Cognitively-Based Compassion Training Manual

Excerpt:

Introduction & Overview

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1.
Introduction

What is compassion and why do we need it?

At its most fundamental level, compassion is the wish to alleviate the suffering of another.

Compassion is a basic human value, necessary for our survival as individuals and as communities. It is recognized by all major spiritual traditions, and is indeed elevated as a highest ideal by them. Modern science is also increasingly recognizing the importance of compassion for our health and the flourishing of our species. Charles Darwin, who is more frequently associated with ideas like "survival of the fittest," in reality described sympathy (the word he used instead of compassion, but with a similar meaning) as the strongest of human instincts, essential for our survival, and the foundation of our ethical systems.

Compassion is recognized as a desirable and beneficial trait in all major religious traditions and in most secular contexts. Impartial compassion for all beings is a quintessential feature of Tibetan Buddhist practice, thus the tradition presents extensive and systematic approaches for cultivating and developing compassion. It is believed that the potential to develop compassion exists in every person, and that it is a quality that can be deliberately expanded and deepened through training. The systematic pursuit of compassion has been the goal of an unusually large number of Tibetan contemplatives for over a thousand years, and to this day it remains a vibrant and integral practice for followers of Tibetan Buddhism.

If we understand love as the wish for another to have happiness, then we see that compassion and love are two sides of the same coin. When we feel close to others, we want them to have happiness and to be free from suffering: that is love and compassion.

What are the origins of CBCT?

During the 2003-2004 academic year at Emory University, increasing signs of mental distress among undergraduates, including several suicides, prompted Emory student Molly Harrington to ask whether there were resources available to help young people deal with stress and depression. Based on her appeal, Geshe Lobsang Negi developed CBCT, a model for a secular compassion meditation practice drawn from the vast, varied Tibetan Buddhist tradition. In 2005 the Emory-Tibet Partnership and the Emory Mind-Body Program forged an innovative study to examine the impact of compassion meditation in treating depression among undergraduates.

The results of the study showed an unequivocal correlation between the practice of compassion meditation and the prevention and reduction of depression levels in students (Pace et al. 2008, Pace et al. 2009). The promising results of this project encouraged us to explore means of adapting and delivering CBCT to a variety of other populations. We

are currently conducting an NIH-funded follow-up study evaluating the efficacy of CBCT compared to both an attentional training intervention and health education group in healthy adults.

In addition to employing CBCT as a means of reducing stress and enhancing immune function, we have begun to conceive of ways in which CBCT could promote prosociality and mental flourishing, and ameliorate or protect against the effects of trauma. Members of our team adapted the CBCT program for use with elementary school children (ages 5-9), and are currently evaluating the effects of this program on prosocial behavior, bullying, social exclusion, stereotyping and bias. The preliminary pilot study with these young children is described in Ozawa-de Silva and Dodson-Lavelle (2011).

In 2008, we piloted a CBCT program for adolescent girls in foster care (ages 13-16). This particular adaptation was designed to help girls develop inner resilience and build stronger healthier relationships. The success of this pilot program, described in Ozawa-de Silva and Dodson-Lavelle (2011), has led to on-going studies investigating the effects of compassion training in this population. In 2010 the Georgia Department of Health and Human Services and the Center for Disease Control in Atlanta, GA funded a randomized, wait-list control trial of CBCT for seventy-two foster children. This study examined the efficacy of this training for reducing emotional reactivity, psycho-social stress, and behavioral problems. Though CBCT was not designed to treat trauma specifically, we believe the training offers practitioners a set of strategies and skills that may buffer against future traumas and lessen the impact of traumatic memories or triggers and promote resilience. Members of our research team are also investigating the efficacy of CBCT among suicide-attempters at a local hospital in Atlanta.

Can compassion be trained?

Primatologist Frans de Waal explains that all human beings share a common foundation of a biologically-based compassion. This biologically-based compassion is limited and only extends to those close to us. As human beings, however, we can extend compassion beyond the few nearest to us, to embrace larger groups. This second level of compassion is a deliberately trainable skill, yet such compassion will only arise if there is a sense of endearment towards others. If that sense of endearment can be cultivated towards larger sections of humanity, so can compassion.

The actual conditions of our existence are such that we exist interdependently with others. Everything we need for our survival comes from the efforts of countless others, almost all of whom are personally unknown to us. Recognizing this often-neglected fact enables us to feel endearment and gratitude towards others. Such a recognition needs to be deepened through training and practice, otherwise it remains only a superficial thought. When it does become a deep realization, it changes the way we behave and relate towards others.

