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Compassion Assignment
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Compassion is Engaging in Perspective Taking

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ABSTRACT

Compassion is the ability to be sensitive to the suffering of self and others with the deep wish and commitment to relieve it.

In this paper I explore suffering in relation to the Buddha's Four Noble Truths and the latest research on (self)compassion. I will use myself as a subject of study to understand more about how suffering and the awakening of compassion work for self and others. What kind of suffering do I recognise in my own life that made me look for a spiritual path like Buddhism that promises the discovery of true happiness? How do I understand the cause of suffering and the possibility of freedom from suffering?

In part two I describe the effect of compassion training in my professional work as a trainer and counselor in relation to evidence-based research on the use of (self)compassion. It is part of the fourth noble truth where the practice of compassion offers a path to liberation from suffering. Compassion is engaging in perspective taking, and it offers valuable strategies for contemplative psychology that need to be developed further.

INTRODUCTION

“A human being is a part of the whole called by us “universe”, a part limited in time and space. He experiences himself, his thoughts and feeling as something separated from the rest – a kind of optical delusion of his 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 this prison by widening our circle of compassion to embrace all living creatures and the whole of nature in its beauty.”

Albert Einstein.

While meditating during the mindfulness retreat with Rob Nairn on Holy island in May 2011 I could suddenly see the unnecessary pain of my own self-made cage in life; how I painfully restrict myself continuously with limiting thoughts and concepts about myself and others. I opened my eyes and looked with a soft heart around the room at my fellow students sitting in silence on their cushions, some looking more caged than others, and spontaneously a strong wish welled up in me of wanting to liberate us all from this illusionary imprisonment. What if I could just see each one of them in their own true nature, free from my own likes or dislikes, my own projections? I imagined

what joy, beauty and intimate truth about our humanness would reveal itself in that flash of openness. Sitting on my cushion I realised again in a new refreshed way what deeply motivates me in life, which is to free myself and others from suffering and to realise my own potential in order to help others realise their potential.

In Buddhism, compassion is the vehicle for recognising and developing our human potential. It is not surprising that in Buddhist psychology, like in any other world religion, compassion lies at the core of its spiritual practice. Over the last decade evidence-based research has offered a new paradigm on compassion that shows the positive effect of compassionate practices on our physiological and psychological well-being. From an evolutionary perspective love and compassion are necessary for our survival as mammals and this human trait is so-called hard-wired in our survival system.

It is absolutely essential that we as humankind access and develop our ability to be compassionate with one another, yet our world seems so short of it. Why is it so hard to be compassionate with oneself and others? What motivates us to cultivate compassion in our daily life? And how does one access and cultivate this inner seed of compassion at the core of our being?

PART ONE

1.0 The Buddhist framework

Four Noble Truths

The famous Four Truths contain the essence of the first series of teachings by the Buddha 2500 years ago. The purpose of all the teachings is to understand, confront and relieve suffering. During the first years of his teaching Buddha established a very complete, scientific and psychological language, enabling all things material and mental to be clearly defined and distinguished. Together with an extremely fine analysis of mind, dismantling myths of personal reality, his teachings deal in very real terms with the suffering both in oneself and in others and how one can work positively to bring happiness to the world and plant seeds to create a wiser and more harmonious society.

Samsara and Nirvana

The first two truths deal with suffering (samsara), and the final two truths deal with the freedom from suffering (nirvana). Everything everywhere can be assigned to one of these two areas of reality: *samsara* or *nirvana*. Or as Holmes (2008) says, 'For Buddhists, there is nothing in heaven, on earth or elsewhere that is not included somewhere in these two. The Four Truths are all-embracing because they are a vivid and complete description of samsara and nirvana, explaining the causes of each.'

Motivation

If one looks at the goal of achieving Nirvana, one has to distinguish two different kinds of motivation. The followers of the Hinayana path look for inner peace and stability for oneself by freeing oneself of suffering. According to the Mahayanist path achieving nirvana is not just the cessation of suffering "like a candle completely burned out", but also the awakening of the Buddha mind with its enlightened qualities. It has the ambitious perspective of realising one's own potential in order to help all sentient beings to be free from suffering and to realise their inner potential. Genuine compassion, the spontaneous and selfless care for all beings, is the main quality needed for attaining one's full potential or enlightenment. That is why Mahayanists keep their motivation fixed on the well-being of all sentient-beings before, during and after meditation.

1.1 First Noble Truth; ‘Life is Suffering’

The first Noble Truth of Buddha is about acknowledging or accepting that life is suffering. Suffering is seen as an existential part of life, something we can't avoid, simply by virtue of the fact that life is impermanent, it changes continuously and sooner or later we will have to leave behind what is dear to us. This first truth also relates to the suffering of being unable to be satisfied with life as it is and resisting inevitable change. The other two key topics of this first truth, voidness and no-self, deal with the illusionary things through which one suffers, not being able to see the true nature of people, things and oneself. In short, reality is perceived in a gross, very partial, frozen image giving the impression of a single, lasting reality and of a lasting self who suffers. On an absolute level no such reality or self can ever be found.

“What is accumulated will eventually dwindle, what is built up will eventually disintegrate, what comes together eventually will part and what lives eventually will die.” (Gampopa, *Collection of Aphorisms*, Holmes, 2008, module 2, p.26)

Death and impermanence

During the first year of my Buddhist practice in 1990 I was asked by my teacher to contemplate daily on the four preliminaries (note 1). These four thoughts or reminders develop a motivation to practice Dharma; a path that truly brings fundamental well-being and happiness by cultivating wisdom and compassion. I didn't know then that it would still take 26 years before I could profoundly face and understand the suffering of the second preliminary ‘Death and Impermanence’, which is one of the main marks of existence.

July 2011

Today it is 49 days ago that my father died. This wave of sadness wells up in me during the day; I miss everything about him. The reality that I will never be able to see or hear him again seems almost impossible to live with. And yet I know that also this pain will pass....

Having been with my father during his last days of his life has been a deep initiation in the process of dying and death itself. More than ever I experienced the value of having a practice like mindfulness that enabled me to find the strength to be with him in complete trust and surrender, opening my heart for his and our pain of having to say farewell. I felt how facing the pain made my heart become more vast, unshakeable in its tender embrace of us all. I didn't know I could love someone so deeply, I didn't know that care could feel so warm, and I didn't know that prayer can be so powerful...

