

Thupten Jingpa on Compassion and Mindfulness

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Published online: 14 October 2015
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We recently had the pleasure of talking with Thupten Jingpa, who has been the principal English translator of the Dalai Lama for the past 30 years. The theme of the conversation was the interrelated practices of compassion and mindfulness, including (i) their role in contemporary society, (ii) the traditional context for learning and applying these techniques, (iii) the utilization of compassion and mindfulness in contemporary behavioral interventions, (iv) issues relating to teacher training, and (v) whether lessons learnt from more than two decades of researching and rolling-out mindfulness-based interventions can be carried forward in order to facilitate the effective integration of interventional approaches based on compassion and loving-kindness meditation. The meeting and subsequent discussion was prompted by the release of Jingpa's new book (*A Fearless Heart: How the Courage to be Compassionate Can Transform Our Lives*), as well as by his work relating to the practice and scientific study of compassion meditation.

ES: Over the course of the last 50 to 100 years and speaking in general terms, would you say that people today are more or less compassionate?

TJ: That is a very difficult question. I would say that probably there was a time soon after the Second World War ... that compassion had an important place in the larger societal discourse. You can see this in the way the human rights charter was shaped. You can see it in the way the welfare systems were created in the Western world ... Then probably from perhaps

the 1970s or as early as the 1960s, things started to change as Western societies became more materially affluent. And then I think compassion kind of disappeared, and the larger public discourse and economic discourse was really around self-interest, efficiency and competitiveness.

Now I think we are kind of going back in a circle. I think there is a beginning of an interest in compassion, partly because there has been a small revolution taking place in the scientific world about the new discoveries from animal research and empathy research, which are pointing out how caring instincts and nurturing instincts are such an important part of the evolutionary process ... Also, I think that because of globalization and the increasing proximity of so many different cultures coming face-to-face, people are beginning to recognise that there needs to be some kind of appreciation of what binds us together as common humanity ... It is an interesting time, but we did forget [about compassion] for the last 40 or 50 years.

ES: So you think that compassion may well be the glue that holds society together?

TJ: Definitely.

ES: Was that the inspiration that caused you to formulate Compassion Cultivation Training (CCT)?

TJ: Partly that. Partly the inspiration for CCT was really the tremendous success of mindfulness in the West. It gave me the courage to really think that if mindfulness can be received so well, something like compassion practice can also be received well. And the beauty of combining the two is that compassion brings in explicitly the role of emotion in mental development ... [There is also] the ethical dimension of intention which in mindfulness is kind of less explicit, whereas [in] compassion

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practice that part of the questioning is more explicit, so that was one inspiration. The second is that there is a lot of new research both in psychology and neuroscience, that really makes us have a better understanding of how mental training, like meditation, actually might work. So those are the things that really gave me the courage to try to formulate at least compassion as a concept, and articulate the compassion practices [within] the larger framework of current psychology.

ES: It worries me a little bit about what has happened to mindfulness, we have taken mindfulness out of its original context.

TJ: Sure.

ES: We are teaching it as a standalone intervention. In fact, it appears there is a new mindfulness intervention born every day.

TJ: Yes, yes.

ES: People are undergoing an eight-week training course and then they become – after one year’s experience and one eight-week course – “mindfulness teachers”. Don’t you think this is a bit dangerous?

TJ: I think this is an interesting question. In a way, I have had this conversation within our *Mind and Life* community because many of the key people in the mindfulness movement make part of the *Mind and Life* family. Jon Kabat-Zinn has been on the board for a long time. I think one of the interesting things about mindfulness is that it does teach individuals some skills to pay conscious attention to what’s happening in their life. It also teaches individuals some skill to be able to disengage from the contents of their thoughts, which tend to dominate the way they see themselves. In this sense, mindfulness does bring very important life skills to ordinary people who would otherwise never have been exposed to these skills.

ES: Yes, I agree with that. But what I am worried about is the lack of training given to the people who are supposed to be instructing individuals with mental health issues.

TJ: Yes sure, so I think it is important that people at least on the teaching end of the mindfulness movement, are consciously aware of the context in which these kind of practices initially evolved. This is a larger discussion that needs to happen. Already within the mindfulness camp, if you look at the more senior teachers, they bring meta/loving-kindness practice or compassion practice as part of their mindfulness course. Very few senior teachers today teach mindfulness alone. They may call it mindfulness practice or a mindfulness course, but they do bring meta or compassion as part of it, because they understand in the end that mindfulness, as it is taught purely in the modern sense, isn’t enough.

ES: In the classical texts, it is very important to establish oneself in the practice of loving-kindness before moving on to the practice of compassion, for example.

TJ: Yes, definitely.

