【Buddhist Encounters: Finding a Home in the Human Condition】

Compassion and Enlightenment: Exploring the Depth of Human Connection and Awakening

Dr. Lewis R. Lancaster
Emeritus Professor, University of California, Berkeley

1. Compassion

While my grandfathers both died before I was born, my great grandfather lived to be nearly ninety-seven and I remember him as an impressive individual. He had been a Drummer Boy during the Civil War and in my child's eye that was exciting. I imagined him leading a parade of soldiers before crowds of cheering people. It was not until I read the work of the philosopher Charles Pierce, a nineteenth-century American, who was one of our nation's great thinkers, that I began to understand the darker side of being a Drummer Boy. Pierce, like my great grandfather, was a Drummer Boy in the Civil War. It was not a fun-filled march down Main Street. It was a serious and dangerous role for young men and boys during battles. They were at the front line and their main task, through loud drum beats, was to communicate instructions to the troops: "retreat"; "advance"; "go to the left"; "stand firm." In this role, Pierce recounts that many times he saw soldiers spring to the aid of others, without a moment's thought for their own safety. From this, he reached an insight about human nature. He concluded that compassion is a part of our psyche and under certain circumstances, it takes place without training or any instruction. By contrast, fighting and killing the enemy, says Pierce, must be taught and soldiers can perform only after receiving training.

The word compassion in its most basic form means "to suffer in common." We have made "passion" into a word meaning intention, strong desire, enthusiasm,

and sexual drive. Its oldest meaning and its root has the meaning of "suffering" and the prefix "com-" means "together." The soldiers that Pierce saw performing selfless acts of compassion on the battlefield were examples of those who acted out of a common bond of suffering together.

William Morris Hunt (1824-79), The Drummer Boy, 1862. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

Empathy is sometimes used as a synonym for compassion, but I think it is not the best use of the term. Empathy implies having the knowledge that others are suffering, but does not necessarily extend to action. Compassion in the experience of Pierce was an immediate response of assistance by someone who is in the same situation. That is why the Dalai Lama said that compassion is only possible between equals. I have never been blind and while I may have empathetic feelings for those who are, it is not possible for me to fully enter into their world. It is instructive to watch blind people together. They have compassion for one another, but it does not show itself as being overly helpful. It is respectful. I remember waiting one day for a stoplight to change before crossing the intersection. Two blind people came up behind me with their canes. To my surprise, one of them asked the other, "What time is it?" and he replied with the correct answer. I wondered how he knew and then I saw his Braille wrist watch. He answered so alertly, and I suspect proudly, with the implication that one does not need to be sighted to tell the time. When the light changed, they waited to hear the flow of traffic and then both walked calmly across the street. I have no idea what it would be like to walk with a friend across a busy street in absolute darkness. They did it with no visible fear, in total harmony and trust.

A friend had a terrible tragedy in his life when his sixteen-year-old son had an accident and was paralyzed from the neck down. The young man was in the hospital for many weeks and I went to visit him. He was in a room with three other teenagers who were also paralyzed and receiving treatment. The four of them kept up a flow of dialogue as they joked with one another. I now know that

it was compassion, that they all suffered in common, and showed that compassion in treating one another without pity or reference to their body's state. When the hospital released my friend, he was devastated because at home he had no one who suffered the same. He became an object of pity, someone who was set apart, lovingly cared for by his parents. He wanted compassion from those who suffered with him, and would joke and support him in a normal teenage fashion.

When I started to do prison visitation, it was soon obvious to me that I could not have this type of compassion for the inmates because my life was so different. What I did see was that the practice of meditation and the conversations that we had together helped them to express their compassion for one another. A great moment of learning for me was hearing one of the men tell of the suffering he had in the living arrangements with two hundred in a large room sleeping in bunk-style beds. He told me of his hatred for those other men, his anger at their snoring, their sudden shouts while dreaming, the constant bright lights, the noise of loud talking. Then one night when he couldn't sleep, he decided to sit on his bed and meditate. As he did so, he was suddenly aware that everyone in the room suffered as he did. He opened his eyes and looked around him at all the men who were there, stripped of everything by imprisonment, shamed by their past deeds, frightened of the future. Suddenly, he felt compassion for them and he was no longer angry, no longer resentful and restive. From that moment he began to reach out to his fellow inmates.