I experienced the process of dying like being born, a natural transition into another dimension, in which my mother, my sisters and I became a kind of midwives, helping my father and ourselves to let go in peace. In the room we all experienced this tangible interpersonal resonance between us and I realise now how at a time like that you can truly help yourself and others by being in a mindful and compassionate state of mind.

My father died softly and in peace amidst our loving presence on the 5th of June 2011. That he could die in peace was our deepest wish and hope, what an incredible blessing and comfort for us all. I feel eternally grateful for that.

Life is like a flowing river – every moment is new. If one isn't awake or doesn't take full advantage of this very moment it's going to slip away from one's hands, like it has often happened probably in the past. Reflecting on impermanence helps one to see this transitory nature of one's life and how fragile our existence is. The reality of impermanence also shows the preciousness of human life, appreciating being where one is and appreciating who one is. In this way, impermanence and precious human birth go together as the first two preliminaries.

Not being good enough

When I entered Buddhism at the age of 25 I was still pretty unaware of the suffering of impermanence and death. I was also dealing with a lot of self-hatred and couldn't appreciate myself and life that much. I was busy finding a way out of my own small misery, trying to escape my pain and despair of failing to meet my own and others' expectations. I was trying hard to get rid of all the things I didn't like about myself and in my life in general. It was this kind of mindset that made me jump onto a spiritual path like buddhism. The quote underneath from Brach (2003) expresses for me in a nutshell one of the main sufferings that made me desperately seek a new hope or perspective in my life at the time.

“Those who feel plagued by not being good enough are often drawn to idealistic worldviews that offer the possibility of purifying and transcending a flawed nature. This quest for perfection is based in the assumption that we must change ourselves to belong.” (Brach, 2003, p.10)

When I look back on my life I realise that so much of what I did was driven by a desire to belong, to be accepted and wanting to feel at home with myself and feel connected to others. In order to be accepted I thought I had to be perfect; to be a really nice warm-hearted person with a successful interesting job, friends, nice house, good looking etcetera. Then I will be loved and accepted by others, and maybe more importantly, then I can accept myself. Until I arrive at this perfected state there is this strong inner critic that pushes me forward, telling me how I can improve myself, how I should change myself. The critical voice in me is never satisfied with how I am or how things are at that moment in time. This relentless need to improve myself feels like I am constantly on the move like a lonely cowboy on his horse looking for a place to come home. I thought that happiness is something out there that I haven't got, something I need to get or obtain by becoming an interesting and successful person that stands out in the crowd. In order to become happy I thought I had to acquire something new to replace the old – a new partner, a new study course, a new job...a new self!

Poverty mentality

What I have just described is typically the dynamic of a poverty mentality; something is lacking within oneself, or something is not okay about oneself, and therefore one thinks the richness in life can be found externally in the outside world. This often translates in working hard and doing one's best in order to become a different/ better person who will be valued by others. Until one has achieved this goal (of perfection) one can't appreciate oneself or allow oneself to rest. Happiness and peace can only be found in the future and are completely conditional within the framework of the poverty mentality. As a result one is never satisfied with how things are. In Buddhism this is called 'dukkha', a continuous feeling of dissatisfaction with one's life, and is seen as another mark of existence and the second key topic of this first truth. The poverty mentality is basically driven by a non-acceptance of self, and therefore always oriented to changing things to something different.

Trance of unworthiness

Brach (2003) describes the dynamic of the poverty mentality as a pre-scripted drama, fated to react to our circumstances in a given way. Maybe the actors change now and then in the poverty mentality script (a new partner, a new colleague or friend), but there is a definite pattern in how we react and behave in relation to self and others. Brach calls it 'the trance of unworthiness' because this pre-scripted drama is based on a lack of self-worth.

I recognise times in my life where I consciously cultivated this drama of unworthiness, using the suffering of feeling separate from others and life in general to create art. I found comfort in the work of other artists, who seemed to express this undercurrent of human despair and alienation that I experienced as well. I also thought my drama of loneliness was unique and felt superior to others sometimes in order not to be faced with the fear underneath that I might be deficient and of no worth at all.

Since many people suffer from a sense of not feeling worthy of love and belonging, one is afraid to look honestly at oneself since it would only cause more self-hate. Joining a spiritual path or idealistic worldview from the trance perspective can then foster the false hope that one can avoid difficult psychological issues in oneself like this. Philosopher Ken Wilber (1997) calls this the 'spiritual by-pass'; trying to transcend oneself by excluding certain unfavorable parts of oneself. It's like wanting to live on the top floor of the building (living a holy life) in order not to have to deal with the mess in the basement. This kind of suppression of one's shadow side will sooner or later cause problems in one's development.

Three main opposites to self-compassion

The problem with the trance of unworthiness is that one unconsciously makes one's world very small and limited. If there is no other perspective given to this kind of poverty mentality one is trapped in a cage of self-criticism, self-isolation and self-absorption. Kristin Neff (2011) regards these three unhealthy tendencies to oneself as the main opposites to self-compassion. From a social psychology and Buddhist tradition Neff developed a Self-Compassion Scale that measures key elements of self-compassion; *Self-kindness* as the opposite of self-judgement; being harshly judgemental to oneself in the face of failure or setbacks, the tendency to add insult to injury. *Common humanity* as the antidote to self-isolation; feeling alone and isolated by thinking you are the only one who suffers like this. It also refers to the tendency to take experiences of misfortune very personal like it is one's own fault and feeling ashamed about it. And *Mindfulness* as the opposite to self-absorption or overidentification; losing oneself in emotional reactivity and as a consequence dramatising reality. For example the tendency to obsess and fixate on everything that's wrong when one feels down. Neff's model helps to acknowledge how one suffers from a certain kind of relationship with oneself and one's experiences, and how key elements of self-compassion can foster a healthy stance with oneself.

Affect-regulation systems out of balance

Another framework that can help us recognise and understand our complex inner dynamics of emotions, that guides our biosocial goals and motivations like safety, achievements or attachments, are the affect-regulation systems by Paul Gilbert (2006, 2010). Rooted in the evolutionary model of social mentality theory Gilbert uses for his Compassion Focused Therapy a useful and simplified model derived from recent research in emotional processing (Gilbert, 2010, p.43), that reveals how our brains contain at least three types of major emotion-regulation systems. Each emotion-regulation system is designed to do different things and these three interacting systems are called in short the threat system, the drive-excitement system, and the soothing-contentment system. For one's well-being it is important that the three systems are in balance, but this is often not the case due to all kinds of factors and causes a lot of unnecessary suffering.