This model—that a change in our view will change our behavior once it becomes deeply engrained through training and practice—is called *lta-spyod-sgom-gsum* in Tibetan, which literally means "view, behavior, and meditation." Spiritual traditions across the world acknowledge that a compassion that embraces others beyond one's immediate friends and family can indeed be cultivated, but that it does not come easy. Deep thinkers in the sciences, such as Albert Einstein and Charles Darwin, have come to the same conclusion. Darwin wrote in *The Descent of Man*, "As man advances in civilization, and small tribes are united into larger communities, the simplest reason will tell each individual that he ought to extend his social instincts and sympathies to all the member of the same nation, though personally unknown to him. This point being, once reached, there is only an artificial barrier to prevent his sympathies extending to the men of all nations and races… Sympathy beyond the confines of man, that is, humanity to lower animals, seems to be one of the latest moral acquisitions. This virtue, one of the noblest with which man is endowed, seems to arise incidentally from our sympathies becoming more tender and more widely diffused, until they are extended to all sentient beings."

Similarly, Einstein wrote, "A human being is part of the whole called by us universe, a part limited in time and space. We experience ourselves, our thoughts and feelings, as something separate from the rest. A kind of optical delusion of consciousness. This delusion is a kind of prison for us, restricting us to our personal desires and to affection for a few persons nearest to us. Our task must be to free ourselves from the prison by widening our circle of compassion to embrace all living creatures and the whole of nature in its beauty. The true value of a human being is determined by the measure and the sense in which they have obtained liberation from the self. We shall require a substantially new manner of thinking if humanity is to survive".

Lastly, His Holiness the Dalai Lama, in his book *Ethics for the New Millennium*, writes: "My call for a spiritual revolution is thus not a call for a religious revolution. Nor is it a reference to a way of life that is somehow otherworldly, still less to something magical or mysterious. Rather it is a call for a radical reorientation away from habitual preoccupation with the self. It is a call to turn toward the wider community of beings with whom we are connected, and for conduct which recognizes others' interests alongside our own".

Our most current understanding of the brain is that its structure and function can be changed through experience and training. This is called neuroplasticity. If we already have a biological basis for compassion, there is every reason to believe that through training and practice this compassion can be extended, even on a neurological level. In today's world, we can draw from both the insights of the world's spiritual traditions as well as the findings of contemporary science to understand compassion and how it can be expanded for our individual and collective benefit. Taking the biologically-given limited capacity for compassion that we already have and expanding it through deliberate training is the focus and purpose of cognitively-based compassion training. It may seem that cultivating unbiased and universal compassion is an impossibility for us, given where we are at the moment. But as human beings we all have the ability to shift our perspectives on things,

even if it is slightly at first, and this means that we all have the ability to gradually expand our compassion, even if it happens in baby steps at first.

What does "cognitively-based" mean?

Analytical meditation is often misunderstood to mean discursive meditation, that is, merely thinking about something. But it is better understood as a method for developing insight into something that is being investigated. It involves reflection and close observation of the object of investigation. Just as a lab scientist engages in research by closely observing an object in order to identify what it is and what its characteristics are, so does a meditator analyze an object during analytical meditation. Similary, just as a physicist comes to understand the nature of subatomic particles through indirect evidence, such as that gleaned from a particle accelerator, so does the meditator also employ indirect evidence and reasoning when engaging in analytical meditation to gain insight into his or her feelings, emotions, motivations, relationships, and experiences. Relating to a given situation from one perspective—say, a distorted perspective—will give a certain response; seeing the same situation from a different perspective—one that is more in tune with the facts of the situation—elicits a completely different response. In this way, insight is essential to being able to relate to our experiences in a more positive way that benefits ourselves and others, and to free us from falling into the same mistakes that result in the same problems.

The point of analytical meditation is to achieve insights or what one could call "a-ha moments." Such insights then need to be deepened through analyzing from many angles, and through sitting with an insight once it has been arrived at. This conviction that arises from such reflections needs to be deeply engrained so that it becomes second nature, spontaneous, even unconscious. Here, the post-meditation session, namely when we go about our normal life, is just as important as the formal meditation session.

We employ different strategies to achieve insights. For example, to develop a deeper sense of endearment towards others, one strategy is to cultivate gratitude and appreciation on the basis of recognizing how we rely on others for everything that we need and how our own interests are intertwined with those of others. When we employ such strategies, it is important that our reflection not remain on a purely intellectual or detached level. Analytical meditation requires that we make it personal. We need to see for ourselves whether certain things are true or not, and we need to see this as deeply connected with our own lives. Otherwise, what we are doing is not analytical meditation, but merely an intellectual exercise that will fail to have a profound impact on our lives, our behavior, and our relationships with others.