In particular, he turned to the young men in their twenties, the group facing decades in prison. It is among prisoners in this age bracket that we find the highest rate of suicide in the country. He began to look for those facing deep depression and started sitting with them. The only thing he had to elicit their interest was a small portable chess board and he used it to get them to do something beyond despondence. His efforts saved lives, and he came to be called the Prison Bodhisattva.

These acts of compassion occurred in extreme situations: the battlefield, a high security long term prison. Most of us are fortunate enough never to face such difficulties. Does that mean that we cannot have compassion for those who do? The Buddhists teach that we all suffer, we all have moments of dissatisfaction. We all face illness and old age. As humans, we share all of the difficulties of living.

While there are experiences that are not shared, our humanness is something that bonds us together. I have reached my ninetieth year on this earth, lost balance, and only move about with a cane or a support. It was painful for me to see other old men with canes and for a time, I tried to look away. Recently, it has come to me that I need to listen to the inmate, who found his compassion in a room with two hundred other prisoners that he resented and rejected. Old men need not just remind me of my reduced bodily movements, it also is an indication that we are fellow sufferers. So now I try to smile and nod if I catch the eye of a fellow sufferer. I am determined not to turn away or to feel diminished by the view of another person in my same condition.

When you have young children, they need to be with equals, those their own age. We say they need "playmates" but it is much more serious than that, they need those who are facing the life of a child. As we grow older, we forget what it was like to be unable to do what others seem to do effortlessly, feeling small as we are surrounded by huge bodies that tower over us, being bodily picked up and carried about, being told not to touch something that interests us, confused by constantly facing new things that we have never experienced. Who can best help a child learn to pick up a ball and throw it? I no longer wonder why children spot each other and are immediately drawn toward one another. It seems to me that it is compassion that they need from one another, the compassion which only an equal can give. Children learn quickly from watching those who struggle with their same development. As teenage approaches, this need for friends grows even stronger. While we have all once been teenagers, we can't have the same understanding as those who are in the midst of that stage of life. Humans are in need of compassion from equals at every stage of life. It does seem that men have a hard time seeking compassion from other men. We have feelings of competition, the need to prove ourselves as superior, the fear of being seen as lacking in strength and ability. Women also need compassion when they feel they are denied equal access to express their abilities. Who better to give it than another person who has to face these issues every day?

So, when we think that we do not face the same situation as a warrior or a prisoner or a handicapped person, it can mislead us to think that any talk of compassion is not needed for ourselves. We have many examples of the need

Bodhisattvas choose to remain in the cycle of rebirth to help all beings, even though they are already free from all bondage.

for compassion in all levels of society. Thousands of people have found support groups of equals: alcoholics; families of those who have become addicted; gamblers; those who have uncontrolled anger; those in danger of suicide. But our search for support need not always be from a negative perspective. Buddhism encourages meditation and chanting as a group exercise. One of the Three Jewels of Buddhist life, alongside the Buddha and the Teaching, is the Sangha, a community of people who have need of focus and spiritual practice. When I first started meditating with Venerable Senzaki in downtown Los Angeles, I realized that the group was much more focused when one woman was there. I could never detect any action on her part to account for her influence. She was able, just with her presence, to give wordless support and compassion to all of us trying to master a practice that offered benefit in our lives. It takes courage to accept the fact that we are like many others who are in need of help.

When the Vietnam Memorial was completed in Washington, I went to see it. Reports of its success were mixed, so I was not sure what to expect. At first it seemed insignificant, a wall set in an indentation of an open field. However, when I walked down the incline and the wall rose above me, covered with the thousands of names of those killed in Vietnam, it was overwhelming. I stood there with tears in my eyes, as the wall conveyed the message of how many had died. At the same time, I imagined how large a wall would be that contained all the names of the women, children, and other Vietnamese who had died in the war. It is an indication that artists can often depict a view of the reality around us in a way that allows me to see it and experience it in a more direct fashion. All of us who stood looking up at that wall that day could feel the sorrow and pain and for a moment, we strangers suffered together. The artist had created a space in which

compassion was possible.