For example I come from a Western society and family culture that motivated and encouraged me to find out what I enjoy doing in life and to become good at that by studying and achieving things in that field. This motivation is part of the drive system and its function is to give one positive feelings that guide one to seek out resources that one needs in order to survive and prosper. Dopamine, a substance in our brain, is part of this drive system and, if balanced with the other two systems, it guides one towards important life goals. Yet there are two main motivations behind achievement according to Dykman (Gilbert 2010, p. 109) which he called *growth* seeking versus *validation* seeking. Although I often enjoyed my ability to learn and mature through challenges /mistakes, I was - especially as an adolescent - more often a validation seeker feeling under constant pressure to prove myself as likeable and acceptable to others. Because of 'evaluative concerns' I was striving to avoid criticism/rejection from others (and myself). The fear of failure and shame (also as a perfectionist who thinks she needs to 'earn her place') triggers the threat system that quickly picks up on threats like social exclusion and then gives me a burst of feeling like anxiety or anger. These feelings travel

through my body to alert and urge me to take action to do something about the threat. Particular brain systems are activated like the amygdala and the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal (HPA) raising my adrenaline and stress-cortisol levels to protect myself. 'Better safe than sorry', I select a response of fight, flight or freeze/ submission. (Gilbert 2010 p.44) Switching to the soothing and contentment system would help me to restore my balance and reduce my suffering of stress, with its release of endorphins and the hormone oxytocin that buffers stress and impacts on threat processing in the amygdala. This system is vital for feeling connectedness and contentment in the sense of being happy or at peace with the way things are and feeling safe. Yet how hard is it to stop defending myself to threats or to let go of the need to achieve or do something?!

By understanding the nature and origins of one's emotions and what they are designed for, one can see negative emotions like anxiety or anger as a normal part of our emotional repertoire. Our brains did not evolve for happiness, but for survival and reproduction. By realising this one can learn how to accept, tolerate and work with difficult, unpleasant emotions or low moods one suffers from and to see them as normal responses rather than as something gone wrong. They need to be engaged with compassionately. This enables one to integrate suppressed parts of the self, which fosters a further growth in maturity as a human being.

Conclusion

To face the first noble truth that life is suffering starts with being able to identify suffering in oneself. This is not so hard when one deals with obvious physical or mental pain, but much harder when one looks at what disturbs the mind and makes one unhappy. To get more insight into this suffering requires courage and compassion since our biological survival system is hard-wired to avoid pain and/or suffering and to grasp for that which is pleasurable. Western and Buddhist psychology, and the biological evolutionary perspective, show how common it is for a human being to be subject to all kind of conflicting emotions, to feel overwhelmed by them and not to know how to get a grip on them. One easily comes under the sway of one's conditioned mindset of self-criticism, self-isolation and overidentification, which causes a lot of suffering on different levels, all rooted in a non-acceptance of self.

Samsara is the name Buddhists give to the worldly mind. It is deluded and it suffers. It's rather like being unwittingly trapped in a self-made cage, going round and round in the same repetitive patterns. The trance of unworthiness with its poverty mentality describes this pre-scripted drama of going around in circles in life looking for something that can never be found. This is called the viciousness of samsara, the fourth preliminary. What is the cause of all this suffering?

1.2 Second Noble Truth; 'Origin of Suffering'.

The second truth gives insight into the origin of suffering, which is caused by attachment to objects of perception that are impermanent, including clinging to the illusory concept of a 'self' as a solid separate entity. "Put simply, it says that by not recognising the true nature of mind, an illusion of persona develops. This leads to personal needs and desires, aversions, jealousy, pride etc. and these poison the mind and cause one to act in a way which harms others. Such actions (*karma*) generate suffering (*samsara*) later for their doer" (Holmes, 2008, module 2, p.12). The priority in Buddha's teaching was always to stop people from harming others (and themselves in the process). To be clear on what 'harm' means, the Buddhist teachings give a description of the ten non-virtuous actions and the ten virtuous actions on the physical, verbal and mental level as part of the second truth (note 2).

How one relates to what is

What's helpful to me in understanding the origin of suffering is the experienced-based insight that *how one relates* to what is happening in the moment, whatever it is, determines the amount of suffering one causes to self and others.

For example the moments I couldn't accept the fact that my father was dying I got more tensed and upset, I was grasping for his love trying to savor every moment of exchange, fearing what might come in the future, losing trust in my own capacity to handle his nearing death. I was suffering because I was fighting the truth. Returning to my mindfulness practice helped me to see this inner conflict, to relax with it and lean into the truth that I could do nothing to prevent his death. I could not save my father, I could not really help him, I was out of control, the only thing I could do was to surrender; to let go of resisting what is happening. This huge deep pain and sadness welled up in me like a big wave heading towards the shore. Being able to hold myself compassionately I let the emotion have its way. Then like any other wave it sank back into the vast ocean and this incredible calmness came over me. I felt both a deep sharp pain in me and an incredible soft and open tender heart reaching out to my father and all of us around him. It felt like I came back to my feet, feeling fully present with a big open heart, accepting each moment as it came with trust, loving my father more than ever in letting him go, realising that everything is okay. I could face the pain, the tears of my father and us as a natural emotion in having to say good-bye for the last time, but I wasn't suffering. I felt more connected, alive and full of love and inner strength than ever before in my whole life.

Non-Acceptance

Germer (2009, p. 16) describes very clearly the difference between pain and suffering when he says, "Suffering is the physical and emotional tension that we *add* to our pain, layer upon layer. In this formula, how we relate to pain determines how much we'll suffer. As our resistance to pain is reduced to zero, so is our suffering."

To understand the origin of suffering it is important to realise that pain is inevitable in life, and that suffering is optional. The crux is acceptance, the profound act of compassion to be with what ever is happening from moment to moment without judgement. The moment one accepts life as it is the mind is at peace, even if it is painful or uncomfortable. This means that suffering is not so much caused by external things, but by that which disturbs the mind internally and makes one unhappy. Relating to thoughts, feelings and body sensations from a place of non-acceptance causes suffering. Yet from a survival perspective it has been crucial to learn to prefer certain feelings and reject others. Lets have a look at that before I come back to the origin of suffering at the end.

