Wellbeings: Suffering, compassion, and interconnectedness.

All the suffering in this word arises from wishing ourselves to be happy;
All the happiness there is in this world arises from wishing others to be happy:
Shantideva

Learning objectives – at the end of the chapter you will be able to…

- Articulate the difference between compassion, empathy and sympathy
- Consider the value placed on compassion by traditions like Christianity and Buddhism
- Appreciate a range of 'other-regarding' qualities in addition to compassion, including loving-kindness, generosity, and sympathetic joy
- Differentiate various models of selfhood, including individualism and intersubjectivism
- Generate compassion through meditative practices
- Understand how cultivating compassion can engender self-transcendence
- Appreciate self-transcendence as a key aspect of psychospiritual development

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List of topics…

• Definitions and models of compassion	• Buddhist theories of the self
• Universal egoism vs empathy-altruism	• Tonglen meditation
• Collectivism vs intersubjectivism	• Self-transcendence
• I-it vs I-thou	• Psychospiritual development
• Religious teachings on compassion	• Union with the sacred

As one begins to contemplate the concept of compassion, almost at once one is beguiled by its mysterious qualities. On one hand, one might not hesitate to place it in a typology of 'positive' qualities. For instance, in Compton's (2005, p.4) *Introduction to Positive Psychology*, compassion nestles in nicely alongside authentic happiness, creativity and savouring in an 'A-Z' of topics. However, the moment one reflects upon the meaning of the word, the picture darkens somewhat. Its etymology is revealing, deriving from the Latin terms *com* (with) and *pati* (to suffer). Thus, at an instance, we can see that valorizing compassion within PP immediately places us in 'second wave' territory. Yes, we value this quality; however, its dynamics are too nuanced and dialectical to depict it simply as a 'positive' emotion; it inherently and necessarily involves opening ourselves up to feelings of sadness and distress. As Schulz et al. (2007, p.6) put it, compassion involves 'a sense of shared suffering, combined with a desire to alleviate or reduce such suffering.' And yet… in cultivating compassion, even as this means opening the door to ostensibly negative feelings, one may also experience profoundly meaningful states of fulfilment and connection. So, how can we explain this seeming paradox? We will attempt to do so here over three parts. We shall begin in part one by considering how compassion has been understood within academia. In part two, we then start to explain our paradox by introducing various models of selfhood, and suggesting that in contrast to the 'individualistic' sense of self that many people commonly experience, compassion allows us to enter into a more

'intersubjective' identity. Finally, we explore how such intersubjectivity may be beneficial to wellbeing, with potentially profound consequences in terms of psychospiritual development.

Compassion

We begin by clarifying what we mean by compassion. Theoretical models view this as being multifaceted (Ozawa-de Silva et al., 2012), involving various components – cognitive (the ability to empathically recognise emotions in others), emotional (experiencing sympathetic distress), motivational (the will to reduce the other's suffering) and behavioural (a resulting action). As such, compassion involves not only empathy (the ability to understand and share the emotional experience of another person) and sympathy (consequent feelings of sorrow or concern for the other as a result of appraising their distress), but goes further in that it also includes motivation and behaviour (Eisenberg, 2002). Thus, in compassion, one 'suffers with' the other, and acts to relieve their suffering as if it were one's own (which, in a sense, it *is*, since one is sharing in their suffering). That said, some perspectives hold that compassion need not necessarily involve experiences of sympathetic distress; for example, in Buddhism, compassion is regarded as a state 'beyond sadness' (Houshman et al., 2002, p.15): while sympathetic distress may act as a catalyst for compassion, it is not an essential component of it; one may experience compassion with equanimity instead of distress. Indeed, Buddhists regard such equanimous responding as the 'highest' level of compassionate activity (we shall return to Buddhist perspectives on compassion below). Nevertheless, generally speaking, compassion involves opening ourselves up to the suffering of another, and seeking to relieve this out of care and concern.

Reflection…

When was the last time you felt a strong sense of compassion for another person. Try to recall this experience in as much detail as possible. To what extent were the four components above present (cognitive, emotional, motivational, and behavioural)? How would you characterise this state overall – positive, negative, or something beyond both of these? What did it *mean* to you?

