Larger than Life: A Personal Journey of Encounters with Compassion

Transcendiendo la Vida: Una Aventura Personal de Encuentros con la Compasión

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Abstract

This essay traces major shifts in the author's understanding of compassion in the course of her personal, professional, and spiritual life as a student of philosophy, practitioner of meditation, and work as a psychotherapist. These shifts involved transitions from understanding compassion as an ideal to which one aspires, to a directly felt personal and interpersonal reality, to a larger, transpersonal reality always present to those who can tune into it. The author describes how her study of Hindu and Buddhist thought and meditative practice, her work as a psychotherapist and supervisor of psychotherapy students, as well as her deep-ecological approach to nature influenced these shifts.

Keywords: compassion, empathy, spiritual development, nature as "Original Mother," Great Compassion

Resumen

Este ensayo rastrea los cambios más importantes de la autora, en su comprensión de la compasión en el trascurso de su vida personal, profesional y espiritual como estudiante de filosofía, practicante de meditación, y psicoterapeuta. Estos cambios implicaron transiciones desde la comprensión de la compasión como un ideal al que uno aspira, hasta una realidad personal e interpersonal sentida directamente, y a una realidad transpersonal mayor, siempre presente en los que pueden sintonizar con ella. La autora describe cómo su estudio de pensamiento hindú y budista y la práctica meditativa, su trabajo como psicoterapeuta y supervisora de estudiantes de psicoterapia, así como su acercamiento desde la ecología profunda, influenciaron estos cambios.

Palabras clave: compasión, empatía, desarrollo espiritual, naturaleza como "Madre Original", Gran Compasión

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Compassion has molded me and my understanding of it in serendipitous ways, reflecting the idiosyncratic twists and turns of my life and career. At this point on the journey, compassion seems larger than me, larger than life —indeed something that creates and sustains all of life. To me it is not a capacity I possess or cultivate in myself, rather, it is something that may manifest through me when all efforts to possess or cultivate are surrendered.

How I came to understand compassion in this manner did not happen overnight. Earlier in my life, my understanding was conceptual. I thought of compassion as a noble quality within the human being, an ideal that one strives to cultivate in one's spiritual practice. At some point, a realization broke through this somewhat abstract understanding, and the ideal gave way to a palpable sense of something alive in actual human encounters. Still later came the understanding that the wellspring of compassion is, ontologically speaking, something much larger than what could be generated and contained within the human personality or its encounters with others. In other words, I came to see that compassion transcends the human self, however this self may be construed.

The subject of this essay is the meandering journey of transformations in my understanding of compassion. In hindsight, I can discern "major shifts" that demarcate what might be thought of as "stages," but on the journey, there were no signposts announcing such stages. Needless to say, my story is not meant as a general theory of development for setting standards and signposts for others. Developmental theories are tricky as they inevitably get imbued with cultural values and biases. I believe that specific, biologically based developments such as language acquisition in children are relatively more immune to such biases and so more amenable to generalizing theories that could be supported by empirical research. Spiritual development, however, is a far more elusive phenomenon and not easy to pin down to unequivocal operational definitions despite a variety of interesting and thought-provoking theories on the subject (see, e.g. Grof & Bennett, 1990; Wade, 1996; Washburn, 1988; Wilber, 1986, 2007). My hunch is that the journeys through the subtler domains of human experience and expression we call "spiritual" tend to vary some depending on the persons undertaking them.

On this basis, I will share some highlights from my own journey that involved the aforementioned three major phases in my understanding of compassion. The context of my evolving understanding has included, though not limited to, decades of philosophical and spiritual inquiry in the earlier years, followed by a quick course in transpersonal psychology as the editor of *The Journal of Transpersonal Psychology* (1999-2001) and later, work as a teacher and practitioner of psychoanalytically oriented therapy, accompanied by periods of intensive meditative practice in group as well as solitary settings. My story is woven from these and other strands, and makes no claim to objective truth or general validity. It may resonate with the reader, or perhaps surprise, or annoy. Such stirrings in the reader would seem to me more worthwhile than the simple acceptance or rejection that might be the response should I attempt to make a case for the "truth" or "validity" of my view.

