



The ART of
HAPPINESS

A Handbook for Living



**HIS HOLINESS
THE DALAI LAMA**

and

HOWARD C. CUTLER, M.D.

Riverhead Books

a member of Penguin Putnam Inc.

New York 1998

Chapter 7

THE VALUE AND BENEFITS
OF COMPASSION



DEFINING COMPASSION

As our conversations progressed, I discovered that the development of compassion plays a far greater role in the Dalai Lama's life than simply a means to cultivating a feeling of warmth and affection, a means of improving our relationship with others. It became clear, in fact, that as a practicing Buddhist, the development of compassion was an integral part of his spiritual path.

"Given the importance that Buddhism places on compassion as an essential part of one's spiritual development," I asked, "can you more clearly define what you mean by 'compassion'?"

The Dalai Lama replied, "Compassion can be roughly defined in terms of a state of mind that is nonviolent, nonharming, and nonaggressive. It is a mental attitude based on the wish for others to be free of their suffering and is associated with a sense of commitment, responsibility, and respect towards the other."

"In discussing the definition of compassion, the Tibetan word *Tse-wa*, there is also a sense to the word of its being a state of mind that can include a wish for good things for oneself. In developing compassion, perhaps one could begin with the wish that oneself be free of suffering, and then take that natural feeling towards oneself and cultivate it, enhance it, and extend it out to include and embrace others."

"Now, when people speak of compassion, I think that there is often a danger of confusing compassion with attachment. So when we discuss compassion, we must first make a distinction between two types of love or compassion. One kind of compassion is tinged with attachment—the feeling of controlling someone, or loving someone so that person will love you back. This ordinary type of love or compassion is quite partial and biased. And a relationship based on that alone is unstable. That kind of partial relationship, based on perceiving and identifying the person as a friend, may lead to a certain emotional attachment and feeling of closeness. But if there is a slight change in the situation, a disagreement perhaps, or if your friend does something to make you angry, then all of a sudden your mental projection changes, the concept of 'my friend' is no longer there. Then you'll find the emotional attachment evaporating, and instead of that feeling of love and concern, you may have a feeling of hatred. So, that kind of love, based on attachment, can be closely linked with hatred."

"But there is a second type of compassion that is free from such attachment. That is genuine compassion. That kind of compassion isn't so much based on the fact that this person or that person is dear to me. Rather, genuine compassion is based on the rationale that all human beings have an innate desire to be happy and overcome suffering, just like myself. And, just like myself, they have the natural right to fulfill this fundamental aspiration. On the basis of the recognition of this equality and commonality, you develop a sense of affinity and closeness with others. With this as a foundation, you can feel compassion regardless of whether you view the other person as a friend or an enemy. It is based on the other's fundamental rights rather than your own mental projection. Upon this basis, then, you will generate love and compassion. That's genuine compassion.

"So, one can see how making the distinction between these two kinds of compassion and cultivating genuine compassion can be quite important in our day-to-day life. For instance, in marriage there is generally a component of emotional attachment. But I think that if there is a component of genuine compassion as well, based on mutual respect as two human beings, the marriage tends to last a long time. In the case of emotional attachment without compassion, the marriage is more unstable and tends to end more quickly."

The idea of developing a different kind of compassion, a more universal compassion, a kind of generic compassion divorced from personal feeling, seemed like a tall order. Turning it over in my mind, as if thinking aloud, I asked, "But love or compassion is a subjective feeling. It seems that the emotional tone or *feeling* of love or compassion would be the same whether

it was 'tinged with attachment' or 'genuine.' So if the person would experience the same emotion or feeling in both types, why is it important to distinguish between the two?"

With a decisive tone, the Dalai Lama answered, "First, I think that there is a different quality between the feeling of genuine love, or compassion, and love based on attachment. It's not the same feeling. The feeling of genuine compassion is much stronger, much wider; it has a very profound quality. Also, genuine love and compassion are much more stable, more reliable. For example, if you see an animal intensely suffering, like a fish writhing with a hook in its mouth, you might spontaneously experience a feeling of not being able to bear its pain. That feeling isn't based on a special connection with that particular animal, a feeling of 'Oh, that animal is my friend.' In that case you're basing your compassion simply on the fact that that being also has feeling, can experience pain, and has a right not to experience such pain. So, that type of compassion, not mixed with desire or attachment, is much more sound, and more durable in the long run."