Looking for safety

It is hard to accept life because it is impermanent. When one really looks into the nature of reality it is utterly changeable and uncertain, one never knows what the next moment will bring. The part in oneself that wants to feel safe doesn't like change and uncertainty. One feels safe if life is predictable, certain, if one can define oneself and the world around in some way in order to have some grip on it. Safety has everything to do with wanting to have control and holding on to that which feels safe and pleasurable.

Preference

Safety is the primal drive of the survival system in human beings. Being born in total dependency it is crucial to attach to that which feels safe and pleasurable, the one who feeds and protects you, and to avoid that which is unpleasurable or painful because there is no self yet that can relate to it consciously. Then pain or suffering is not only overwhelming but worse, it's a real threat to one's existence since one is not able to respond adequately. Therefore one is dependent on love and compassion in order to survive, otherwise one dies.

I think I have seen the same primal drive with my father in relation to his care-takers in the hospice. Being almost fully paralysed, having lost his ability to talk, and not being able to think clearly because of his alzheimers, my father became completely dependent on the care-takers for his survival. To our surprise as a family my father often responded more clearly to signals from his care-takers than us. He would smile at them, try to please them by being co-operative or try to respond to their questions although he couldn't talk. It was amazing to see how he won their hearts in such a short time, with such a limited ability to communicate. Now it is hard not to love my father because he is such a gentle, loving and charming man. But thinking back it could well be that his innate survival instinct was also partly helping him to feel safe by making sure he was loved by his care-takers.

Out of survival one develops a preference system with likes and dislikes. But if one has learned to hold onto what is pleasurable or dear, sooner or later one will suffer since nothing lasts. One gets in the same trouble the other way around; if one tries to avoid pain or unpleasurable things in life one will be incredibly vulnerable and at loss the moment life kicks in with unpredictable suffering like failure, sickness, old age or loss. It is not a surprise that attachment and aversion are two of the main afflictions (note 3) that disturb the mind and create suffering. One has to get beyond this egocentric preference system (EPS) of likes and dislikes, as Rob Nairn (2011) calls the primal survival mode, to reduce suffering.

Fixed self

The real root of suffering boils down to holding on to a self as a solid, separate entity that exists independently. Although direct experience of reality shows an absence of own entity because all phenomena exist interdependently and are by nature impermanent, one fixes experiences into solid and stable images, thoughts, concepts. Like a photograph one frames the present moment into a certain/controllable image which by nature is actually uncertain and beyond one's control. By identifying with thoughts, emotions and bodily sensations one creates the illusion of a lasting isolated self, but when one really looks at it one discovers that the self is insubstantial and always intimately connected with everything else. In essence one's conditioned mindset translates every experience of reality into a fixed subject-object relationship, thereby creating the illusion that one is a separate island existing independently of one's surroundings. It is like building one's own castle in the air, thinking that one needs to defend this imaginable solid territory from any threats from outside. This identification with 'I, me, myself' causes all the defilements or afflictions to arise like desire, anger, ignorance, jealousy, pride and so on. The involvement with these illusions of *permanence* and *self* cause suffering.

If one looks though at the development of consciousness, from being born as a human being into adulthood, one understands how being able to discriminate between self and others is a crucial step forward in one's personal development. One only needs to look at the bigger picture to understand and validate certain conditions in the mind from the past. It helps to realise that there is *nothing wrong* with building up an ego-identification, a solid sense of self or 'I' that considers itself separate from others, since it is actually a necessary and healthy step in becoming an adult. It is just not the end of the journey. Based on his map of integral psychology Ken Wilber (1997) explains how development doesn't stop at the personal consciousness level, but that one can evolve further into a transpersonal consciousness which transcends and includes the personal or ego-identification level. Wilber distinguishes three main stages in the development of consciousness; from pre-personal to personal and transpersonal consciousness. In Appendix 1 you can find a brief and simplified description of these three stages.

Conclusion

What is of value for one's survival and growth as a child, the egocentric preference system with its attachment to likes and aversion to dislikes and the clinging to an illusionary concept of self, seems to become the root for suffering once one is grown up. Seeing the bigger picture of the development of consciousness one can appreciate this conditioning from the past in the perspective of the need for safety and survival. Yet on the other hand if one wants to reduce one's suffering as an adult, and access one's full potential as a human being, it's also necessary to go beyond the first reactive response in the conditioned survival mindset that is also hard-wired in our biological and neurological system. Every attempt, though, to change the story of the trance of unworthiness with its EPS-system and poverty mentality within the same frame of mind is doomed to fail, since the root of the problem, clinging to a fixed concept of self as a separate entity, stays in place. Until one wakes up from this illusion one keeps a kind of distrust of one's own nature, believing that something is not okay about oneself.

Suffering is caused by how one relates to what is there, so it has little to do with any content or external circumstances. For example if one identifies with negative thoughts and feelings like anger, jealousy or pride it will lead to negative actions which will only create more suffering for self and others. All experiences that are tainted by self-centredness with its afflictions, and through taking dualistic perceptions as reality, involves suffering according to Buddhism. This samsaric reality is caused by karma, which is caused by a confused mind with its confused thinking. And such thinking comes from ignorance; nothing truly is what it at first appears to be.

“According to the Buddha's teachings, what we do now—the *karma* we create now—determines what will become of us in the future and in future lives. What we are now, and the world as we experience it, each uniquely, is the result of what we did in the past.” (Ken Holmes, 2008, module 2, p.25)

1.3 Third Noble Truth; ‘Cessation of Suffering’.

The third noble truth is about true liberation, which is not a continuation from the past, but about discovering a whole new paradigm on reality that includes and transcends everything one has learned and knows so far. This third truth focuses on freedom from the bondage one suffers from. Nirvana means that all the suffering of samsara (first truth) and all of its causes (second truth) have been removed. The term nirvana is not defining “something”, it only tells one what is no longer present.