ES: So would you say that teaching *en masse* to many hundreds, perhaps thousands, of people, is a bit precarious because at one time we would teach these practices in small groups?

TJ: Yes. I think here it depends upon what your goal is. I think large scale teaching, if the goal is to help individuals acquire basic skills of disciplining their mind, basic skills of bringing some element of [an] active approach to their mental life, then I think that it’s perfectly fine. The danger is for them to think that this is the sum total of Buddhist teaching. There is a danger because then you detach these practices completely from their ethical roots, people forget about their responsibility to others. People forget about the larger motivation of why they are doing these kind of things. So it really depends on the individual teachers who are delivering the courses and also the goal they have in mind.

ES: I wrote a paper that was published in the *Australia and New Zealand Journal of Psychiatry* whereby I mentioned the development of *Second-Generation Mindfulness-based Interventions*, which are overtly spiritual in nature. I don’t see any harm in using the word spiritual. I know it is a little taboo in the industrialized society, but I think people should really be getting used to it. What do you think?

TJ: I think one of the interesting things about mindfulness, is that the initial emphasis on the secularization of the language really makes it less threatening to many people. It offers a very, very, skilful route to get to that experience, and then as people’s experience deepens, there is no denying the fact that it does open to deeper spirituality, however it may be formulated. And those who use it purely as a skill, purely as a technique, they never get to that deeper level of experience anyway. I think that this is a kind of organic process.

WVG: There is a potential area for concern, though, if mindfulness interventions and compassion interventions are advertised or marketed as being “non-spiritual”, but then subsequently – as has been done in the case of Jon Kabat-Zinn – they are described as being “embodiments of the Dharma”. On the one hand, they are “non-spiritual”, but on the other hand, they “embody the Dharma”. Isn’t there a danger we can confuse participants with that type of message?

TJ: True. I had a conversation with Jon Kabat-Zinn on this and he tends to use the word “Dharma” in a very generic

sense. Not in the specifically Buddhist sense. I remember, in the early days, having an argument with him and a couple of other people. I said “I have no problem at all with taking something, like the technique of mindfulness, out of the Buddhist context and bringing it to the larger world, so long as we don’t make the next claim and say that somehow we have captured the essence of the Buddhist teachings”. I said: “You can’t have it both ways. You cannot say that this is Buddhism and at the same time say that this is secular”.

ES: You can’t have your cake and eat it at the same time!

TJ: What happens is, it becomes a kind of insult to the traditional Buddhist practices, because then what we are suggesting is that what’s left [after the removal of mindfulness] is just cultural mumbo jumbo, which has no relevance outside the traditional Asian context. I think that is a very large claim ... It may come from the Buddhist techniques. But then to say that this is the “heart of Buddhist meditation” and somehow [that] you have taken the juice out of the traditional Buddhist practice, that I think is a problem.

ES: Based on a comprehensive systematic review that I recently conducted and that was published in the journal *Mindfulness*, although research findings relating to compassion and loving-kindness interventions are promising, there really is insufficient evidence still to open this up to the general public. Mindfulness has been researched for a while, and there is quite a degree of evidence now. But loving-kindness and compassion meditation are relatively new to the research field. Do you think we are jumping the gun a little bit?

TJ: Yes. This is where the problem is. The thing is because of the tremendous success of mindfulness in the general popular consciousness, people are looking for even a tiny finding in some research paper and picking it out ... At this point, most of the studies are very crude ... We have no understating of the mechanisms by which these practices work. It is at a very, very, early stage.

WVG: Talking about early days and jumping the gun, you will no doubt be familiar with the condition of compassion fatigue?

TJ: Yes.

WVG: In these eight-week compassion interventions, participants – in some cases with mental health issues – are invited or instructed as the training progresses, to take upon themselves the suffering of others. This is after just eight weeks. Actually, it is after just one weekly meeting eight times. Is that wise? Don’t we need to examine the risks of participants developing compassion fatigue and other related conditions?

TJ: I think this is a very important question because we were very conscious of that problem when we were developing the Stanford program. We do have the eight-week active compassion [program], which is a sort of Tonglen meditation, but even there we have designed it in such a way that [taking others’ suffering] is not an integral part of the training. It is almost like an option. Also, Tonglen meditation is introduced in such a way that when you take others’ suffering, you imagine an orb of light at your heart where the suffering that you take from others disappears or dissolves. It is not really taking it upon yourself ... When we give out something, we give more in the form of assurances and encouragement, rather than our strength. We were conscious of this and also the instructors are explicitly told to look out for the individual’s reactions and natural aversion to suffering ... So there are all these potential danger areas. That’s why people who are teaching the courses really need to be very conscious. For example, in the Stanford compassion training, the instructors go through six months of training with three residential weekend retreats. They have quite a large amount of science as part of their training as well, and a lot of ... these cultural issues [and] potential areas of misunderstanding are flushed out. There needs to be a lot of careful thinking.