Moving deeper into the subject of compassion, I continued, "Now in your example of seeing a fish intensely suffering with a hook in its mouth, you bring up a vital point—that it is associated with a feeling of not being able to bear its pain."

"Yes," said the Dalai Lama. "In fact, in one sense one could define compassion as the feeling of unbearableness at the sight of other people's suffering, other sentient beings' suffering. And in order to generate that feeling one must first have an appreciation of the seriousness or intensity of another's suffering. So, I think that the more fully one understands suffering, and the var-

ious kinds of suffering that we are subject to, the deeper will be one's level of compassion."

I raised the question, "Well, I appreciate the fact that greater awareness of other's suffering can enhance our capacity for compassion. In fact, by definition, compassion involves opening oneself to another's suffering. Sharing another's suffering. But there's a more basic question: Why would we want to take on another's suffering when we don't even want our own? I mean, most of us go to great lengths to avoid our own pain and suffering, even to the point of taking drugs and so on. Why would we then deliberately take on someone else's suffering?"

Without hesitation the Dalai Lama responded, "I feel that there is a significant difference between your own suffering and the suffering you might experience in a compassionate state in which you take upon yourself and share other people's suffering—a qualitative difference." He paused, and then as if effortlessly targeting my own feelings at the moment, he continued, "When you think about your own suffering, there is a feeling of being totally overwhelmed. There is a sense of being burdened, of being pressed under something—a feeling of helplessness. There's a dullness, almost as if your faculties have become numb.

"Now, in generating compassion, when you are taking on another's suffering, you may also initially experience a certain degree of discomfort, a sense of uncomfortableness or unbearableness. But in the case of compassion, the feeling is much different; underlying the uncomfortable feeling is a very high level of alertness and determination because you are voluntarily and deliberately accepting another's suffering for a higher purpose. There is a feeling of connectedness and commitment, a willing-

ness to reach out to others, a feeling of freshness rather than dullness. This is similar to the case of an athlete. While undergoing rigorous training, an athlete may suffer a lot—working out, sweating, straining. I think it can be quite a painful and exhausting experience. But the athlete doesn't see it as a painful experience. The athlete would take it as a great accomplishment, an experience associated with a sense of joy. But if the same person were subject to some other physical work that was not part of his athletic training, then the athlete would think, 'Oh, why have I been subjected to this terrible ordeal?' So the mental attitude makes a tremendous difference."

These few words, spoken with such conviction, lifted me from an oppressed feeling to one of a feeling of the possibility of the resolution of suffering, of transcending suffering.

"You mention that the first step in generating that kind of compassion is an appreciation of suffering. But are there any other specific Buddhist techniques used to enhance one's compassion?"

"Yes. For example in the Mahayana tradition of Buddhism we find two principal techniques for cultivating compassion. These are known as the 'seven-point cause-and-effect' method and the 'exchange and equality of oneself with others.' The 'exchange-and-equality' method is the technique that you'll find in the eighth chapter of Shantideva's *Guide to the Bodhisattva's Way of Life*. But," he said, glancing at his watch and realizing that our time was running out, "I think that we will practice some exercises or meditations on compassion during the public talks later this week."

With this, he smiled warmly and rose to end our session.

THE REAL VALUE OF HUMAN LIFE

Continuing our discussion of compassion in our next conversation, I began, "Now, we've been speaking about the importance of compassion, about your belief that human affection, warmth, friendship, and so on are conditions absolutely necessary for happiness. But I'm just wondering—suppose, let's say, a wealthy businessman came to you and said, 'Your Holiness, you say that warmth and compassion are crucial for one to be happy. But by nature I'm just not a very warm or affectionate person. To be honest I really don't feel particularly compassionate or altruistic. I tend to be a rather rational, practical, and perhaps intellectual person, and I just don't feel those kinds of emotions. Yet, I feel good about my life, I feel happy with my life the way it is. I have a very successful business, friends, and I provide for my wife and children and seem to have a good relationship with them. I just don't feel that anything is missing. Developing compassion, altruism, warmth, and so on sounds nice, but for me, what's the point? It just seems so sentimental . . .'"

"First of all," the Dalai Lama replied, "if a person said that, I would still have doubts whether that person was really happy deep down. I truly believe that compassion provides the basis of human survival, the real value of human life, and without that there is a basic piece missing. A deep sensitivity to other's feelings is an element of love and compassion, and without that, for example, I think there would be problems in the man's ability to relate with his wife. If the person really had that attitude of indif-

ference to other's suffering and feelings, then even if he was a billionaire, had a good education, had no problems with his family or children, and was surrounded with friends, other rich businesspeople, politicians, and leaders of nations, I think that in spite of all these things that the effect of all these positive things would just remain on the surface.

