In the Buddhist tradition compassion is understood mainly in terms of empathy – our ability to enter into and, to some extent share others suffering. This Buddhists – and perhaps others – believe, can be developed to the degree that not only does our compassion arise without any effort, but it is unconditional, undifferentiated and universal in scope. A feeling of intimacy towards all other sentient beings, including those who would harm us, is generated. This is likened to the Buddhist literature to the love a mother has for her only child.

But the sense of equanimity towards all others is not seen as an end in itself. Rather it is seen as a spring-board to a still greater love. Because our capacity for empathy is innate, and because the ability to reason is also an innate faculty, compassion shares the characteristics of consciousness itself. The potential we have for it is therefore stable and continuous. It is not a resource, which can be used up - as water is used up when we boil it. Though it can be described in terms of activity, it is not like a physical activity for which we train, like jumping, and which once we reach a certain height we can go no further. On the contrary, when we enhance our sensitivity towards others’ suffering through deliberately opening ourselves up to it, it is believed that we can gradually extend our compassion to the point where the individual feels so moved by even the subtest suffering of others that they come to have an overwhelming sense of responsibility towards those others. This causes the one who is compassionate to dedicate himself or herself entirely to helping others overcome both suffering and the causes of suffering. In Tibetan, this ultimate level of attainment is called nyung-je chenmo, literally "great compassion"

Now I am not suggesting that in order to lead an ethically wholesome life, each individual must attain these advanced states of spiritual development. If we can keep the aspiration to develop nyung-je chenmo, or great compassion as an ideal, based on the simple recognition that, just as I do so all others desire to be happy and not to suffer, it will naturally have a significant impact on our outlook.

It will serve as a constant reminder against selfishness and partiality. It will remind us that there is little to be gained from being kind and generous because we hope to win something in return. It will remind us that actions motivated by the desire to create a good name for ourselves are still selfish, however much they may appear to be acts of kindness. It will also remind us that there is nothing exceptional about acts of charity towards those who we already feel close to. It will help us recognize that the bias we naturally feel towards our families and friends is actually a highly unreliable thing on which to base ethical conduct.

Why is this? Because as long as the individuals in question continue to meet our expectations, all is well. But as soon as they fail to do so, someone we consider a dear friend one-day can become our sworn enemy the next. Similarly, if our love for someone is based largely on attraction, whether it be looks or some other superficial characteristic, our feelings for that person are liable,
over time, to evaporate. If they lose the quality we found alluring, or we find ourselves no longer satisfied by it, the situation can change completely – this despite it being the same person. Love as we usually find it tends to exaggerate one small quality, causing the person in question to appear to us in an entirely positive light. If that quality changes, or our attitude changes, our love for that person changes. With genuinely compassionate love, on the other hand, neither the other’s appearance nor his or her behaviour affect our underlying attitude.

Consider, too, that our feeling towards others habitually depend very much on their circumstances. Most people feel sympathy when they see someone who is handicapped. When they see others who are wealthier, or better educated, or better placed socially they immediately feel envious and competitive towards them. Our negative feelings prevent us from seeing the sameness of ourselves and all others. We forget that just like us, they desire to be happy and not to suffer. The struggle is thus to overcome these feeling of partiality.

Although, certainly, developing genuine compassion for our loved ones is the obvious and appropriate place to start, we need to recognize that there are ultimately no grounds for discriminating against others. We are all in the same position as a doctor confronted by ten patients suffering the same serious illness. Each is equally deserving of treatment. The reader should not suppose that what is being advocated here is a state of detached indifference towards our close ones, however. What is being suggested is that we need to strive for even-handedness in our approach towards all others, a level ground into which we can plant the seed of nying-je chenmo, of great love and compassion. The idea behind this is that, in so doing, we can begin to transcend the limitations of our habitual feelings of bias towards those we are close to.

If we can begin to relate to others on the basis of such equanimity, our compassion will not depend on the fact that so and so is my husband, my wife, my relative, my friend. Rather a feeling of closeness towards all others will begin to develop based on the simple recognition that, just like myself, all wish to be happy and avoid suffering. In other words we will start to relate to others on the basis of our common nature, Again, we can think of this in terms of an ideal, and one which it is immensely difficult to attain. But for myself, I find it one which is profoundly inspiring and helpful.

Let us now consider the role of compassionate love and kind-heartedness in our daily lives. Does the ideal of developing it to the point where it is unconditional mean that we must abandon our own interests entirely? Not at all. In fact, it is the best way of serving them – indeed it could even be said to constitute the wisest course to fulfill our own interests. For if it is correct that qualities such as love, patience, tolerance and forgiveness are those in which happiness consists, and if it is also correct that compassion, as I have defined it, is both the source and the fruit of these qualities, then the more we are compassionate, the more we provide for our own happiness. Thus any idea that concern for others, though a noble quality, is a matter for our private lives only is simply short-sighted. Compassion belongs to every sphere of activity including, of course, the work place.