Compassion as an Individual Human Capacity

When I started my meditation practice in earnest as a college freshman in the 1960's, compassion was not in the forefront of my concern. Like most practitioners who take up *vipassana* or insight meditation in the context of Theravada Buddhism, I took compassion to be something that needs to be cultivated as part of one's personal spiritual development. In this, my understanding was congruent with the Christian tradition in which I had grown up. However, as a student of philosophy, I was more fascinated by the insights about the nature of reality and of the self that were articulated by the foundational Buddhist philosophers of the Mahayana traditions (Nagarjuna, Asanga, Dharmakirti) than I was by the ethical precepts of Buddhist practice.

I did nevertheless explore the *metta* and *karuna* practices described in the Theravada tradition. In this tradition, the meaning of *metta* as "loving kindness" is considered distinct but closely related to the meaning of *karuna* as "compassion." *Metta* (Sanskrit *maitri*) is a more active stance of wish for the happiness and wellbeing of others, perhaps akin to the Christian *agape*, whereas *karuna* (Sanskrit *karuna*) is the willingness to embrace and be with the suffering of others. The "how to" of these practices was laid out more clearly and meticulously in the Theravada literature than I had found in the English translations of Mahayana writings which were still relatively scarce in those days. I felt comfortable in my conceptual understanding and my practices of *metta* and k*aruna;* their effect on me felt good in a lukewarm sort of way. (The beneficial effects of these meditations on behavior as well as on the

brain have more recently been supported by extensive research at the Stanford School of Medicine's Center for Compassion and Altruism Research and Education —see. e.g. Brown & Leary, 2014; Burns and Kobus, 2012).

In hindsight, I was happily slumbering –until I had a rude awakening one day at the university where I was training to be a psychotherapist. A fellow student whom I did not know very well had been diagnosed with cancer. Because of being on chemotherapy, she was unable to tolerate the cigarette smoke which was in those days still liberally present in many professors' offices. Ignoring her pleas, the professor continued to smoke, and she had to get up and leave the room. Without forethought, I found myself in that instant also getting up and exiting the room. In the corridor alone with this woman, I did not know what to say. She was dying. What was there to say when there was nothing I could do to help her? Then I blurted out to her just this —that I did not know what to say. She smiled and told me how grateful she was that I was there with her. "Most people feel uncomfortable when they can't help and so they turn away," she explained.

I was profoundly humbled. All notions of being a good person or a compassionate, helpful person, fell away in that moment. What mattered was being there, being present with, and open to, another's suffering, and I got it at that moment: just "feeling with," "com-passion." One's compassion gets tested especially when there is nothing one can do to alleviate the suffering. My near-failing of this test became my first major lesson in compassion. There were many more lessons in the years to come, including the following quandary when I myself came down with an illness for which there was no cure: should I keep this from my friends and spare them from an encounter with me where they may feel uncomfortable because they cannot help me? –or should I offer them an opportunity for a lesson that I had found so important for myself?

As a teacher and supervisor of novice psychotherapists, my first lesson in compassion as described above has been invaluable and always relevant: beginning therapists are anxious to help their clients, to alleviate their suffering and make them feel better. When the therapist finds him or herself unable to help or alleviate the client's suffering, bringing compassion to the situation becomes especially challenging. The more profound and intractable the suffering, the more difficult it is for therapist and client alike to tolerate, much less embrace, such suffering. It is not difficult for me to feel empathy with my supervisees' suffering in the face of their helplessness in this situation, for those situations and that helplessness were intimately familiar to me as a therapist as well. In the contemporary world of psychotherapy dominated by evidence-supported brief therapies, the supervisees' suffering is compounded by the pressure for them to demonstrate fast and efficient performance as therapists. Staying with their suffering for a moment in the supervision session before doing anything about it seems to be needed with many of my supervisees. This helps them, in turn, to provide the kind of holding for their clients' suffering that is needed for the clients to build or restore faith in their own capacity to first tolerate and then productively address this suffering.

Compassion and Empathy

The previous illustration from psychotherapy supervision suggests that there is a close relationship between "compassion" and "empathy." The two are distinct yet they can potentiate each other in a synergistic fashion.