In Buddhism, the epitome of compassion has come to be the figure of a bodhisattva—one who continues to be reborn lifetime after lifetime, even though their spiritual development gives them the ability to attain Nirvana and move beyond all contact of the world. Herein lies a problem. If the sage or the one who helps us is so far beyond our level, can they truly help us? Can a bodhisattva still be an equal, when they have attained such superior insight and abilities? This problem was noted by Buddhist thinkers and some suggested that the mechanism for maintaining rebirth as a possibility, required that a bodhisattva had to continue to have delusion or some aspects of normal human experience. Only in that way can they have the ability to be reborn. It reminds me of the movie Mars, where one person was left behind in order for the spaceship to avoid a raging dust storm and potential destruction. They assume their colleague had perished in the storm until he manages to create a signal of survival, visible through telescopes on earth. The problem was time. Even though alive, the marooned person only had resources for a few months. The spaceship safely transiting back to earth was his only possible rescue. Those on the spaceship had to make a decision, for they all understood and felt the anxiety of their friend left alone on the surface of the planet. In an act of compassion, they turned back, endangering their lives. They were once again on equal footing with the solitary figure, in danger and facing great odds for a safe journey home. This story is like a bodhisattva who has achieved a state that allows them to safely go to Nirvana, and yet, time and again, they return to ordinary life, to all of the suffering of life and uncertainties, in order to help others.

How can each of us live a life of compassion, of common experience with others? How can I teach others who may not have knowledge that I have acquired? How can I give a meaningful message to you as you read my words, if we do not share the same life issues?

Suzuki Roshi of the San Francisco Zen Center continually referred to "Beginner's Mind." That is, the practice of living in which we are prepared for any moment of experience, able to be like someone just learning, without reference to our preconceived thoughts. It is a difficult practice. There is high praise in social media for such acts as "thinking outside the box." But what does

that mean? Can I only escape the "box" when I have achieved a significant level of knowledge and attainment? Is this the way to "think" myself outside the box of my awareness, beliefs, and conclusions about reality? Or is it that I set all of my concepts aside and try to create a space for a new beginning within my sensory experiences? Can I have the mind of a "beginner," open to any possibility? This might be a crucial step toward compassion. When we start anew, we put ourselves on an equal footing with everyone, even children who have to figure out how to live without decades of experience that they can draw on to determine how to behave. If compassion is only possible between equals, then we have to achieve some state that is just like what others are presently experiencing. None of us knows what will happen in the next moment, we try to imagine the future but attempts to do so seldom produce a true picture of it. We are all moving into the not-yet-seen future, moving into the darkness where it is impossible to know where the pitfalls, the dangers, the opportunities, and the delights are to be found. In this, we are all suffering in common. This is why we need friends, family, a community of support, to equally share the challenges that lie ahead. I have stopped worrying about where I can find my equals and compassion. They are all around me and at the crucial moment of taking the step into the unknown future, everyone of us is equal. Everyone of us is a candidate for compassion.

2. Enlightenment: A Distant Beacon

For many people the idea of enlightenment is like a distant beacon that always may be beyond our reach. Enlightenment has been defined and redefined; interpreted; analyzed over the centuries. Surprising is the fact that seldom do we find a description of what it is like to experience it. When I started my preparation for this lecture, I found myself in the usual state of realizing how limited my knowledge was. In my six decades of study of Buddhism, I should certainly have come to know a reasonable definition for enlightenment, and yet, it seems elusive. However, I called to mind a moment when it was described to me by someone who felt he had achieved it. This story started one night in Taiwan. It was nearing ten and after a busy day, I was thinking of going to bed. The phone rang and an acquaintance was on the other end, insisting that I get ready to go with him. He told me that there was a monk who lived in the mountains but was willing to see

me that very night.

We got in his car and drove up into hills near Taipei, a difficult drive because a cloud had settled on the heights and we could hardly see the road. Finally, arriving very late because we had to drive so slowly in the fog, we were admitted to the quarters of the monk. He was gracious and at ease even with the invasion of a foreigner in the middle of the night. He asked me what I would like to know. For a moment I was taken aback since I had thought he would be ready to give me some teaching. I was struck by his presence, his calmness, and his lack of an agenda. My question to him was about how he came to be like he was. He didn't reject such a blunt request and in a most kindly fashion began to share with me. He told me of his long years of meditating until one day, he had what he identified as his enlightenment. He lost all feeling of separation from the world or the cosmos. He became one with the whole and had great bliss. He said,

> "It was something that seemed quite unlike any experience of thought, it was just being without thinking. I was just being and not thinking in my normal way. There was no sensation, no feeling of pain or ease, no charting of time, whether past, present, or future, no idea of self but no arising of the opposite idea of no-self. It was not like a coma or unconsciousness, quite the opposite, it was having full alertness with no thoughts or feelings."