"But if he continued to maintain that he didn't feel compassion, yet he didn't feel anything missing . . . then it might be a little bit difficult to help him understand the importance of compassion . . ."

The Dalai Lama stopped speaking for a moment to reflect. His intermittent pauses, which occurred throughout our conversations, did not seem to create an awkward silence; rather, they were like a gravitational force, gathering greater weight and meaning to his words when the conversation resumed.

Finally, he continued, "Still, even if that was the case, there are several things that I could point out. First, I might suggest that he reflect on his own experience. He can see that if someone treats him with compassion and affection, then it makes him feel happy. So, on the basis of that experience, it would help him realize that other people also feel good when they are shown warmth and compassion. Therefore, recognizing this fact might make him more respectful of other people's emotional sensitivity and make him more inclined to give them compassion and warmth. At the same time he would discover that the more you give others warmth, the more warmth you receive. I don't think that it would take him very long to realize that. And as a result, this becomes the basis of mutual trust and friendship.

"Now suppose this man had all these material facilities, was

successful in life, surrounded by friends, financially secure, and so on. I think it is even possible that his family and children might relate to him and experience a kind of contentment because the man is successful and they have plenty of money and a comfortable life. I think that it is conceivable that up to a certain point, even without feeling human warmth and affection, he may not experience a feeling of lacking something. But if he felt that everything was OK, that there was no real requirement for developing compassion, I would suggest that this view is due to ignorance and shortsightedness. Even if it appeared that others were relating to him quite fully, in reality what is happening is that much of the people's relationship or interaction with him is based on their perception of him as a successful, wealthy resource. They may be influenced by his wealth and power and relate to that rather than to the person himself. So in some sense, although they may not receive human warmth and affection from him, they may be contented; they may not expect more. But what happens is if his fortune declined, then that basis of the relationship would weaken. Then he would begin to see the effect of not having warmth and immediately begin to suffer.

"However, if people have compassion, naturally that's something they can count on; even if they have economic problems and their fortune declines, they still have something to share with fellow human beings. World economies are always so tenuous and we are subject to so many losses in life, but a compassionate attitude is something that we can always carry with us."

A maroon-robed attendant entered the room and silently poured tea, as the Dalai Lama continued, "Of course, in attempting to explain to someone the importance of compas-

sion, in some cases, you might be dealing with a very hardened, individualistic, and selfish person, someone concerned only with her or his own interests. And it is even possible that there are people who may not have the capacity to empathize with even someone whom they love or who may be close to them. But even to such people, it is still possible to present the importance of compassion and love on the grounds that it's the best way to fulfill their self-interests. They wish to have good health, live a longer life, and have peace of mind, happiness, and joy. And if these are things that they desire, I've heard that there is even scientific evidence that these things can be enhanced by feelings of love and compassion . . . But as a doctor, a psychiatrist, perhaps you would know better about these 'scientific claims?'

"Yes," I agreed. "I think there is definitely supporting scientific evidence to back up the claims about the physical and emotional benefits of compassionate states of mind."

"So I think that educating someone about these facts and scientific studies could certainly encourage some people to cultivate a more compassionate state of mind . . ." the Dalai Lama commented. "But I think that even aside from these scientific studies, there are other arguments that people could understand and appreciate from their own practical or direct everyday experience. For example, you could point out that lack of compassion leads to a certain ruthlessness. There are many examples indicating that at some level deep down, ruthless people generally suffer from a kind of unhappiness and discontent, people like Stalin and Hitler. Such people suffer from a kind of nagging sense of insecurity and fear. Even when they are sleeping I think that sense

of fear remains . . . All that might be very difficult for some people to understand, but one thing you could say is that these people lack something that you can find in a more compassionate person—a sense of freedom, a sense of abandonment, so when you sleep you can relax and let go. Ruthless people never have that experience. Something is always gripping them; there is some kind of hold on them, and they aren't able to experience that feeling of letting go, that sense of freedom."

He paused for a moment, absently scratching his head, then continued, "Although I'm just speculating, I would guess that if you asked some of these ruthless people, 'When were you happier, during your childhood, when you were being cared for by your mother and had more of a closeness with your family, or now, when you have more power, influence and position?' I think they would say that their youth was more pleasant. I think even Stalin was loved by his mother in childhood."

