana, is often translated as conceit. However this single English word is highly inadequate since mana includes three possibilities: the views that one is either superior, equal, or inferior to another. It really connotes that psychological structure by which

we measure our self-worth against our perceptions of others. In Buddhist psychology, *mana* is viewed as a detrimental construct yet one that is highly resistant to change, only falling away at the highest level of spiritual attainment. (Nyanatiloka. (1980). [Buddhist Dictionary: Manual of Buddhist Terms and Doctrines](#), p. 114.)

Guided Buddhist Meditations

For a Buddhist lovingkindness meditation, guided by Tara Brach, PhD, psychologist and founding teacher of the Insight Meditation Community of Washington, DC (IMCW), go to Brach's online [Guided Meditations](#) webpage, then scroll down to the "Guided Meditation – Metta Practice," dated 4/20/2011. (31 minutes)

Watch the following video for an example of a compassion meditation, called Tonglen, from the Tibetan Buddhist tradition, led by Tulku Tsori Rinpoche.

Psychological Roots

Self-compassion also has roots in Western Psychology, particularly in the Humanistic Psychology movement. Abraham Maslow, who in many ways presaged the Positive Psychology movement (See the lesson "[Introduction to Positive Psychology](#)"), proposed something like self-compassion in his classic *Toward a Psychology of Being*. (Maslow AH (1968). [Toward a Psychology of Being](#).) Maslow lamented our human tendency to fearfully defend against our own psychological pain and shortcomings in the service of self-esteem. As an alternative, he proposed what he called "B-perception," a way of relating to oneself characterized by a forgiving, nonjudgmental, loving acceptance. Carl Rogers offered a similar approach with his "unconditional positive regard" applied both towards clients and oneself. (Rogers CR (1961). [On Becoming a Person](#).)

Other humanistic psychologists have chimed in with further variations. Among these are Albert Ellis and Maryhelen Snyder. Ellis' preferred term was "unconditional self-acceptance," characterized by a self-forgiving acknowledgment of one's own faults and grounded in the belief that human existence has inherent worth. (Ellis A (1973). [Humanistic Psychotherapy: The Rational-Emotive Approach](#).) Snyder's notion of an "internal empathizer" that explored one's own experience with "curiosity and compassion" also touches on two parts of Neff's definition. (Snyder M (1994). [The development of social intelligence in psychotherapy: Empathic and dialogic processes](#).)

Later Judith Jordan, writing in the feminist tradition, offered "self-empathy" as an important psychological construct. She defined self-empathy as a way of relating to ourselves in which the parts of ourselves towards which we have been critical are now "accepted and responded to in a caring, affectively present and re-connected manner." (Jordan JV (1991). Empathy, mutuality and therapeutic change: Clinical implications of a relational model. In Jordan JV, et al. (Eds.), [Women's Growth in Connection: Writings from the Stone Center](#) (pp. 283-290).

Self-compassion also bears some resemblance to strategies for emotional regulation. As such, self-compassion can be seen as a form of emotional intelligence, popularized in the mid 1990s by Daniel Goleman's book, [Emotional Intelligence: Why It Can Matter More Than IQ](#). (New York: Bantam Dell, 2004) Emotional intelligence is generally described as the ability to attend to one's own affective states leading to the skillful use of information and emotional energy in life activities (Salovey P, Mayer, JD (1990). [Emotional intelligence](#). In the following video, Goleman introduces the concept of emotional intelligence.

Another important precursor for self-compassion in psychology is the study of self-esteem. In crafting this relatively new niche, Neff compares and contrasts self-compassion to the preceding decades' work on the topic of self-esteem. This theme is addressed in [Self-Compassion II](#).

Resources

For a perspective that bridges Buddhism and psychology, listen to these two talks by Tara Brach, PhD, psychotherapist and Buddhist teacher:

["The Healing Power of Self-compassion, Part I."](#) (54 min.)

["The Healing Power of Self-compassion, Part 2."](#) (54 min.) (54 min.)

A deep theme in Brach's teaching is the importance of radical self-acceptance. For Brach's article on this topic in relation to healing trauma in psychotherapy, read "[The power of radical acceptance: Healing trauma through the Integration of Buddhist meditation and psychotherapy.](#)"

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