Richness mentality; you are not who you think you are

Buddhism offers a whole new paradigm to the pre-scripted drama of the ‘trance of unworthiness’. Their starting point is that everyone is basically okay, since we all have a fundamental goodness at the core of our being. Yet we are often not aware of our intrinsic potential of limitless wisdom and compassion. Our conditioning from the past is like clouds covering up the sun. The moment we can create some space in this thickness of our conditioned mind our natural true nature will come through like the sunlight breaking through the clouds. In other words the removal of what clouds or obstructs the mind (karma, afflictions and duality) allows the natural qualities that they have been blocking to appear. This incredible liberating view really cuts through the poverty mentality; one can find all the richness of being human within oneself instead of chasing after it in the outer world. This has a huge implication for where to look for happiness and how to realize one's full potential.

Recognising who I really am starts with a willingness to not know who I am. Am I willing to put down the story of ‘me’ as I know it so far. It is like I have made a map of the territory and now I am wondering if I mistake the map for the real thing. Although my constructed reality of the world in

images, ideas, concepts gives me an idea of safety and ‘having something to do’ the pay off of this belief system is often dissatisfaction, anxiety, suffering, confusion, loneliness and so on. What is asked for is an irrational curiosity and courage to put down my map of the world, to stop reading in my own novel and really touch upon my existence in the present moment. When I look deeper into the present reality where I seem to experience a sense of ‘I’ as a separate solid self, I can’t find it. Like peeling an onion, I discover that this sense of me is just layers without a centre. This means that the story only relates to the story but not to reality as it is. I am not who I think I am! This realisation is both frightening and liberating. Somehow I die with seeing that this idea of myself is just a fleeting thought and at the same time I awaken to a bigger picture. Suddenly I am not living anymore in the story, but resting in an all encompassing ground of beingness that transcends the story. I am no longer looking at the vastness of reality from the cage of the egocentric preference system, but it is like the vastness itself looks through my eyes at the vastness of reality. Awareness doesn’t need ‘me’ to be aware; it is self-aware. Realising this when I look within, I see nothing (it’s void of a separate entity). When I look out, I see I am everything (I am not separate from all phenomena that have the same limitless essence). Or as Nisargadatta Maharaj says,

“Wisdom is knowing I am nothing,
Love is knowing I am everything,
And between the two...my life moves”

Key elements of nirvana

Because one identifies oneself with so many things like one’s thoughts, plans, and history, this identification limits and binds oneself; it creates separation and inevitable pain and suffering. In a flash of a moment, though, one can understand that all those things do not define oneself. Seeing this, one’s identity expands immediately and it is now possible to directly experience oneself as one with all things. This gives rise to a state of tremendous rest and great aliveness, and true happiness and freedom is found. Although recognising one’s true nature is a major shift in the way how one perceives reality, it still takes a lot more to fully embody nirvana.

In Buddhist scriptures (Holmes, 2008) the full attainment of nirvana is described as a continued absence of the causes of samsara (karma, afflictions and duality) and also the habitual tendency related to them. Cessation is defined as the definite end of suffering. Another key element in describing nirvana is a peace that is characterised by a clarity that cannot be troubled in the sense of unruffled, unperturbed or untroubled by anything. This is the opposite of samsara, which is disturbed and chaotic; there is an anxiety that things can go wrong any time and life demands a constant effort and attention. A third key element is the excellence of nirvana in the sense that it gives rise to the very best qualities; it is the purest and most liberated state possible for any mind. And a last description of nirvana relates to its definite transcendence of the ups and downs of samsara, it is completely beyond that.

Deconstructive process

Nirvana is a type of result that is known as *result through removal*. It is attained as the consequence of a long and intelligent process of removing obstacles that prevent one’s natural true nature to manifest. For example by removing busyness and agitation, there is natural peace. Or by removing self-centredness a natural awareness of others and care for them emerges. Realising one’s true nature is a path of deconstruction instead of trying to change or add things to oneself. The self-made cage is the illusion; one is already absolutely free and all the rich qualities of limitless wisdom and compassion are like a seed present in oneself. One simply has to see the truth of life as if one wakes up from a dream. The trance of unworthiness is a fictional story covering up one’s inner dignity and unimaginable true worth. Realising this one sees the true majesty of one’s existence, which by nature is unborn, uncreated, indestructable and indescribable.

Conclusion

Cessation is an extremely profound topic and I can't say I have awakened yet to this reality. Maybe I had some glimpses, but more important is that through reflecting upon this Third Truth "comes a heartfelt conviction that total freedom from samsara is possible and that the bonds imprisoning the mind can be broken forever." (Holmes, 2008, module 4, p.4)

As a psychiatrist my father was already totally intrigued by such a possibility. The goal of therapy, he would explain, is to help people to deal with suffering, to make it bearable for them. He often imagined how wonderful it would be if he could offer to his clients a practice or path that would truly liberate them from their suffering instead of only being able to offer a kind of remedy to it. Although he didn't know if true liberation of suffering was possible, he definitely searched for such a truth in his entire life. More than ever I realise how much his drive and motivation is also within me.

The third truth also gives a deeper insight into the inherent contradictions of one's survival strategy like separating what is actually connected, in order to create a boundary between itself and the world. Or to stabilise what keeps changing in order to maintain one's internal system within a safe range. From this point of view one realises it is all created by the mind, that it is made up. Then human behaviour also becomes like a tragi-comedy, seeing how one tries to avoid threats that are inescapable or holding on to opportunities that remain unfulfilled. Maybe all humans are in some form a bit like Don Quixote fighting the windmills. The good news is that if one can see that one's mind and brain are the cause of suffering, it can also be its cure.

1.4 Fourth Noble Truth; 'Path that leads to the Cessation of Suffering'

The fourth noble truth explains how it takes paradoxically a long and progressive journey to become what one already is. One needs to practise the middle way of gradual self-improvement that is free from the extremes of hedonism and asceticism. The purpose of all the practices on the Buddhist path is to attain Buddhahood, which is the essence or potential in everyone and everything. "Until that potential or essence is fully matured, we will not stop suffering" (Tai Situ Rinpoche, 2007). Compassion is there from the start and cultivated throughout the whole journey or as Buddha said, "in the beginning compassion is like the seed without which we cannot have any fruit; in the middle, compassion is like water to nourish the seed we have planted; in the end, compassion is like the warmth of the sun that brings the fruit to ripening" (Dewar, 2004, p.17). Compassion is seen as the quintessential skillful means; the most effective transformative tool appropriate to a particular moment. Compassion forms the ground for deepest wisdom, the warm wisdom of the good heart, and together they constitute the basis of the Mahayana path.