An affective response like compassion arises on the basis of various factors. The Indian philosopher Dharmakirti once posed the rhetorical question, "What can prevent the result from arising, when all the necessary conditions are complete?" His point was that results come from the presence of their conditions, not just by wishful thinking. We might want to develop more compassion due to seeing its benefits, but that wish alone won't result in our

having more compassion any more than a farmer who wants a rich harvest or a gardener who desires lush fields of flowers will get them just by wishing for them. If they attend carefully to the conditions necessary for a rich harvest or garden — good soil, the removal of weeds, proper moisture, the seeds, and so on — a rich harvest or garden will be the outcome. Similarly, cultivating compassion requires that we ensure the proper conditions that give rise to compassion. These conditions or ingredients will be presented in the next chapter, where we look at the arc of compassion training through an overview of the eight topics that make up CBCT.

2.
Overview of CBCT

Assembling the Conditions that Give Rise to Compassion

Recall the earlier quote from the Indian philosopher Dharmakirti, who wrote "What can prevent the result from arising, when all the necessary conditions are complete?"

As mentioned, when all the conditions for a rich harvest are present, the harvest itself will naturally come as a result. The same holds true for compassion. We cultivate compassion by cultivating the conditions that give rise to it. In this chapter, we will take a broad look at the CBCT program and how each of the eight topics work together to give rise to the development of greater, more stable, and more powerful compassion. Looking at the program in its totality is important for various reasons. First, as we teach each topic, it is important that we not only understand the topic in itself, but also how it contributes to the cultivation of compassion. Second, it is important that we see how each topic relates to the ones that come before and after it. That way, we fully understand the importance of each topic and also that of the sequence of the program.

Results arise from concordant conditions. As mentioned, just wishing for compassion won't give rise to compassion any more than wishing for more money would yield more money. But if one develops the concordant conditions for compassion, then it will naturally arise. The following chapters of the manual will present each condition needed for compassion in the order in which we will cultivate them and teach them to others. It is also useful to look at the conditions in reverse order, examining what are the immediately preceding conditions for compassion, without which compassion would not arise. Those immediately preceding conditions have their own causes and conditions, and that chain continues until we reach the first stage of the practice. So in the next sections of this chapter, we will look at the arc of cultivating compassion from this perspective. That way we will clearly see all the conditions that are needed to give rise to compassion, and why.

Two Crucial Conditions for Compassion: Endearment and Impartiality

Compassion is the heartfelt wish to relieve others from suffering. Its immediate precondition is a felt inability to bear witnessing the suffering of others. That is to say, when one sees suffering, one finds it disturbing, rather than pleasing or of no consequence. If one did not feel the suffering of others to be unbearable, one would not be moved to see them relieved of suffering, so it is clear that without this unbearability of others' suffering, compassion for them is not possible. This in turn depends on an ability to feel the suffering of others, a sensitivity to their suffering, and for this we need empathy.

Furthermore, the degree of unbearability we feel when witnessing the suffering of others correlates directly with how endearing those others appear to us. The closer we feel to them, the more unbearable we will find their pain. Therefore, if we are to have compassion for others, we need to cultivate a sense of endearment towards others. Our sense of endearment is normally very biased, however. We feel it strongly towards our family members, but it takes on a more indifferent tone towards people whom we do not know very well and whom we do not see as directly relevant to our lives, which is the vast majority of people in the world. When it comes to those we dislike strongly, or even hate, we may feel little if any discomfort in seeing their suffering, or may even, in the worst cases, take pleasure in it.

This is the reason why it is important to cultivate impartiality as a condition for the arising of compassion. Without leveling out our strong biases, our compassion will remain limited to the few nearest and dearest to us. With a greater sense of impartiality, however, we will be able to extend our compassion in ever-widening circles, eventually even embracing all of humanity, including those whom we once considered to be enemies.

As we mentioned the seed of compassion is biologically given in all of us. Cultivating impartiality is like leveling the field, without which even growth is not possible. Developing affection and endearment towards others is like providing moisture that nourishes the seeds and brings about their healthy growth.