WVG: Six months of training sounds like a long time, but relative to the traditional mode of practice, six months would not constitute a solid grounding in the practice. Is six months long enough to really embody the practice and then to teach it?

ES: Six months is a blink of an eye really.

TJ: We had two courses, one was nine months long and the other was six months long. The important component [of the courses] is that each instructor trainee is connected with a mentor. So they have a mentoring relationship where they have to deal with this mentor on a one-to-one basis through Skype. Part of their training also involves teaching courses which then need to be taped and critiqued by the mentor. So it is not a very cost efficient system, it is a laborious system. Also the certification at the end is contingent upon the mentor signing off. So just because you have finished the course doesn’t mean that you will get the certificate. We have trained over 100 people and we felt that about 15 of them could not be given the certificate because they just didn’t have enough ...

WVG: Enough compassion!?

TJ: Yes, not enough natural compassion!

ES: Would you say that CCT makes part of the second generation or first generation of mindfulness-based interventions? That is to say, the second generation of mindfulness-based interventions are overtly spiritual.

TJ: Well, that is an interesting question. We do not use the word spiritual at all, but we do talk about values. So in that sense, there is a very explicit discussion of ethics and also there is a very explicit discussion about how compassion can inform one's conscious intention, and how compassion is the moral anchor and compass. So in that sense, implicit in the discourse is the spiritual question. You could say it is part of the second generation.

ES: I'm interested in the concept of self-compassion. I have researched extensively the Buddhist literature and I can't come up with that exact term because as part of the complex and profound process of meditation, self-compassion is explicit in all things that we do. There is no actual "self-compassion" mentioned. Why do we take practices out of their original context, make something of them, and give them a new name?

TJ: Well, in the Theravada tradition probably it's not there, but in the Tibetan tradition there is an explicit discussion of it. The word self-compassion is not used but the word self-caring is used. ... The idea here is that, if you don't have a genuine sense of concern for your own suffering and needs, then you don't have the point of reference which allows you to then connect with others' sufferings and others' needs. So that is explicit in the Tibetan tradition, but then it is actually assumed that you have [self-compassion], unless you have a problem. So there is no self-compassion practice per se, there you are right. There is no difference between the Theravada and the Tibetan tradition, there is no explicit self-compassion practice because it is kind of assumed that you have it ... The thing is, when we bring compassion practice into the Western context, then people struggle with self-compassion and that is why we have to make a big thing out of this, because it is a real challenge. But on the other hand, I don't agree with my fellow Buddhist teachers who argue that without genuine self-compassion, you cannot feel compassion for others. That is not true. Compassion for others is a very powerful natural instinct. But to have a sustained compassion for others, I think self-compassion is an important foundation.

WVG: You mentioned that in the Tibetan tradition the term "self-caring" occurs. Is there a specific discourse in the Tibetan canon where it occurs, or do you just mean it occurs in the practice tradition that has developed on the back of those discourses?

TJ: In the Tibetan tradition, for example, there is a concept called "*ngé jung*" which is translated as "renunciation", but that is not really the right word. It is an aspiration for genuine freedom for oneself, so that's "*ngé jung*". And then [there is] "*Bodhicitta*" which is the aspiration for freedom for others. They are acting as two sides of the same coin. The idea is that if you do not have a genuine recognition of your own situation of suffering and aspiration for freedom from suffering, you

cannot have a genuine aspiration of freedom from suffering for others. This is the context in which the language of self-caring comes up. It is not only part of the practice but it is also a kind of theoretical discussion or discourse.

ES: The CCT is at its beginning. Yes?

TJ: Yes.

ES: Are you at all worried that it is going to become a little bit like mindfulness. I don't know if you have heard the term "McMindfulness"? It has been thrown around a lot. Can I ask your views on that? I would be a little bit worried that there will be a dilution of the core meanings of compassion.

TJ: I think there is a danger of that if we just keep to self-compassion. There are movements – for example, there is a course at the University of California, San Diego – which focusses just on self-compassion. If we are only interested in self-compassion, then there is that danger. However, if self-compassion practice is part of a larger framework where compassion is the overall goal, then I don't think there will be a danger because compassion already takes into account your perspective on others, and that is built into the very notion of compassion. Because even the English word [compassion] means "to suffer with" – the other is already built into the very concept of what they mean by compassion. So long as we don't detach self-compassion practice from the larger framework of compassion in general, I don't see any danger. But there is a danger – because self-compassion is so powerful, so needed – that people will just go for that.