Cultivating compassion starts out as an attitude and slowly becomes an entire way of life, a way of being. As certain compassionate qualities mature in the person, like a softness, warmth, tolerance, generosity and broad-mindedness, it regulates one's actions, words and thoughts to create benefits rather than harms for self and others. When compassion and wisdom go together one is able to perform 'untainted' actions, where the notion of 'subject-object and interaction' are absent or transcended. It is the way out of samsara to nirvana. If the 'taint', the illusion of self when the action (good or bad) is performed, is still present it results in samsara.

Most of the work on the path deals with a transformation of one's habitual existence into something positive and helpful. From this relative reality one learns on an intellectual level how to join the mind with what is ultimately true. The great breakthrough is when one has an irreversible direct insight into the nature of truth (voidness). In the light of the insight now gained, a long-term and increasingly fine work of meditation has to be accomplished, until the finest impurities/blockages

have been radically removed. The phase beyond training is the end of the journey; nothing left to be purified and nothing still to be attained, which means becoming a Buddha.

PART TWO

Section two starts with placing the development of compassion training in its professional context of contemplative psychological practice. As a trainer and counselor I will further elaborate on how the four noble truths are an inspiration for working with compassionate imagery as a way of engaging in perspective taking. Specifically I use the latest research on self-esteem versus self-compassion that suggests that self-compassion is a useful alternative when one considers what constitutes a healthy stance with oneself.

2.1 Context Compassion Training in the Professional Field

Western psychology is increasingly incorporating Buddhist principles and practices, applying them in ways suited to our culture in modern societies. One sees this synthesis for example in Kabat-Zinn's work (2005) with mindfulness based stress reduction, Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (Eifert, Forsyth, 2007) or Compassion Focused Therapy (Gilbert, 2010). Research on compassion is part of this larger movement whereby Western scientists investigate the validity of Buddhist ideas on what causes and relieves suffering and how mindfulness and compassion contribute to psychological health and well-being. For example a growing body of research suggests that higher levels of self-compassion, first established as a field of study by Neff (2011) almost a decade ago, have been associated with 'greater life satisfaction, emotional intelligence, social connectedness, and mastery goals, as well as less self-criticism, depression, anxiety, rumination, thought suppression, perfectionism, performance goals, and disordered eating behaviors.' (Neff, Vonk, 2009, p. 26).

With the focus in modern culture more on extrinsic goals, such as individualism and materialism, what is often lacking is the cultivation of intrinsic goals like social sharing and support, and contentment. Research in emotional processing (Gilbert, 2010) shows the physiological effect of over-stimulating the threat and drive systems, and how our culture is not very helpful in relating to the soothing system. Nowadays neuroscientists like Hanson (2009) help us see how one can actually use the mind to change the brain. He gives us neural reasons why we should slow down and balance our brain, and how we have the ability to rewire our brain for greater well-being, fulfillment in relationships and inner peace.

The culture in modern societies causes its own particular forms of emotional suffering, and scientific research is helpful both in defining these problems and in offering new secular paradigms for compassion from psychology, neurology and contemplative practices. This opens doorways in encouraging people to cultivate mindfulness and compassion for themselves and others to become happier in daily life. Nowadays there is more cultural acknowledgement of this kind of inner work with one's mind and heart.

Within the context of the mindfulness training, compassion can be seen as complete and wholehearted acceptance of whatever arises in the present moment. For two years I have been giving mindfulness courses to teachers of the University of Applied Sciences and independent research shows that participants find it most difficult to develop an attitude of acceptance (Smeele, 2011). There is growing interest in the professional field in offering an eight-week compassion training course as a follow-up for those people who have done the mindfulness training. In the Netherlands pioneers in developing compassion training courses are Koster and van den Brink and

Nevejan, using the same sources of inspiration (Gilbert, Neff, Germer, and Buddhism) as the Study in Mindfulness at Aberdeen University.

2.2 Compassionate imagery

With the integration of Tibetan Buddhism and Western psychology, new ways of using compassionate imagery (one of the many practices used to cultivate compassion) are being developed to work with our own cultural neurosis in a transformative way. Since imagery is closely related to culture it is an interesting area to explore in terms of integrating Eastern and Western wisdom. Tibetan Buddhism is well known for its highly developed iconography and its use of images of Buddhas and bodhisattvas (deities) in Buddhist practice as a means to the liberation and the enlightenment of all. When the Dalai Lama was asked during an interview in 1982 (Khandro Net, 2011) if symbols and deities should be altered so as to correspond with those of one's own culture, he said "This cannot be. If you follow Buddha-dharma, the deities meditated upon should have a sound reference to the teachings of Buddha Vajradhara. They cannot be arbitrarily created nor can they be blended with those of other methods."

For many years as a contemplative psychologist I have used in my work elements of deity practice from Vajrayana Buddhism, yet people were also free to imagine another person or spiritual figure that embodied for them compassion or unconditional love. Brach (2003) also suggests in her guided meditation 'invoking the Presence of the Beloved' that one can bring to mind an image of one's own that one associates with compassion such as a dear friend, one's grandmother, an angel and so on. In Compassion Focused Therapy (CFT by Gilbert, 2010) one is also free to create one's own so-called 'Compassionate Ideal'. There is still a lot to be explored in this area. I can only say for now that over the last ten years working with compassionate imagery has been a powerful and transformative way for people to reconnect with their own inner resources of kindness, compassion and wisdom. One reason might be that imagination engages one in perspective taking, which is an essential characteristic of compassion.

2.3 Compassion is engaging in perspective taking

"By its very nature, compassion is relational, stepping back and forth between various perspectives to see the mutuality of the human condition." (Neff, 2011, p. 191)

The first pair of the four noble truths gives insight in how non-acceptance of moment to moment experiences is the root of suffering. Put very simply, 'what one resists persists'. The way out of one's self-made cage is by accepting absolutely everything about oneself and one's life, without trying to control, judge or pull away in any given moment. This means that freedom is possible by making the relational shift from non-acceptance to what Brach (2003) calls Radical Acceptance; clearly recognising what is happening and regarding what one sees with an open, kind and loving heart. This means one has to engage in perspective taking if one wants to be compassionate with oneself (and others). Rather than sticking to the point of view of the pre-scripted drama of unworthiness – I feel inadequate, afraid, stupid and so on – one needs to tap into another dimension or perspective that is free from the storyline. The moment one can recognise the truth of one's experiences as they exist in the present moment, they are naturally released or self-liberated just as the snake uncoils out of a knot.