For some hours he reported that he had stayed in this state until the first rays of the sun lit his room at dawn. With the light came the awareness of breathing and for some time there was only inhaling and exhaling, not tied to anything else. After some time of his return to the world of thought and experience, one by one thoughts again began to appear. To his surprise, they were the same thoughts that he had the previous day before his "enlightened" state had occurred. He felt discomfort from sitting so long, thirst and feeling of hunger, worry about what was happening, impatience with the arising of all the old thoughts.

I asked him how he dealt with this high state he had described as enlightenment and the erosion of it as thought after thought sprang to consciousness. I could not miss the opportunity to ask questions that I felt he could answer. "What," I asked, "is the benefit of this 'enlightenment'?" It must

have seemed that I was downplaying the significance of what he had to teach by wondering whether there was any use for this experience. In a less polite fashion, I was asking, "What good is all this in your daily life?" He took no offense and answered me, but I think studying my reactions to each statement before proceeding:

> "'Enlightenment' that I lived for the first time that night years ago, is just the reality that surrounds us. It is not something that is neither far distant nor near at hand, it just is. Having the awareness of the presence of enlightenment, gives me moments of ease, free from anguish. It has allowed me to live my long life with contentment. Sometimes, I return through meditation to just being and stay with that reality for some hours, and that helps sustain me with how I relate to others, to my aging body, and to every life moment. It is a wonderful tool to help in facing the storms of worry, pain, fear.
>
> I had an experience which came upon me suddenly and without any warning signal. For the first time, I knew what the texts meant when they said that enlightenment is 'sudden.' But as the old patterns of thoughts, feelings, and emotions came back into view, I realized that while enlightenment is 'sudden,' the practice of it in our lives is 'gradual.' It was like a tool that I could use to deal with all the thoughts that swarmed once again in my head. Having known what it was like to be without them, they all appeared in a very different light. They were like flashes of light, arising one after another, in rapid succession. Not one of them stayed for more than a split second before another took its place. Now, every morning when I awake, I use my 'enlightenment' to put all the thoughts into perspective, to know them as they are… momentary and without any power to stay with me. I came to realize that I had to go on living an ordinary life, getting up, eating, bathing, teaching, reading, and planning. At first, it seemed that enlightenment was like a distant beacon, only accessible in special moments of intense concentration. But then, I began to notice that I could feel that 'enlightenment' at any moment

> of the day, I could feel it in the midst of a cascade of worries and fears. It is always there but when a thought arises, it is replaced for a moment. However, when my thought flashes and fades away in a moment, there is just a tiny window before the next thought arises and in that hiatus, enlightenment takes over only to be replaced by another thought and reappearing when that thought fades."

I realized that I was finally meeting someone who seemed to have experienced consciousness without content. In psychology communities, there is by no means great support for the idea that consciousness can be without content. I cannot hope to solve that problem or even reach a firm conclusion during this talk. Let me just say that as I listened that night on the cloud-shrouded mountain in Taiwan, I heard the monk recount the event which he called enlightenment and from what he described, it met all the standards for being consciousness without content. Only with the morning light did content once again begin to reappear in his normal state of mind. From the few studies that have been made, people who have this feeling of being in a state without any thought, are transformed by it.

In the Pali canon, there is a description of a man sleeping under a mango tree and in that deep sleep there is no thought or content. A mango fell from the tree and awakened him. The text says that while in his deep dreamless sleep, he was in what they called "*bhavanga*," a passive state that exists whenever there is no active state. The minute the mango fell on him, "*bhavanga*" was immediately replaced by active thought. When he realized what had happened, he returned to his sleep and "*bhavanga*" once again replaced all his thoughts of "mango," "tree," and "ground." Hearing what the old monk described seemed to me to be an example of this process, whereby continuity of consciousness occurs (perhaps consciousness without content), and it is interrupted by sensory-generated momentary thoughts. It rises to prominence at the moment a thought flashes and disappears.