"In bringing up Stalin," I observed, "I think you've hit on a perfect example of what you're saying, of the consequences of living without compassion. It's well known that the two main features that characterized his personality were his ruthlessness and his suspiciousness. He viewed ruthlessness as a virtue, in fact, and changed his name from Djughashvili to Stalin, meaning 'man of steel.' And as his life progressed, the more ruthless he became, the more suspicious he became. His suspiciousness was legendary. His fearfulness and suspiciousness of others eventually led to massive purges and campaigns against various groups of people in his country, resulting in the imprisonment and execution of millions. But he still continued to see enemies everywhere. Not long before his death he told Nikita Khrushchev, 'I

trust no one, not even myself.' In the end he even turned on his most faithful staff. And clearly the more ruthless and powerful he became, the more unhappy he was. One friend said that finally the only human trait he had left was his unhappiness. And his daughter Svetlana described how he was plagued by loneliness and an emptiness inside and got to the point that he no longer believed that people were capable of being genuinely sincere or warmhearted.

"Anyway, I know it would be very difficult to understand people like Stalin and why they did the horrible things that they did. But one of the points that we're talking about is that even these extreme examples of ruthless people might look back with nostalgia on some of the more pleasant aspects of their childhood, such as the love they received from their mothers. But where does that leave the many people who didn't have pleasant childhoods or loving mothers? People who were abused and so on? Now, we are discussing the topic of compassion. In order for people to develop the capacity for compassion, don't you think that it's necessary for them to be raised by parents or caretakers who showed them warmth and affection?"

"Yes, I think that's important." He paused, deftly and automatically rotating his rosary between his fingers as he reflected. "There are some people who, right from the beginning, have suffered much and have lacked other's affection—so that later in life it seems almost as if they have no human feeling, no capacity for compassion and affection, those who are hardened and brutal. . . ." The Dalai Lama paused again, and for several moments seemed to ponder the question earnestly. As he bent over his tea, even the contour of his shoulders suggested that he was deep in

thought. He showed no inclination to continue immediately, however, and we drank our tea in silence. Finally he shrugged his shoulders, as if acknowledging that he had no solution.

"So do you think that techniques to enhance empathy and develop compassion would not be helpful to people with that sort of difficult background?"

"There are always different degrees of benefit that one might receive from practicing various methods and techniques, depending on one's particular circumstances," he explained. "It's also possible that in some cases these techniques may not be effective at all . . ."

Trying to clarify, I interrupted, "And the specific techniques to enhance compassion that you're referring to are . . . ?"

"Just what we have been talking about. First, through learning, thoroughly understanding the value of compassion—this gives you a feeling of conviction and determination. Then, employing methods to enhance empathy, such as using your imagination, your creativity, to visualize yourself in another's situation. And later this week in the public talks we'll discuss certain exercises or practices that you can undertake, such as the practice of *Tong-Len*, that serves to strengthen your compassion. But I think it's important to remember that these techniques, such as the practice of *Tong-Len*, were developed to help as many as possible, at least some portion of the human population. But it was never expected that these techniques could help 100 percent of people, the entire human population.

"But the main point really . . . if we are talking about various methods to develop compassion—the important thing is that people make a sincere effort to develop their capacity for com-

HUMAN WARMTH AND COMPASSION

passion. The degree to which they will actually be able to cultivate compassion depends on so many variables, who can tell? But if they make their best efforts to be kinder, to cultivate compassion and make the world a better place, then at the end of the day they can say, 'At least I've done my best!'"

THE BENEFITS OF COMPASSION .

In recent years there have been many studies that support the idea that developing compassion and altruism has a positive impact on our physical and emotional health. In one well-known experiment, for example, David McClelland, a psychologist at Harvard University, showed a group of students a film of Mother Teresa working among Calcutta's sick and poor. The students reported that the film stimulated feelings of compassion. Afterward, he analyzed the students' saliva and found an increase in immunoglobulin-A, an antibody that can help fight respiratory infections. In another study done by James House at the University of Michigan Research Center, investigators found that doing regular volunteer work, interacting with others in a warm and compassionate way, dramatically increased life expectancy, and probably overall vitality as well. Many other researchers in the new field of mind-body medicine have demonstrated similar findings, documenting that positive states of mind can improve our physical health.

