

Compassion, a marvel of human nature

Like all other mammals, we humans are born from our mothers, and for some time after birth we are utterly dependent on our mothers or other caring adults. For nine months we are nurtured in our mother's womb, and at the moment of birth we are completely helpless. We can neither sit nor crawl, let alone stand or walk, and without the care and attention of others we cannot survive. In this state of absolute vulnerability, our first action is to suck at our mother's breast. And with her milk, we are nurtured and given strength. In fact the period of dependency for young humans is particularly long. This goes for all of us, including even the worst criminals. Without another's loving care, none of us would have lived more than a few days. As a result of this intense need for others in our early development, a disposition towards affection is a part of our biology.

Recent medical research shows that the physical touch of one's mother or caregiver during early infancy is a crucial factor in the physical enlargement of the brain. And modern psychology confirms that the care we receive as infants and children has a profound impact on our emotional and psychological development. This research shows that people who lacked affection as children are more likely to have a deep-seated sense of insecurity in later life.

Our dependence on others is most apparent in childhood, but it does not end there. Whenever we face difficulties in life, we turn to others for support. When we are ill, for instance, we go to a doctor. Throughout our lives, even our physical health benefits from simple human affection and warmth. Recovery is not just a matter of receiving the right medical treatment or of putting the right chemicals into our bloodstream, but is also dependent to a significant degree on the human care we receive.

We also depend greatly on the warmth and kindness of others when we reach the end of our lives. How much better it is to depart from this world surrounded by love and affection, in an environment of peace and happiness, than to be surrounded by indifference or hostility, in an environment of discord and resentment. At the point of death, the goodwill of others matters to us profoundly. This is simply a fact of human nature. Of course, humans are not alone in this dependence on the warmth and affection of others. Scientific studies yield similar conclusions with respect to various other mammals.

In all this I do not want to propose that our well-being is entirely passive or dependent on the way others treat us. Even more important than the warmth and affection we receive, are the warmth and affection we give. It is through being genuinely concerned for others - in other words, through compassion - that we gain the conditions for genuine happiness. For this reason loving is of even greater importance than being loved.

Many people mistakenly assume that compassion is a religious practice. This is not the case. It is true that compassion is central to the ethical teachings of all the major religious traditions, but in itself it is not a religious value. As I have said, many animals can appreciate it and certainly mammals have a capacity for it.

Many people also assume that feeling compassion for others is only good for the others and not for oneself. This is incorrect. Whether or not our kindness brings benefit to others will depend on a great many factors, some of which will be outside our control. But whether or not we succeed in bringing benefit to others, the first beneficiary of compassion is always oneself. When compassion, or warmheartedness, arises within us and shifts our focus away from our narrow self-interest, it is as if we open an inner door. Compassion reduces our fear, boosts our confidence, and brings us inner strength. By reducing distrust, it opens us to others and brings us a sense of connection with them and a sense of purpose and meaning in life. Compassion also gives us respite from our own difficulties.

Some time ago, while visiting Bodh Gaya, an important Buddhist pilgrimage site in India, I came down with a severe gastrointestinal infection. The pain was so intense I was compelled to cancel the whole series of teachings I was scheduled to give there. I was very sorry to disappoint the many

thousands of people who had travelled to attend, many from far away. But I had to get to a hospital urgently. This meant driving through some of the poorest parts of rural India.

The discomfort in my abdomen was acute. Every time there was a bump on the road, the pain threatened to overwhelm me. Looking out the car window, I saw scenes of widespread poverty. Underfed children were running around naked in the dirt. I caught a glimpse of a very old man lying in a cot near the road. He seemed to be alone and to have no one to care for him. As the car continued on its way, I couldn't stop thinking about the tragedy of poverty and human suffering. Later I noticed that as my thoughts shifted away from my own suffering to contemplation of the hardships of others, my own pain had subsided.

There is now increasing scientific evidence that love, kindness, and trust have not only psychological benefits but also observable benefits to physical health. One recent study even shows that deliberate cultivation of love and compassion can even affect our DNA. It has also been shown that negative emotions such as anxiety, anger and resentment undermine our ability to combat illness and infection. Persistent negative emotions actually eat away at our immune system. People with a high level of self-focus are likely to be more prone to the stress and anxiety that accompany self-centredness. And stress and anxiety are well known to be bad for the heart.

The inseparable relationship between mental and emotional states on the one hand and well-being and health on the other suggests to me that the very constitution of our bodies guides us towards positive emotions. As I often say, an appreciation of love and affection seems to be built into our very blood cells.

Now there is nothing inherently wrong with pursuing one's own interests. On the contrary, to do so is a natural expression of our fundamental disposition to seek happiness and to shun suffering. In fact, it is because we care for our own needs that we have the natural capacity to appreciate others' love and kindness. This instinct for self-interest becomes negative only when we are excessively self-focused. When this happens, our vision narrows, undermining our ability to see things in their wider context. And within such a narrow perspective, even small problems can create tremendous frustration and seem unbearable. In such a state, should genuinely major challenges arise, the danger is that we will lose all hope, feel desperate and alone, and become consumed with self-pity.

What is important is that when pursuing our own self-interest, we should be 'wisely selfish' and not 'foolishly selfish'. Being foolishly selfish means pursuing our self-interest in a narrow, shortsighted way. Being wisely selfish means taking a broader view and recognizing that our own long-term individual interest lies in the welfare of everyone. Being wisely selfish means being compassionate.

So the human capacity to care for others is not something trivial or something to be taken for granted. Rather, it is something we should cherish. Compassion is a marvel of human nature, a precious inner resource, and the foundation of our well-being and harmony in our societies. If, therefore, we seek happiness for ourselves, we should practise compassion; and if we seek happiness for others, we should also practise compassion!

Extracts from *Beyond Religion: Ethics for a Whole World*, His Holiness The Dalai Lama, Rider 2012, page 41, with some headings added for clarity, by Len Warren, 10 January 2017 and 17 April 2020.