WVG: What do you think are the key mechanisms that underlie therapeutic change during compassion therapy?

TJ: That, I think, is difficult to say for me because I don't have any therapeutic background. But I think in the case of self-compassion probably one of the things that is happening is some kind of re-parenting goes on.

ES: Re-parenting?

TJ: Yes, I mean, you can call it self-parenting where one's relation to oneself is being somehow realigned. One of the speculations ... is that a lot of people who suffer from high levels of self-criticism and negative self-judgement have learnt to internalize a self-protection mechanism, where they don't tap into a self-soothing system, self-caring system. Part of the practice of therapy involves allowing them to learn to tap into that mechanism of self-caring and self-soothing. That might be another interesting thing that is going on. But for general compassion, I think one of the reasons by which why the therapy works is probably because it enables people to feel a deeper connection

with others. When you feel a deeper connection with others, then there is less danger for loneliness and feelings of isolation.

ES: So, we begin a teaching of interconnectedness, really.

WVG: Traditionally, of course, all of these practices – compassion and mindfulness – are taught with the understanding that essentially there is no self. Is that a concept you introduce in some way to participants?

TJ: No we don't because it is potentially risky, initially. But there is an element of no-self teaching that is brought in, which is also in mindfulness. It is to question the constructs of our thoughts because more of our self-identity and self-image is rooted in a particular narrative that we have built up ourselves. We get fixated, and we see them as a static self-image. So, part of the no-self teaching that is really helpful is to question that, and to really bring home the point that those are just constructs of our own thoughts, and the content of our thoughts are not the reality of our being. Those kind of things are much more helpful and skilful. But the basic questioning of the existence of self at this stage is probably very destabilising.

ES: A little bit of a scary place to be.

TJ: Yes, it is, yes.

WVG: Going back to the beginning of our discussion, you mentioned that there has been a kind of fluctuation in the extent to which people are compassionate. You mentioned there have been increases and decreases in that respect and that perhaps now, we are beginning to embody compassion a bit more. How does that compare with the view in Buddhism that the current era constitutes an era of degeneration of the teachings, the Sanskrit word is “*pashchimadharmā*”? If this is an era where we can expect the teachings to decline and perhaps behavior in general to decline, is it realistic to think that people can, and are, becoming more compassionate?

ES: I think we have to have hope!

TJ: Yes. I think the Buddhist idea of the eras of degeneration and that whole kind of mythology is really from the perceptive of high levels of realisation that individual Buddhist practitioners can attain. I genuinely believe that, when it comes to an individual practitioner's attainment of high levels of *jhanas* and different levels of enlightenment, probably we are going through a degeneration. In the good old days, many of the followers of the Buddha were able to attain Arhat state and powers of seeing quite swiftly. Those days are probably gone. In that sense, yes, it is an era of degeneration.

But on the other hand [and in terms of] qualities like compassion and mindfulness which we are now beginning to see ... we are talking about certain skills that enable us to relate to each other in a more healthy way. I think the reality of the world is such that we are being called to bring these things up. If not for anything, just for survival. For the sanity of the world. I think we are now being challenged to develop these kind of important skills. I think there is no contradiction in the Buddhist believing in degeneration and at the same time the rise in compassion. I don't think there is a contradiction here.

ES: Do you think that Buddhism is still in good shape, is it strong enough to help the industrial world?

TJ: I think so. I think it probably depends on how strong the Buddhist institutions will remain within the traditional Buddhist societies. In order for this kind of conversation to take place, it has to take place from a position of strength. I think countries like Sri Lanka and Thailand where there is less threat compared with Tibet, [there the conversation] is going to be important.

WVG: I would say though that the “Buddhist strongholds”, I am particularly talking now in terms of organised Buddhism, are not necessarily always where authentic and fresh constructions of the Dharma have come from. It has often come from practitioners who have been able to distance themselves from that somehow.

TJ: True. But in order for all those kind of individuals to emerge, you need the larger pool. So I think the survival of the Buddhist tradition in the traditional [Buddhist] societies would have [needed this larger pool]. In the West, a large part of the Buddhist movement is very individually driven. In the West, there is not much sense of loyalty as being [something that is] important, and also there is less importance, emphasis, on believing in a collective mythology of the Buddhist discourse. So in that [relative] sense, the traditional Buddhist societies are still very strong.

ES: Thank you very much indeed, Jingpa.

JP: Thank you. It was a wonderful conversation.

Acknowledgements We would like to thank Rita Marshall for her help with transcribing the interview.

Compliance with Ethical Standards

Conflict of Interest ES and WVG receive payments from academic and trade publishers for writing books on mindfulness and Buddhist practice.