For many scientists and philosophers, compassion is a conundrum, a fly in the ointment of their particular view of human nature as being fundamentally selfish and self-serving, a perspective known as 'universal egoism' (Batson, 1991). Some such people are well-versed in evolutionary theory, where living beings are seen as driven by the reproductive prerogatives of their 'selfish' genes, and where life is a dog-eat-dog 'survival of the fittest' (Dawkins, 1976). In this view, caring for others (who do not share our genes) is almost regarded as an aberration of nature, and is certainly a difficult phenomenon to account for. Others are persuaded by the overlapping notion of 'rational choice' theory, which holds that human behaviour is ultimately motivated by self-interest (Ostrom, 1998). While still buying into the competitive discourses of evolutionary biology, this latter perspective does allow room for compassion; however, it regards it cynically as ultimately self-serving, a form of 'enlightened self-interest.' Some advocates of this view

argue that people act compassionately primarily to reduce their *own* feelings of distress (evoked by the other's pain) (Cialdini et al., 1987). Similarly, others argue that compassion can be self-serving in terms of helping people to prosper through mechanisms such as conforming to social norms, developing a good reputation, and/or increasing the likelihood that they will themselves be reciprocally rewarded in future (Trivers, 1971).

However, these types of cynical explanations are somewhat undermined by the very *existence* of the compassionate impulse; even if we may be motivated to help others in order to reduce our own distress, this does not really explain why we feel distress in response to their suffering *in the first place*. Thus, as theorists such as Batson (1991) have recognised, first and foremost, people are genuinely moved by the plight of another, even if other motives then contribute to their decision to respond. A powerful demonstration of this intuitive empathy is the existence of mirror neurons (Gallese, 2001), where studies have found that brain regions that are activated when an individual experiences emotions are likewise activated when the same emotions are observed in other people (Preston & De Waal, 2002). As such, Batson's 'empathy-altruism' hypothesis holds that, contrary to the universal egoism model, people can and do genuinely care for other people, regardless of whether it benefits them personally. This benign view of human nature is echoed by philosophies such as Buddhism, which views people as being *fundamentally* compassionate, even if this core nature does unfortunately often get obscured all too easily. As expressed by His Holiness the Dalai Lama (2002, p.70), people have a 'natural ability to connect spontaneously and deeply with the suffering of others.'

However, even if compassion were shown to be 'natural' – an inherent feature of our common humanity – this in itself would not be sufficient to *recommend* it to people, to argue that one *should* ideally be compassionate. For a start, many generally undesirable traits, from anger to anxiety, are likewise 'natural'; this is not evidence in their favour. Moreover, there are those who warn of potential dangers of compassion. Most forcefully and provocatively, there is an 'anti-compassion' tradition in philosophy, associated most prominently with the polemical work of Nietzsche (1887), who argued that compassion is ultimately detrimental to both the giver and the recipient (since it hinders the latter from developing self-sufficiency). From a different angle, based on her studies of the American and French revolutions, Arendt (1963) worried that compassion (e.g., for society's downtrodden victims) could all too easily morph into violence (against their oppressors). On a less dramatic note, but still a cause for concern, many scholars have highlighted the potential burden that compassion may impose upon the giver, so-called 'compassion fatigue.' Here the literature is replete with warnings of the potential emotional strain faced by people who are in long-term caring roles, whether looking after family members (Figley, 1997) or in the helping professions (Schulz et al., 2007). While such analyses do not undermine the value of compassion – rather, they highlight the need for carers to receive compassion and support *themselves* – they again give us pause for thought in terms of arguing that one ideally should be compassionate.

Given these concerns, why would one *advocate* compassion? Answers to this are naturally less forthcoming within scientific literature, since science generally endeavours to be 'value-neutral' (analysing phenomena dispassionately rather than arguing for particular outcomes). However, we can find myriad supportive voices from the fields of moral philosophy and religion. Within Western philosophy, perhaps the most prominent articulation of the value of compassion was provided by Schopenhauer (1840), who regarded it as the solution to the 'great mystery of

ethics.' He saw compassion as the only possible foundation for any moral framework: morality is not upheld through people rationally assenting to a system of laws – the position taken by Kant (1785), with his notion of the categorical imperative (i.e., act in ways that you would will to become a general law) – but rather because people care in a deep and mysterious way about the suffering of others. On this view, compassion is the cornerstone of morality, and thus of any genuine social cohesion and solidarity. The importance of compassion is likewise asserted in the great religious traditions. For instance, in his Epistle to the Corinthians, St. Paul preached that of the three great theological virtues in Christianity, faith, hope and charity, 'the greatest of these is charity.' (Charity was selected by the translators of the King James Bible as an equivalent of the Greek *agape*; however, as Hitchens (2011) argues, *agape* is arguably be better rendered as selfless or compassionate love.) Likewise, the Dalai Lama (1997) calls compassion the 'essence' of Buddhism, which indeed has been called a 'religion of compassion' (Price, 2010).