Empathy as I understand it is the capacity to feel what the other is feeling —but more than that: empathy involves a knowing that is broader than feeling, a knowing what's going on deep within the other. Christopher Bollas (1987) has explicated this as the "unthought known" –something the psychotherapy patient deep down, or unconsciously, knows but is not able to consciously think about. A therapist who is in empathic attunement with his or her patient may, by sensing into this "unthought known," be able to help the patient think about and articulate this knowing. As with all capacities, empathy occurs with varying degrees of clarity and also with various degrees of depth. In my use of these terms here, "clarity" refers to the content of the knowing, whereas "depth" refers to how it is known. Thus being able to imaginatively take the perspective of another is a relatively more superficial expression of empathy than is sensing or feeling what is actually going on in the other. Certainly there have been moments when I felt or knew what was going on in the other with great clarity and depth, but at other times, what I felt was less clear and more colored by feelings and thoughts the origin (i.e. in me or in the other) and meaning of which was difficult to sort out. Or, what I seemed to "know" may have been more what I surmised or imagined

than what was actually going on in the client. Such variations in the clarity and depth of empathy involve the vicissitudes of "countertransference" phenomena which are experienced by the therapist or analyst in the session that have lately received a great deal of attention from contemporary relational psychoanalysts (Mitchell & Black, 1995; McWilliams, 2004; Ogden, 2004, 2012; Waska, 2012; Tubert-Oklander, 2013).

Compassion without empathy is sterile and lacks transformative power. When not infused by empathy, it is an abstract ideal that may function as a moral imperative which guides a person's conduct with others. Such a practice of compassion is deliberate and effortful, and its objective is the cultivation of the practitioner's own character more than it is a spontaneous concern for the other. Indeed, the other's suffering has become an opportunity for cultivation of compassion, a means to an end which is the practitioner's self-improvement. A phase in one's personal journey may involve working with one's character in this way. Certainly on my own journey, compassion was a somewhat abstract concept which guided my conduct, more or less, until I was awakened from my slumber by the encounter with my fellow student with cancer. That encounter jolted me out of my self-involvement as a spiritual practitioner into an empathic encounter where the power of compassion was palpable in a way that I had not felt before. When compassion is fueled by empathy, it arises spontaneously in our relationships with others and has the power to transform these relationships.

But empathy can also occur without compassion. Empathy without compassion lacks the power to hold or contain suffering. Empathic capacity in itself does not mean the person is willing to be with another's (or one's own) suffering or even to tolerate it. The lack of tolerance for the suffering can contribute to the compulsion to remove or "fix" it, as previously discussed. Worse yet, when empathy is confused with, or leads to, identification with the suffering, the individual may find herself or himself helplessly caught on an emotional roller-coaster with the other —a common enough phenomenon in intimate partnerships and also one that supervisors of students in psychotherapy training are familiar with. Compassion, when understood and enacted as the willingness to be present with another's (and one's own) suffering, can provide the extra space, extra moment, that can hold the empathic, intimate encounter with suffering as well as the individual(s) involved in the encounter.

Over the decades, I have found the problem of not being able to tolerate suffering and the tendency to compulsively try to fix it to be common among my psychotherapy students, many of whom are empathic by nature. On the other hand, I have found working with "compassion" as an ideal for conduct to be the relatively more favored approach among spiritual practitioners, many of whom are more retiring and perhaps less empathic by nature. Of course, most people are temperamentally some mixture of the two, and, indeed, many students of psychotherapy are also aspiring spiritual practitioners. When both compassion and empathy are present to a high measure, one is unflinchingly present to suffering that one feels intimately yet cannot alleviate.

My use of the word "willingness" above is deliberate. For it may be the case that at first, one would rather not embrace suffering that seems hopeless and seemingly bottomless, and so it may take courage and an act of will to stay rather than flee. At least that is how it was for me in the early days (and, often enough, still is). In time, however, I noticed that wholeheartedly embracing the suffering of another became easier, more spontaneous. It became evident that there was a power behind my effortful will that did not originate in myself but was larger than myself and larger than my will. Which takes me to the next section.