2.4 The Beloved as an interface

Because it is very hard to relate to oneself from the perspective of Radical Acceptance, compassionate imagery like the guided meditation of the Beloved becomes like an interface between the conditional self and one's unconditional true nature. In brief it is the essence of one's

mind, the innate luminous wisdom, which takes the form of the Beloved (or in Buddhist tradition the deity). This more transparent and unconditional form outside of oneself communicates to the conditional self its own true nature. Just as children need to be mirrored by parents to build up a sense of self, one also needs to be mirrored in one's potential. What is such a guided meditation like?

By bringing to mind an image of a person or spiritual figure one associates with the embodiment of limitless compassion, one visualises being held by this being's loving embrace and warm luminosity. The eyes of the Beloved look upon one with acceptance and understanding. Gradually one lets oneself transform in its merciful presence by allowing one's entire body, heart and mind to merge with this loving awareness. By consciously identifying with the qualities of the Beloved one allows the heart to awaken to the same radiance of unconditional compassion. This is the moment one realises one is 'not two'. Experiencing oneself as a more transparent, pure form both enables one to get a taste of one's ultimate, formless, true nature and to gain insight into the perspective of the illusory, self-made cage. Subtle communication is now possible between the three different perspectives that one's true nature manifests: the more dense forms of the physical world, the more transparent and pure forms of the spirit world, and the formless ultimate perspective.

When looking at compassion as engaging in perspective taking, it is not only about making a transcendental shift in perspective. For example to feel compassion for others involves care and concern for their suffering, as well as taking on their perspective. Rather than having judgments about failures of others, with compassion one sees things from the other's point of view by considering what it must feel like to be the person making the failure. It enables one to look at things from the inside out, which aligns one's actions with one's heart. It doesn't mean one necessarily gets beyond the dual notion of subject-object, or giver/taker. The action is still 'tainted' even though it is a positive act.

Genuine compassion can only be there if one understands egolessness or selflessness, otherwise one's motivation mixes the interests of other beings with one's own self-interest and then it becomes slightly selfish and less genuine. It shows again how in Buddhism compassion and wisdom exist interdependently like two wings of a bird. Because the deity is the manifestation of unconditional wisdom and compassion there are a lot of key elements in building up the visualisation that is crucial for communicating the truth of reality. The precise meaning of deities varies also according to the view of a particular school or lineage.

"We take imagination as the path. The main point is that there is profound emptiness and then the vast way in which things appear. Emptiness is not the same as nothingness, but neither should we see appearances as real, solid things. Rather it's that while things appear they are empty, and while they are empty they appear." H.H. 17th Karmapa (2011)

2.5 The Beloved as a healthy stance

There is a lot of benefit in working with the imagery of the Beloved on a more relative level. I specifically want to look at how the Beloved is helpful in developing compassion for oneself. Recent study suggests that self-compassion is a better and more effective path to happiness than the relentless pursuit of high self-esteem.

When asked in a study by Neff (2011), 'Do you tend to be kinder to yourself or to others?' people say they were kind to others, but only self-compassionate people were also kind to themselves. Being kind with oneself is not such a common thing in the West, where most people suffer from continually judging and evaluating themselves. Our highly competitive culture puts a lot of pressure

on people, where self-esteem is often dependent on the successful attainment of goals. Underneath the surface one can quickly drop into the trance of unworthiness if one has a setback in life. This leads to more self-criticism, feelings of shame that isolates one from others, and getting carried away by depressing thoughts and feelings. It becomes a vicious circle.

Self-compassion versus self-esteem

Since the seventies psychologists have strongly emphasised the importance of self-esteem for psychological well-being. As a result parents nowadays throw heaps of praise upon their children to build up a high self-esteem, and no longer fear, unlike previous generations, that praise will bring forth egocentric and lazy children. A study by Neff and Vonk (2009) showed that self-compassion and self-esteem were statistically equivalent predictors of happiness, optimism, and positive affect. But the results from these two studies suggest that self-compassion is a useful alternative when one considers what constitutes a healthy stance with oneself, because it doesn't have the drawbacks of self-esteem. How is this to be understood?

Self-esteem is based on positive evaluations of the self and therefore operates mainly on the level of self-image/concept, a constructed reality. Self-compassion, on the other hand, is not a particular type of self-evaluation or cognitive representation of the self. It has more to do with an openhearted awareness that can embrace all aspects of personal experience. Self-compassion grounds a stable sense of self-worth and belonging in simply being human and enables one to meet feelings of inadequacy or failure with acceptance rather than evaluation and judgment. It kicks in precisely when self-esteem falters, allowing for greater resilience and stability regardless of particular outcomes. Self-compassionate individuals therefore have less need to defend their self-image than those motivated by self-esteem maintenance. Research showed that self-esteem, but not self-compassion, was positively associated with narcissism, which can be seen as having a false self-image or inflated ego. As a result the person feels easily threatened by others, and therefore tends to engage in downward social comparisons or protects feelings of self-worth by becoming aggressive or having a rigid, closed mindset that cannot tolerate alternative viewpoints. Self-compassion softens rather than reinforces ego-protective boundaries and therefore promotes the interconnectedness of people.

Awakening of the courageous Noble Heart

In working with clients as a counselor one of the main obstacles for personal growth is the inner critic which feeds the story of not being good enough. There is often a lot of attachment to the story, even if one knows it is not the truth about oneself. What's necessary is to give more space and value to this inner voice that wants to be truthful, that can discern what is just a belief system and what not. Often there is also a longing to be part of a larger whole; one feels cut off from parts in oneself and life in general. This is the point where taking on the perspective of the Beloved as an 'other' more kind and wise self is incredibly valuable.

Just to know that there is a fundamental goodness at the core of one's being is already a huge support for that inner voice in clients who have the courage to question their belief systems. It is that kind of inherent spirit within the person that takes the form of the Beloved during the guided meditation. Bringing to mind an outer image of one's own inner wisdom and compassion helps to free the voice of one's noble heart from the layers of conditioning. Probably one isn't able yet to make a real transcendental shift in perspective, but just having a fresh look as an 'outsider' at the pre-scripted drama can allow one to start to understand oneself more compassionately and create space for natural healing.