Art links…
One of the most famous paintings of Vincent van Gogh was of an old weather-beaten pair of worker's boots. According to Wilber (2001), a profound personal experience of compassion lay at the heart of this artwork. When asked by his friend, the painter Gauguin, about its meaning, van Gogh reported that, as a young man, he had wanted to follow his father and be a religious pastor. One day, while pursuing this vocation, there was an awful fire in the local mine. One of the miners was horribly burned, to the extent that he had been given up for dead. Consumed by a fevered sense of mission, van Gogh spent one whole month nursing this pour soul back from the brink of death. These shoes, which van Gogh had worn at the time, came to symbolise the near-divine sense of purpose and meaning he had felt during this numinous time. According to Gauguin, as he was recounting the story, van Gogh took on an almost Christ-like sense of being imbued with sacrality, crying 'I am the holy spirit, I am whole in spirit' (in Wilber, 2001, pp.114).

However, when we consider the centrality placed on compassion by religions like Christianity and Buddhism, the stirring thought occurs: is compassion simply valued as a basis of morality, as a foundation for social cohesion, or is something deeper, more radical, being alluded to? Yes of course, compassion is a wonderful gift for the recipient, helping them to feel loved, cared for and supported. But… what if compassion also has the potential to transform the *giver* in profound, unanticipated ways, as reflected in the example of van Gogh above? In Christianity, Jesus preached the radical message that we should be compassionate to all people, include those who may have harmed us: 'Love your enemies, and pray for those that persecute you, so that you may be children of your father in heaven' (Matthew 5:44). The last phrase, '*so* that you may be children of your father,' seems very telling: it seems to suggest that, by being compassionate and loving, a person might be changed somehow, as if ushered into a new way of being, or even sharing in the divinity of God, as a believer might put it (Smith, 2011). Now, to our 21st-Century ears, these phrases and notions may sound odd and out of place. Nevertheless, when we contemplate the nature of compassion, it becomes apparent that something potentially quite remarkable may possibly occur to the giver. In the language of contemporary psychology, we might interpret this prospect in terms of theories of identity, raising the tantalising possibility that, through cultivating compassion, a person may experience significant changes in their sense of self, as the next section explores.

Identity and interconnectedness

What can it mean to say that, by being compassionate, one might experience changes in one's sense of self? To answer this question, we need to begin by recognising that there are different ways of conceptualising 'the self.' Indeed, this is a vast understatement: the concept of the self – and related terms like identity, ego, and subjectivity – is one of the most perplexing, contested and complex constructs in the history of thought. Thus, we cannot hope to give a comprehensive account here of all the myriad ways in which identity and selfhood have been appraised even within psychology, let alone by thinkers throughout the ages. On a positive note, this acknowledgment opens the door to the liberating idea that our taken-for-granted notions of the self are a product of our particular historico-cultural context, and are neither inevitable nor unalterable. However, this still leaves the issue of how we get to grips here with the shape-shifting concept of the self since, in an academic context, we must at least try to define our terms for the discussion to proceed at all. So, at the risk of greatly over-simplifying a vast field of thought, we might note that the various perspectives on selfhood fall roughly into two broad categories: individualism and intersubjectivism[1]. We'll begin here by exploring individualism, which, as we will see, is regarded as the predominant conception of selfhood in the West, before going on to introduce the notion of intersubjectivism.