Compassion as a Transpersonal and Cosmic Reality

My musings here take me to where psyche meets cosmos. By "cosmos" I simply mean the home we humans share with all living beings both known and unknown. Such a characterization will be unlikely to satisfy a physicist or astrophysicist, but I believe it is adequate to accommodating what is actual or even possible in human experience. As such, it is relevant to this discussion of compassion.

In my own journey, I eventually came to see that this cosmos is the "true home" I had longed for in my younger days and sought through my meditative practices. The realization did not announce itself with fanfare or suddenly hit me like a lightning bolt, as it happens in the stories we sometimes hear. It just crept up on me until it finally dawned as something seemingly "already known" or even "always known." To be sure, it was helped along by flashes of insight here and there, little openings to a reality much vaster than my self (or anyone else's self) that was the playground of compassion. Such flashes, however,

were preceded by years of contemplation that had turned to increasingly larger spheres beyond my self, family and friends, even humanity, to nature. My love of nature had been there from early childhood, and often in my turbulent teens I had sought solace and restoration in nature which I saw as my "original mother." Such healing experiences early on made it easy for me to later embrace the idea that nature was the source of solace and nurturance for all her children, human and nonhuman alike —thus, that care was an essential quality of hers.

But it was not until my contemplation turned to the dark side of nature that the great depth of compassion and its trans-human origin revealed themselves. Especially in those earlier years, I seemed to have the penchant for "morbid contemplations" which William James (2008) associated with people he described as "sick souls" but also as "twice-born." As twice-born, according to James, these people perceive a great evil and depth of suffering in the world and cannot reconcile themselves to this depth of suffering in their daily lives by simply tallying up the little sufferings against the little joys and sticking to the plus side of things. Rather, they are often compelled to seek a religion or spiritual understanding that offers deliverance from such great evil –thus a "second birth."

The great evil was revealed to me by my great love of nature. For this love eventually compelled me to tune into the deep and relentless suffering that was there for living beings in the clutches of the grotesque "eat and/or be eaten" law that governs all life on this planet. My somber reflections extended from fields and forests to the human society and how this same law was reflected in myriad ways in our social and economic life. My great love of my "original mother" clamored for answers and did not allow my attention to veer off into easier, more cheerful subjects. I felt compelled to understand the horrors of life deeply enough to be able to embrace them all. In these tumultuous contemplations I found inspiration in the symbolism of Kali (Zimmer, 1951; Doniger, 2014), the terrifying aspect of Gaia which as the goddess of time in Hindu mythology devours her children whom she loves.

Though not her devotee in the conventional sense, Kali's symbolism helped me grasp an order of compassion wholly different from what I had understood in the context of human affairs. In my mind I called it "Great Compassion," for this was compassion that embraces life and death equally. Later, I found descriptions of Great Compassion in some Tibetan Dzogchen texts (Thondrup, 1989) which described it as the dynamic energy that brings into being all manifestation. Still later, while studying with Rinzai Zen Master Joshu Sasaki, (Puhakka, 1998) I came to see it as the very breath of the living cosmos: breathing in —compassion, breathing out— loving kindness. There is no center-like "self" into and out of which the breath flows but both were happening everywhere at once; or, if you will, there is no place (or time) where the "self" is not. What had started as two distinct but related concepts, *metta* and *karuna*, I now saw as the two phases of one cosmic process.

It Is Contagious

Many have felt or witnessed the power of compassion in human life. This power, I believe, has much to do with the fact that compassion is contagious. By this I mean that it is transmitted from one individual to another directly and without any special effort. This contagion takes place seemingly differently depending on which of the two understandings of compassion informs the experiences of the persons involved –as a quality to be cultivated within the individual, or as a transpersonal and cosmic reality.

Compassion as a quality or virtue to be cultivated

So long as my understanding of compassion was of a quality to be cultivated within myself, the awakening of empathy was crucial for compassion to become manifest in my relationships with others. This was illustrated by my encounter with the fellow student with cancer which I described in the section before the last. There was no thought of cultivating anything in that encounter with the student in the corridor. It remains a matter of speculation as to whether my previous, deliberate *metta* practices might have somehow prepared the ground for this. In any case, I encourage my psychotherapy students to embody compassion in their being rather than try particular methods or deliberate practices.