In addition to the beneficial effects on one's physical health, there is evidence that compassion and caring behavior contribute to good emotional health. Studies have shown that

THE VALUE AND BENEFITS OF COMPASSION

reaching out to help others can induce a feeling of happiness, a calmer mind, and less depression. In a thirty-year study of a group of Harvard graduates, researcher George Vaillant concluded, in fact, that adopting an altruistic lifestyle is a critical component of good mental health. Another survey by Allan Luks, conducted with several thousand people who were regularly involved in volunteer activities that helped others, revealed that over 90 percent of these volunteers reported a kind of "high" associated with the activity, characterized by a feeling of warmth, more energy, and a kind of euphoria. They also had a distinct feeling of calmness and enhanced self-worth following the activity. Not only did these caring behaviors provide an interaction that was emotionally nourishing, but it was also found that this "helper's calm" was linked to relief from a variety of stress-related physical disorders as well.

While the scientific evidence clearly backs up the Dalai Lama's position on the very real and practical value of compassion, one needn't rely solely on experiments and surveys to confirm the truth of this view. We can discover the close links between caring, compassion, and personal happiness in our own lives and in the lives of those around us. Joseph, a sixty-year-old building contractor whom I first met some years ago, serves as a good illustration of this. For thirty years Joseph rode the gravy train, capitalizing on a seemingly limitless construction boom in Arizona to become a multimillionaire. In the late 1980s, however, came the biggest real estate crash in Arizona's history. Joseph was heavily leveraged and lost everything. He ended up declaring bankruptcy. His financial problems created a strain on his marriage, which finally resulted in a divorce after twenty-five

HUMAN WARMTH AND COMPASSION

years of marriage. Not surprisingly, Joseph didn't take all this very well. He started drinking heavily. Fortunately, he was able to eventually quit drinking with the help of AA. As part of his AA program he became a sponsor and helped other alcoholics stay sober. He discovered that he enjoyed his role as a sponsor, reaching out to help others, and started volunteering in other organizations as well. He put his business knowledge to use in helping the economically underprivileged. In talking about his current life, Joseph said, "I own a very small remodeling business now. It brings a modest income, but I realize that I'll never be as rich as I once was. The funny thing is, though, that I don't really want that kind of money again. I much prefer spending my time volunteering for different groups, working directly with people, helping them out the best I can. These days, I get more pure enjoyment out of one day than I did in a month when I was makin' the big money. I'm happier than I've ever been in my life!"

MEDITATION ON COMPASSION

As promised during the course of our conversations, true to his word, the Dalai Lama concluded one public talk in Arizona with a meditation on compassion. It was a simple exercise. Yet in a powerful and elegant way, he seemed to summarize and crystallize his previous discussion of compassion, turning it into a formal five-minute exercise that was direct and to the point.

"In generating compassion, you start by recognizing that you do not want suffering and that you have a right to have happi-

THE VALUE AND BENEFITS OF COMPASSION

ness. This can be verified or validated by your own experience. You then recognize that other people, just like yourself, also do not want to suffer and that they have a right to have happiness. So this becomes the basis of your beginning to generate compassion.

"So . . . let us meditate on compassion today. Begin by visualizing a person who is acutely suffering, someone who is in pain or is in a very unfortunate situation. For the first three minutes of the meditation, reflect on that individual's suffering in a more analytic way—think about their intense suffering and the unfortunate state of that person's existence. After thinking about that person's suffering for a few minutes, next, try to relate that to yourself, thinking, 'that individual has the same capacity for experiencing pain, joy, happiness, and suffering that I do.' Then, try to allow your natural response to arise—a natural feeling of compassion towards that person. Try to arrive at a conclusion: thinking how strongly you wish for that person to be free from that suffering. And resolve that you will help that person to be relieved from their suffering. Finally, place your mind single-pointedly on that kind of conclusion or resolution, and for the last few minutes of the meditation try to simply generate your mind in a compassionate or loving state."

With that, the Dalai Lama assumed a cross-legged meditation posture, remaining completely immobile as he practiced the meditation along with the audience. Stark silence. But there was something quite stirring about sitting among the assembly that morning. I imagine that even the most-hardened individual

HUMAN WARMTH AND COMPASSION

could not help being moved when surrounded by fifteen hundred people, every one of them holding the thought of compassion in their minds. After a few minutes, the Dalai Lama broke into a low Tibetan chant, his voice deep, melodic, gently breaking and falling in tones that soothed, comforted.