It is often asserted that there is, in the West, an ideology of individualism (Becker & Marecek, 2008). What can this mean; surely all human beings are 'individuals'? Well, yes they are, but the concept of individualism captures a particular view of the self that is thought to have emerged over the course of the last few centuries in Western societies: the idea that the self exists as an autonomous entity, a discrete unit, complete unto itself. As Geertz (1983, p.59) puts it, the self is regarded as a 'a bounded, unique, more or less integrated motivational and cognitive universe.' Similarly, Taylor (1995, p.60) suggests that individualism conceptualises the self as 'a centre of monological consciousness': this means that the person is constituted by a private, 'inner space,' in which they alone exist, over which they alone have control, and through which they alone act. Other people of course exist, but only either as objects 'out there,' or as mental representations 'in here.' This is the view of selfhood that underpins contemporary psychology, and indeed PP, reflected in the myriad constructs prefixed by the term 'self,' from self-determination to self-esteem, and in all the related discourses of self, from authenticity to autonomy (Ryan & Deci, 2006). It is not just that the main object of concern is the individual; people are fundamentally seen as existing as separate individuals – unique, autonomous, and self-contained. The social, to the extent that it is recognised at all, is simply an aggregation of individuals.

This may seem like the unproblematic, common-sense way of looking at the self; however, its 'naturalness' is undermined when we consider that this may be a rather specific construction, particular to our current age and cultural context. It is suggested that this vision of the self was forged in the heat of the extraordinary period of cultural ferment and development in the West that we now refer to as the Renaissance and the Enlightenment (Taylor, 1995). In contrast to the largely diminished view of humankind that had dominated the West through the Middle Ages – where humans were regarded as the sinful, errant children of a displeased God – the Renaissance gave (re)birth to a confident, elevated picture of the strength, intelligence, dignity and autonomy of humankind (Tarnas, 1991). Although many thinkers contributed to this new

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[1] Intersubjectivism is perhaps more commonly referred to as 'collectivism' (Hofstede, 1980). However, as explained later in this chapter, 'intersubjectivity,' associated with the phenomenological philosophy of Husserl (1931), is arguably a more useful term here.

emerging view of selfhood, one philosopher above all proved to be particularly influential: Rene Descartes (1641). In his quest to establish a secure basis for knowledge, Descartes found that *everything* was subject to doubt, *except*… the fact that he was doubting – leading to the immortal statement *cogito ergo sum*, I think therefore I am. Thus, even if nothing else is real, the 'monological consciousness' exists. Such was the power of Descartes' articulation of this vision – this 'reification of the disengaged first-person-singular self' (Taylor, 1995, p.59) – that it came to dominate Western thinking over subsequent centuries, to the extent that the individualised sense of selfhood is frequently referred to as the 'Cartesian I.'

However, even if we are so accustomed to viewing the self in this way that individualism has become 'naturalised,' it is not the only way of appraising the self. The first counterargument to individualism derives from other cultures. Throughout the 20th century, anthropologists have sought to highlight variation in views of selfhood among the different world cultures, both historical and current. Some such analyses are very specific, focusing on one particular locale. For instance, in Vietnam, Marr (2000) suggests that the person has historically been viewed primarily in terms of their location within, and contribution to, the suprapersonal social order. Marr contends that the concept of the 'individual' only entered into the Vietnamese lexicon in the 20th century, and even then only in a pejorative sense, whereby a person acting in their own interests could be accused of perpetrating the anti-social misdeed of 'individualism.' This notion of a more group-oriented view of selfhood in Vietnam fits within perhaps the most widely researched and discussed cross-cultural generalisation within psychology: the idea that Western societies are 'individualist' whereas Eastern cultures are 'collectivist' (Hofstede, 1980) Developed by Markus and Kitayama (1991, p.224), this theory holds that contrary to Western individualism, Asian societies have 'distinct conceptions of individuality that insist on the fundamental relatedness of individuals,' where the 'emphasis is on attending to others, fitting in, and harmonious interdependence with them.'

However, as enduring as this individualist-collectivist distinction has proved – analysed and to an extent corroborated across hundreds of empirical studies (Taras et al., 2010) – it still serves to reinforce the notion of individualism, but simply limits it to 'Western' cultures. The picture may be far more nuanced though. For a start, notions of 'West' versus 'East' are themselves cultural constructions, homogenising and obscuring myriad differences at a regional and local level (Said, 1995). The idea that 'the East' lacks its own strains of individualism, and likewise that 'the West' does not possess its own collectivist traditions and voices, is a fallacy that does disservice to the rich heterogeneity of both arenas (Spiro, 1993). Moreover, a binary 'East-West' distinction constructs these hemispheres as if discretely bounded and hermetically sealed, overlooking the complex inter-transmission of people and ideas across boundaries. The last 100 years in particular have witnessed an incredible cross-fertilisation of cultures, with supposedly Western ideologies such as consumer capitalism finding fertile ground in countries like China, and 'Eastern' practices such as meditation finding hugely receptive audiences in the West (King, 1999). Thus, the notion of ubiquitous individualism in the West has been challenged, with it being recognised that 'intersubjective'[2] experiences of self are perhaps more universal than the