I am usually successful at this to the degree that I am able to embody compassion myself. The situations I described with psychotherapy students in an earlier section where the students experience difficulty tolerating being present to their clients' suffering may serve to illustrate how compassion, when taken as a human quality, may be transmitted by embodying it. A behavioral description of my approach in those situations might be to say that I

was "modeling" compassion to the students. My empathic understanding of their (the students') suffering, together with my willingness to be with that suffering with them, helped in developing their own capacity for compassion, first for themselves and then for their clients. I also believe that it helps if the person doing the modeling has an attitude toward what is being modeled as "nothing special" but as something altogether natural to human beings.

Compassion as a transpersonal and cosmic reality

When compassion is understood and experienced as something vaster and deeper than the human self, it can pervade the interpersonal space of the encounter between persons as well as the interior spaces of the selves in the encounter. These are truly transpersonal moments that now and then occur in various human encounters, including those between therapists and clients. The following vignette of a therapist-supervisor encounter illustrates the subtle transformations in the psychic space that is partially and in moments more fully shared by the two participants in the encounter. The moments of transformation tend to be nonverbal and silent. In the vignette, below, I indicate two such moments in brackets as:

[silence. . .]

A young male therapist describes a session with a long-term client who has been paralyzed by a major transition in her life which she feels unable to handle. The therapist reports that the client deals with the situation in purely intellectual terms and shows no emotion. The therapist acknowledges that he himself felt overwhelmed by anxiety in the session with the client, and even as he is describing this session to the supervisor, he finds himself in the throes of anxiety —which is highly unusual for this self-possessed young man. In the session with the supervisor, his harsh self-criticism further aggravates his anxiety. Listening to the therapist's story and to his anxiety about it, the supervisor begins to feel anxious, inadequate, and helpless. The supervisor then acknowledges feeling anxiety and helplessness in herself and "in the room" and invites the therapist to also feel it without trying to do anything about it. [silence. . .] He finally says: "Yes, this is the anxiety my client cannot allow herself feel, and I see now how I need to hold it for her. "After some more silence which now feels much less anxious, the therapist suddenly tenses up again and says: "But I can't tell now which part of this anxiety is mine and which is the client's —how can I help her if I can't?" The supervisor (who likewise can't tell which "part" of the anxiety in the room is hers and which is his) says, "No need for you to worry about that. Just holding it is enough." [silence. . .] This silence was followed by a conversation about the transpersonal dimensions of psychotherapy work (new to him), but more importantly, an acknowledgement by him that, for the first time he now has a real taste of the work he has long wanted to be able to do.

Compassion was not discussed or even explicitly named in the above vignette, yet it was deeply felt in the interstices of the words and especially in the silences. Psychoanalytically oriented therapists might recognize the phenomenon of *projective identification* (McWilliams, 2004; Ogden, 2004, 2012) whereby the anxiety was transmitted initially from client to therapist and later in the supervision session from therapist to supervisor. The holding helped transform, or in Wilfred Bion's (1961) terms, "digest," the anxiety and allow for compassion to eventually manifest.

Conclusion

It would seem evident that compassion is desperately needed for any viable future of humanity and the planet. At the same time the expression of compassion in human life is quite mysterious, not fully accounted for by evolutionary psychology or other scientific theories of human nature (Hornstein, 2005). In this essay I have offered my personal understanding of compassion and how it may be transmitted from one person to another. In different phases of my life, the meaning of compassion revealed itself in different ways, and I discussed the principal difference being that of two standpoints from which compassion can be viewed and experienced. One is the standpoint of the individual person, and the other is a larger standpoint of nature or cosmos which includes the person and the relationships between persons. In discussing how compassion manifests and is transmitted as understood from each of these standpoints, I have mostly used illustrations from the psychotherapeutic encounter. To me these encounters are not essentially different from what may be there in any encounter with beings, human and others, with whom we share this planet. All relationships are portals to the playground of compassion.

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