Here, though, I must acknowledge the existence of a perception – shared by many it seems – that compassion is, if not actually an impediment, at least irrelevant to professional life. Personally, I would argue that not only is it relevant but that when compassion is lacking, our activities are in
danger of becoming destructive. This is because when we ignore the question of others’ well being, there is nothing in which to situate restraint of our actions. An ethics of compassion helps provide the necessary foundation of and motivation for both restraint and the cultivation of virtue. When we begin to develop a genuine appreciation of the value of compassion, our outlook on others automatically begins to change. This alone can serve as a powerful influence on the way we conduct our lives.

If, for example, the temptation to deceive others arises, our compassion for them would prevent us from entertaining the idea. And if we realized that our work itself was in danger of being exploited to the detriment of others, it would cause us to disengage from it. Take an imaginary case of a scientist whose research seemed likely to be a source of suffering. He or she would recognize this and act accordingly, even if this meant abandoning the project.

I do not deny that genuine problems can arise when we dedicate ourselves to the ideal of compassion. In the case of a scientist who feels unable to continue in the direction his or her work is going, this could have profound consequences for themselves and their families. Likewise, those engaged in the caring professions – in medicine, counseling and social work and so on – or even those looking after someone at home may sometimes become so exhausted by their duties that they begin to feel overwhelmed. Constant exposure to suffering, coupled occasionally with a feeling of being taken for granted can induce feelings of helplessness and even despair. Or it can happen that individuals may find themselves performing outwardly generous actions just for the sake of it – simply going through the motions as it were. When left unchecked, this can lead to insensitivity towards others’ suffering. If this starts to happen, it is best to disengage for a short while and make a deliberate effort to awaken one’s sensitivity. This can be done by reflecting on the fact that despair is never a solution. It is rather the ultimate failure. Therefore, as the Tibetan expression has it, even if the rope breaks nine times, we must splice back together a tenth time. In this way, even if ultimately we do fail, at least there will be no feelings of regret. If we combine this insight with a clear appreciation of our potential to benefit others, we find that we can begin to restore our hope and confidence.

Some people may object to this ideal on the grounds that, by entering into others’ suffering, we bring suffering on ourselves. To an extent this is true. But I suggest that there is an important qualitative distinction to be made between experiencing one’s own suffering and experiencing suffering in the course of sharing in others’. In the case of one’s own suffering, given that it is involuntary, there is a sense of oppression: it seems to come from outside us. By contrast, sharing in someone else’s suffering must at some level involve a degree of voluntariness which itself is indicative of a certain inner strength. For this reason, the disturbance it may cause is considerably less likely to paralyze us than our own suffering.

Of course, even as an ideal, the notion of developing unconditional compassion is daunting. Most people, including myself, must struggle to reach the point at which putting others’ interests on par with our own becomes easy. We should not allow this to put us off, however. Undoubtedly there will be obstacles on the way to developing a genuinely warm heart, there is the deep consolation of knowing that in doing so we are creating the conditions for our own happiness.
As I mentioned earlier, the more we truly desire to benefit others, the greater the strength and confidence we develop and the greater the peace and happiness we experience. If this still seems unlikely, it is worth asking ourselves how else we are to do so? With violence and aggression? Of course not. With money? Perhaps up to a point, but no further. But with love, by sharing in others’ suffering, by recognising ourselves clearly in all others – especially those who are disadvantaged and those whose rights are not respected – and by helping them to be happy. Through love, through kindness, through compassion we establish understanding between ourselves and others. This is how we forge unity and harmony.

Compassion and love are not mere luxuries. As the source both of inner and external peace, they are fundamental to the continued survival of our species. On the one hand, they constitute non-violence in action. On the other they are the source of all spiritual qualities; of forgiveness, tolerance and all the virtues. Moreover they are the very things that gives meaning to our activities and makes them constructive. There is nothing amazing about being highly educated, there is nothing amazing about being rich. Only if the individual has a warm heart do these attributes become worthwhile.

So to those who say that the Dalai Lama is being unrealistic in advocating this ideal of unconditional love, I urge them to experiment with it nonetheless. They will discover that when we reach beyond the confines of narrow self-interest, our hearts become filled with strength. Peace and joy become our constant companion. It breaks down barriers of every kind and in the end destroys the notion of my interest as separate from others’ interest. But most importantly, insofar as ethics is concerned, where love of one’s neighbour, affection, kindness and compassion live, we find that ethical conduct is automatic. Ethically wholesome actions arise naturally in the context of compassion.

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