Self-Compassion: The Need for a Secure Base

An inability to bear the suffering of others does not automatically translate into compassion, however. It can result in what psychologists call empathic distress, or anxiety, paralysis or avoidance that arises when one observes the suffering of another and is overwhelmed by it. Consider two people who witness a bad car crash and see the injured victims. One becomes so distressed by the sight that she turns away and experiences intense anxiety; this is empathic distress. The other witnesses the same thing but rushes over to see if she can be of assistance; this is empathic concern. What is necessary to ensure that witnessing suffering leads to empathic concern, and not empathic distress, is a secure base. A secure base is a type of courage that comes from an inner confidence that suffering can be overcome.

An analogy would be an addict who is in the throes of his addiction and can't see a way out of it. When he sees another addict suffering, this triggers his sense of hopelessness and despair, and he experiences only anxiety. But if he sees that the true source of his addiction is a craving that can in time be brought under control and dealt with, and if he thereby feels a sense of inner confidence in his ability to overcome his affliction with help, his response may change. He now sees a light on the other side of the tunnel, so when he sees a fellow addict suffering, he has a secure base to respond to that person with empathic concern and an offer of help, instead of only responding with empathic distress.

How does one generate such a secure base? It comes from identifying the underlying causes of suffering and generating a determination to emerge from them. Like an alcoholic realizing that alcohol is not a real source of happiness, but rather a cause of suffering. Typically we chase after certain things and reject others; but after analysis we may find that we were blindly chasing causes of suffering while rejecting things that could bring us more lasting happiness. Identifying such mistakes is the first step, but the second step is to resolve to change our habits and perceptions, so that we put ourselves on a path that leads away from suffering and towards happiness. When we realize that the causes of suffering can be transformed, and that we ourselves are in a position to transform them, and when we resolve to do so, we cultivate self-compassion. It is called self-compassion because this is the genuine way for us to care for ourselves and relieve ourselves of unnecessary suffering.

Gaining Insight into Our Mental Life and Cultivating Mindfulness

The point is neither to deny one's cravings, nor indulge in them, but rather to observe them and relate to them in a more healthy manner, gradually gaining a greater degree of mastery over them. This can only happen through the cultivation of a greater state of awareness of our own mental experience. Giving in to craving or aversion only reinforces such patterns, but suppressing them will not work either. The third possibility is transformation by gaining insights into the emotional patterns. That transformation is possible when one can relate to one's experiences in a non-reactive, neutral manner without craving or aversion. From that non-reactive place, one can then use the gap between stimulus and response to decide how to respond to the given emotion. If it is a constructive emotion, one can support it; if it is destructive, one can take measures to limit it.

Dr. Abraham Verghese, in his book *The Tennis Partner*, writes about how many medical students and residents become exposed to suffering without having been properly taught how to deal with the suffering they are witnessing and the emotions and experiences it gives rise to. Without being able to relate to their experiences non-judgmentally, many future doctors have no recourse but to suppress the natural empathy they have for the patients before them, less they be overcome with empathic distress. A suppression of one's feelings is not healthy in the long run, however, and Dr. Vargas talks about how such individuals may later go on to turn to alcohol and other drugs and addictions to relieve their stress, and even how individuals in the medical profession face higher suicide rates than those in other professions.

When an actual situation arises, it is hard to catch ourselves and move from a reactive place to a non-reactive place, where we can respond thoughtfully and rationally, instead of reacting instinctively or out of established but unhealthy habit-patterns. Fortunately, we can practice this in meditation, and cultivate insight into our mental experience through the practice of resting the mind in its natural state. Natural state here means an uncontrived state of mind that is not chasing after something that we crave, nor pushing away something that we dislike, but merely observing whatever arises in experience in a non-judgmental way. Gradually we learn to relate to experiences without getting immediately caught up in them, and this transforms the way we experience craving and aversion. That in turn allows us to practice self-compassion, because we now have the tools to gradually wean ourselves away from emotions and thought patterns that lead to suffering, by not giving in to them, and instead strengthen constructive emotions and thought patterns that lead to greater well-being and happiness for ourselves and others.

This practice of observing our inner mental life, whether on the meditation cushion or out in active life, can only take place if we have developed some degree of attentional stability. Generally we are not trained to attend to the moment-by-moment experiences that take place in our minds. We may not notice emotions arising until they become quite strong, or if we do notice them, we may become too caught up with them or distracted by something else before we can address them. Therefore, the cultivation of mindfulness is an essential foundation for learning to rest the mind in its natural state and gain insight into our inner world. In CBCT, we develop mindfulness by focusing on the breath and learning to attend to it moment by moment as it enters and leaves the body. Gradually we refine our attention through this process, like a scientist polishing and focusing a microscope. Once our attention is a bit more refined, we can use our minds to engage in the types of meditations explained above, and we have a great tool for the cultivation of compassion. Mindfulness is therefore foundational and essential for the cultivation of compassion.