To return to my questioning the value of the state that the monk had achieved, I understood him to say that he had continued to sit in meditation throughout the night filled with his bliss and when he emerged from that state the next morning, he remembered and rejoiced at his experience. However, as the day wore on, to his surprise and chagrin, he realized that he still had to face everyday life, and some

Enlightenment can happen in a moment, but the practice that follows is gradual.

of it made him impatient, and he even felt a spurt of anger. He could reenter his blissful state when he meditated but when the world impinged on him, he faced the old patterns of thought and behavior. It was then that he realized that his "enlightenment" was a wonderful tool, he had to use it to deal with life's experiences. So, he said that he had learned that his ingrained habits, his attitudes of a lifetime, his prejudices, and his impatience were still present. It was, he remarked, as if his brain had deep gorges that had been created over his whole life and even his former lives.

The concentration that he had mastered had given him a way to slowly, every day, practice the removal of his deep patterns of behavior. His solace was to read the works of Tsung Mi, a great master in ancient Chinese Buddhism. Tsung Mi taught that the enlightenment moment is immediate but the practice that follows it is gradual. This is a reversal of what some taught that first comes gradual practice and then the flash of enlightenment. For the old monk on that Taiwan mountain, his never-to-be-forgotten flash of enlightenment was with him at all times, and he had for years continued to use the insight to remove the Three Poisons: Greed, Hatred, and Delusion.

I admit that I did not quite know what to do with these descriptions and decided to put them aside and direct my attention elsewhere. Then one day on my car radio, I heard a most remarkable interview. It was with Dr. Jill Bolte Taylor, a neuroscientist from Harvard, who was a member of the staff of the brain research center. When she was thirty-seven, she had a stroke. Because of her training, she was fully aware of the symptoms, and she knew that it was serious and massive. Even though unconscious, she diagnosed that the trauma was in the left lobe of her brain, and as a result, judgment, sense of ego, and content of consciousness were fast fading. What she began to experience was a surprise, brain chatter was shut off, worry about the stroke and problems in life left her. Like the monk, distinction between her body and the world's space dissolved and she felt at one with the flow of existence. Her mother was sitting beside her bed knowing that

her daughter's brain might be damaged beyond recovery. To her amazement, her stricken daughter, unable to speak, smiled. It appeared that rather than pain and suffering, she was in bliss. It angered her mother to think that she could smile at such a time, but there it was before her.

When I heard that broadcast, I immediately thought of what the monk had shared with me. There was a reality to consciousness that has no content. Dr. Taylor fortunately recovered, but she said that once having had the experience, when life becomes too stressful, she can return to the state which she describes as retreating to the right lobe of the brain. The stroke had transformed her. Meditation has transformed the monk. We are told in the texts that there are two kinds of Nirvana. One is the Nirvana that occurs while we are still alive with our human forces. It is called Nirvana with remainder. Like the sleeper under the tree, it can be interrupted and replaced with the everyday world. While the doctor had suffered a profound trauma, she could still make use of the experience of a damaged brain to give her ease.

I do not want to trivialize enlightenment when I tell these stories of people's experience. However, over the years, I have time and again come across examples that do not seem remote from the experiences of the monk on the mountainside in Taiwan. Is there any benefit for these moments of consciousness without content in a real-life situation? I have already described the situation of the basketball star Kobe Bryant, who described a similar experience. I cannot tell you whether the monk, the neuroscientist, and the professional basketball player were having similar states. I don't know how one might prove it. However, I think the similarities are too striking to be overlooked. It is possible to take from the examples assurance that there is value in being able to have moments when we are free of our normal thinking process. One of the portals for entering such a state is through meditation. However, there are other potential ways to reach equivalent experiences. Focused activity of many kinds can open up part of this state. While I may never achieve the states that I have just described, the value of having any experience of a heightened state of awareness that is without the content of my normal flow of thought, seems to be within reach and to be of great value. Perhaps enlightenment is not so distant after all, not so separated from us in our daily life. Perhaps it is not so distant from us, at this very moment.