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[2] As indicated above, this label is preferred here to the term 'collectivist.' For a start, the word collectivist has been tainted by association with the horrors of totalitarian communist regimes like Stalinist Russia (Conquest, 1987). This usage is connected to the idea that 'collectivist' models of selfhood often deny the right of people to exist as autonomous individuals per se, rather viewing them as fungible parts of a larger collective social entity. In contrast, intersubjectivity does not dismiss people's claims to individuality and

individualist-collectivist dichotomy appears to suggest (Larsen, 1990). Consequently, various contemporary theories of identity have emerged capturing this sense of 'intersubjectivity.'

In their various ways, these theories argue that people can come to transcend a narrow, view of selfhood – the autonomous, bounded, individual 'I' depicted above – and to identify with other people (using identity here in a strong sense to mean that the person experiences their lives as 'bound together' in some way). This intersubjective sense of self goes by various names, including the 'dialogical self' (Hermans et al., 1992), the 'permeable self' (Larsen, 1990), and 'identity fusion' (Swann et al., 2012). We are entering into tricky conceptual territory here, so we must be careful with our elucidation of this intersubjective self, especially since psychopathologies such as schizophrenia are often explained in terms of the disruption of self-other distinctions and the 'dissolution of the self' (Parnas, 2000, p.117). Without denying the possibility that there can be dysfunctional intersubjective experiences of self, what we are really talking about here is the *transcendence* of a narrow self-identity, rather than an obliteration of it. Now, what do we mean by transcendence? A useful approach to this much contested concept is provided by Wilber (1995). Wilber draws on the philosophy of Hegel (1807, pp.163-164), who argued that to transcend means 'at once to negate and preserve.' In self-transcendence, what is negated is an exclusive identification with a particular view of self; however, this does not mean that the old view of self is completely lost – it is preserved, but simply set in a larger context that means it is 'seen through.'

All this is sounding rather esoteric, so let us explain it with a very common, yet no less powerful, example. Imagine a mother (or a father) with her new-born baby. Before the birth, let us suppose that the mother had a somewhat individualistic sense of selfhood; she may well have loved and cared for others, but her selfhood was entirely bounded to herself – she was, in Watts' (1961, p.18) neat phrase, a 'skin-encapsulated ego.' However, with the birth all this has changed. Our idealised mother literally experiences the baby as a 'part' or 'extension' of herself – granted, they no longer share the same 'skin-encapsulated' physical body, but cognitively, emotionally and motivationally, they remain essentially one: the baby's pain is her pain; its smile is her joy; her 'sphere of concern' encompasses her baby totally. Thus, we might say that the mother has transcended her previous individualistic identity to take on a larger sense of selfhood that includes her new progeny. Here we can really appreciate the meaning of transcendence: this is not a 'dissolution' of the self – rationally, the mother can still recognise and identify herself as a separate being. Note: this is in contrast to the new-born, who *does* experience this dyadic relationship in an 'undifferentiated' way, who has yet to develop any self-other distinction (Mahler et al., 2000). Thus, the mother has transcended her previous sense of selfhood: it has been preserved (she can still recognise herself as a separate being), and yet negated (her identity has been enlarged to also encompass the little being who has emerged into the world).