Finding Inspiration and Appreciation for Compassion: Resting in a Moment of Nurturance

Any endeavor that requires a sustained effort will depend on depth of appreciation one has for the end goal of the endeavor. If a gardener's effort is grounded in a genuine appreciation of beautiful gardens, his efforts will come more naturally and be more sustainable through the long process of preparing and tending to the garden as the flowers flourish. In the same way, deepening one's personal sense of appreciation for the value of compassion and its many benefits can provide a powerful impetus and motivation to sustain one's efforts in cultivating such compassion.

Therefore one powerful way to develop that strong appreciation of compassion and its benefits is to connect oneself with a moment of such nurturance, recollecting an actual moment or imagining a person or place that provides a felt sense of being secure, safe, and cared for. As a preliminary practice for CBCT, we begin by taking a few moments to immerse in such a nurturing moment, connecting with the sense of caring warmth and

protection and thereby finding the inspiration to embody for oneself these qualities so that we may become the source of such nurturance for others.

Stages of CBCT

The steps of the practice can be briefly outlined as follows:

1. **Developing Attention and Stability of Mind**: The foundation for the practice is the cultivation of a basic degree of refined attention and mental stability.
2. **Cultivating Insight into the Nature of Mental Experience**: The stabilized mind is then employed to gain insight into the nature of the inner world of thoughts, feelings, emotions and reactions.
3. **Cultivating Self-Compassion**: The student participant observes the innate aspirations for happiness and wellbeing as well as those for freedom from unhappiness and dissatisfactions, i.e., which mental states contribute to fulfillment and which ones prevent it. The participant then makes a determination to emerge from the toxic mental and emotional states that promote unhappiness.
4. **Developing Equanimity and Impartiality**: Normally one tends to hold fast to categories of friends, enemies, and strangers and to react unevenly to people, based on those categories, with over-attachment, indifference and dislike. By examining these categories closely, the participant comes to understand their superficiality and learns to relate to people from a deeper perspective: everyone is alike in wanting to be happy and to avoid unhappiness.
5. **Developing Appreciation, Affection, and Empathy for Others**: Although people view themselves as independent, self-sufficient actors, the truth is that no one can thrive or even survive without the support of countless others. When the participant realizes interdependence with others and the many benefits which others offer every day, the participant develops appreciation and gratitude for them.

   Developing affection and empathy then follws, and involves a two-pronged approach: reflecting on the kindness of others and reflecting on the many drawbacks of a self-centered attitude. The latter weakens out self-centeredness, while the former is the active component that strengthens endearment and affection towards others. That endearment and enhanced empathy serves as the catalyst for compassion. The more endearment we feel towards another, the more unbearable we will find their suffering and difficulties, and the more we will rejoice in their happiness and good fortune. [Singer] We will then be impelled to see them relieved of their distress, which is compassion. Deeper contemplation and insight into the ways in which myriad benefits are derived from countless others, along with awareness that this kindness should by rights be repaid, enables the participant to relate to others with a deeper sense of connectedness and affection. By relating to others with a profound sense of affection and endearment, the participant is able to

empathize deeply with them. The participant cannot then bear to see others suffer any misfortune and rejoices in their happiness.

6. **Realizing Engaged Compassion**: Enhanced empathy for others, coupled with intimate awareness of their suffering and its causes, naturally gives rise to compassion: the wish for others to be free from suffering and its conditions. For engaged compassion, the participant is guided through a meditation designed to move from simply wishing others to be free of unhappiness to actively committing to assistance in their pursuit of happiness and freedom from suffering. Consistent meditation training develops a greater capacity for compassion, which eventually will become ingrained and spontaneous.

The six modules are distinct, yet integrated, and each builds upon the previous stages. The course is taught weekly over 6, 8, or 10 weeks, and occasionally as intensive courses over several days. The pacing of the presentation of the modules is tailored to each group, depending on experience and orientation of the participants, but the final stage (number 6 above) is always the final step. Over the course, the participant is led through a series of integrated, cumulative meditations – and provided with guided recordings for each module -- for the systematic development of compassion.

When practiced sincerely, this training can be a powerful tool for identifying and observing the components of subjective experience; for understanding how subjective experience colors perception of the outer world; and for working with these observations to gain insight into, and perspective on, interpersonal relationships. When successful, this training enhances positive feelings of connectedness to others, while minimizing feelings of isolation and alienation.