Being a compassionate mess

By taking on the accepting perspective of the Beloved one lets oneself off the very painful hook of continually thinking one needs to be different from how one is. The Beloved is voicing one's own noble heart that has complete trust in one's own beingness. The noble heart always completely

accepts who one is: an imperfect and dysfunctional, neurotic person. And that is totally okay, it is part of being human. Although one might think one has it all together, inside most humans are quite a mess, as Nairn (2011) often says during his teachings. With compassion one learns to become a compassionate mess, then there is a chance to become happy. Compassion can be seen as the process of descending into the mud, embracing all aspects of being human, knowing that the lotus is born from the mud. This is important to understand, otherwise one could again suppress certain parts of oneself.

In this light one should be cautious when using compassionate imagery like the Beloved that it doesn't become another ideal image of oneself one tries to fit into. Then the Beloved becomes part of the same old script and could lead to more narcissism. What needs to be clear is that it is not so much about the form of the Beloved, but the qualities it refers to. One shouldn't make the image of the Beloved too much of flesh and blood, but let it be made of clear light like a rainbow. It is important not to think of the Beloved as some kind of content, but as embodying the inspiring attitude of Radical Acceptance that holds whatever arises in the present moment with clear and kind awareness.

Self-appreciation

The compassionate imagery of the Beloved also challenges one to appreciate the good qualities in oneself and to stand one's ground. If one is used to acting small or belittling oneself there is often a fear of waking up to one's powerful potential. Or one can be afraid to stand out in the crowd and celebrate one's greatness. In Buddhism, though, there is a distinction between ego-pride and the healthy pride of taking up one's inner potential and learning to work with it, which they call 'vajra-pride'. It is not about feeling better than others, but engaging with the world from a place of natural, inner dignity and worthiness knowing that all human beings have strengths and weaknesses. Being grounded in a sense of common humanity, one can rejoice in the good qualities and fortune of self and others.

In awakening compassion for oneself one becomes the holder and the held, being also less dependent on external approval of others. By tapping into one's own resources and remembering the Beloved in one's heart, one can recharge one's emotional batteries if needed and become more available for what is needed in the present moment. With compassionate imagery like the Beloved one gradually develops an inner support system, an inner soother when one needs to be held with care and concern. The Beloved becomes like an inner sanctuary one can take refuge in when one feels confused or lost, allowing one to access the wisdom of the good heart in order to discern what is most needed in any given situation.

Further Research

As described above, compassion and training in compassion are powerful tools for learning to accept the present and the past and to nurture the causes of a better future. Further research is needed to study how not only the fourth noble truth in Buddhism can help, but also to identify how the first three noble truths can be translated into contemplative psychological practice.

Secondly further research is needed to elaborate on new methodologies for introducing people to compassion. As described above, the idea of the Beloved, whatever the Beloved might be, gives clients the experience of compassion. Other possible methodologies may be available as well using artistic research, specific physical exercises, construction of narratives and more. This paper clearly indicates that such further research into compassion will benefit individual people and communities as well.

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Note 1

The four preliminaries or thoughts that turns the mind away from samsara are part of the so called Ngöndro practice in Vajrayana buddhism. These four contemplations are precious human birth, death and impermanence, karma cause and effect, and the viciousness of samsara; going around in circles looking for something that can never be found.

Note 2

The Ten Non-Virtuous Actions

Physical	To kill To steal
Verbal	To commit sexual misconduct To lie To create division and enmity To speak woundingly
Mental	To speak uselessly Malevolence Avarice Aberrant belief

The Ten Virtuous Actions

Physical	To protect life To be generous
Verbal	To maintain a pure sexual conduct To speak the truth straightforwardly To dispel discord among people and bring them to harmony To speak peacefully, sincerely and in a way that is pleasant for others
Mental	To speak in a way that is meaningful To reduce desires and be content with what one has To cultivate loving kindness and so forth To penetrate the highest meaning

Note 3

Afflictions are the unwholesome things in our mind which are the source of suffering in Buddhism. In Sanskrit it is called *klesha*, meaning affliction, defilement, poison etc. The self-centeredness of ego-identification is characterised by trying to get what you want and to avoid what you don't want. This gives rise to the afflictions of desire, anger, ignorance, pride, jealousy and so on.

Appendix 1

Brief and simplified summary of the development of prepersonal, personal and transpersonal consciousness (Ken Wilber, 1997)

The first stage of pre-personal consciousness refers to when one is born; one experiences oneself as one with the world around oneself. There is no real discrimination between inside and outside, there is no sense of an objective happening. It is a kind of oceanic timeless consciousness (Wolf referentie Marinet) in which there is no subject-object relationship, it is still pre-personal. A big step in development is when the child identifies with its body, for the first time it can discriminate between a sense of self and its surrounding through body consciousness. With the development of language it learns to connect symbols to objects, it can structure its world, including an understanding of time with past, present and future. The verbal consciousness develops further into a mental consciousness of concepts, abstract thinking and a sense of self based on thoughts. Now the child has made the full transition into personal consciousness in which it experiences the world through a subject-object relationship. A sense of self is identified with thinking at this level, which results in a fixed image of self and other. One has obtained a 'thoughts-generated self consciousness' (Agazarian, 2001) that lives in a constructed reality. Now it explains its world of the past through interpretations of memory, the present by interpretations on wishes and fears and the future by negative or positive predictions. Because one lives at this stage more in one's head, a world of images, instead of in the bare reality as it is, one also tends to suppress or deny (partly) one's body consciousness.

The transition of the personal consciousness into the transpersonal consciousness is marked by the ability to observe one's thinking, feelings and body sensations. This meta-cognition enables one to integrate parts of the self that were denied or suppressed in earlier stages. This integration of the mental and body consciousness at a deeper, more encompassing consciousness level is symbolised by the centaur image that is both half human and half a horse.

Where one first looked at the natural development of consciousness from pre-ego to ego, one is now looking at the next step to access one`s full potential which is the development of transpersonal consciousness; the ability to respond from a perspective that is larger than one`s own survival mode. This step is not a continuation from the past, but about discovering a whole new paradigm on reality. A whole new way of relating to one`s direct experiences that transcends the subject-object relationship and goes beyond a conceptual reality. At this level of consciousness one also identifies different steps of realisation of one`s potential.