Now, returning to the overall theme of the chapter, we can interpret the mother's (or father's) identification with and concern for her new-born as the very epitome of compassion. And not only compassion – consideration and care generally. The Jewish philosopher Martin Buber (1958) made a beautiful distinction between 'I-it' and 'I-thou' relationships. In the former, the other person is regarded as an object, to be valued only to the extent that he/she helps one fulfil

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agency; it simply recognises that their being is also formed through their interconnections with other people (Husserl, 1931).

one's own needs. With I-thou relationships, the person meets the other with unconditional regard, as equally worthy of love, care and respect as oneself. Parental love for an infant is perhaps the zenith of I-thou regard. In this there is not only compassion, but care for the other generally. For instance, in Buddhism, it is recognised that when one cares for another in this I-thou kind of way, one does not only react with compassion when they are in distress, but responds with love to all their joys, sorrows and needs (Eisenberg, 2002). Thus, in addition to exuding *karuna* (compassion), the person embodies qualities such as *metta* (loving-kindness: treating the other with love generally), *mudita* (sympathetic joy: rejoicing in their happiness and successes), and *dana* (giving benevolently and unreservedly: responding to their needs as they arise). One could see how our hypothetical parent would evince these wonderful prosocial qualities with regard to their beloved child.

We can recognise that this is a somewhat idealised example. Not all mothers may feel this kind of identification, and even with those that do, it is unlikely to be constant; there will be moments of selfishness amidst the care. In an odd way though, this gives us hope. It suggests that this kind of concern is not a trait-like all-or-nothing affair (you either have it or you don't), but rather an intersubjective mode that we can, at our best, enter into. Granted, it would be almost impossible to generalise the kind of concern a parent shows towards their baby to everyone we encounter. This does not mean we cannot have our moments of compassion and grace, instances where we do step outside of our individualistic self-regard and act purely out of concern for the other, as illustrated in the box below. So, let us imagine a continuum between total selfishness (the kind of absolute solipsistic disregard for others found in psychopathy) and total selflessness (the kind of absolute compassion manifested by a Buddha). We might imagine that everyone is located, by temperament and development, *somewhere* along this line. Let us add further nuance here: the person's various relationships may each be situated differentially along it, some being characterised by greater degrees of selflessness than others; furthermore, the location of each of these relationships may shift depending on certain factors (e.g., if the person is feeling happy, there may be movement in the direction of selflessness). As such, arguably nearly all people will act with some degree of selflessness, at least in some of their relationships some of the time.

Research and practice case studies…
Extraordinary situations can bring out extraordinary qualities in people, even to the extent that they will selflessly sacrifice their lives for people to whom they may not even be related by blood. A moving example of this can be found in Sebastian Junger's (2010) powerful account of American personnel serving in Afghanistan, in which a solder is reported as saying 'I'd actually throw myself on the hand grenade for them… because I actually love my brothers.'

Finally, the key point here is that wherever a person is situated on this continuum, and however their various relationships are configured along it, they can endeavour to *move along* this spectrum in the direction of greater selflessness. People can practice and cultivate a greater sense of compassion, and indeed work on the whole constellation of other-regarding qualities, including loving-kindness, sympathetic joy, and benevolent giving. The idea that these qualities can be developed is the premise behind specific psychological practices, such as loving-kindness meditation (LKM; Salzberg, 1995), and indeed is a key teaching in philosophies and religions such as Buddhism and Christianity, as noted above. However, what we have not yet addressed is *why* such religions lay such a strong emphasis on the importance and value of compassion. Yes, of course it is beneficial to the recipient, and serves to uphold a moral vision articulated by

these religions. And yet... we raised the possibility above that compassionate acts – and the self-transcendence that such acts facilitate – may also potentially have a profound impact on the actor themselves, as our final section explores.

The value of self-transcendence

As Western psychology begins to awaken to the value of compassion, we are beginning to see the diverse ways in which this quality contributes to wellbeing. Understandably, much of this research has focused on the positive social impact of compassion, on how it benefits its recipients and the collective commons generally. For example, following Schopenhauer (1840), Ozawa-de Silva et al. (2012, p.145) identify compassion as 'the most stable foundation for a secular ethics,' since it is based on the 'fundamental human aspiration' towards happiness, and thus 'transcends religious, cultural, and philosophical divides.' Moreover, Ozawa-de Silva et al. have developed a practical form of 'cognitively-based compassion training' to help engender exactly this kind of ethical sensibility. Interestingly, a large segment of the prosocial research on compassion has been in terms of its positive *environmental* impact. One of the outcomes of self-transcendence, as we shall explore below, is enhanced feelings of 'interconnectedness' – not only with other people, but with the world around (Hungelmann et al., 1996). Just as such interconnectedness can lead one to treat people more compassionately, recent work – both theoretical (Daniels, 2010) and empirical (Davis et al., 2009) – has shown that this care can extend to nature, leading to more environmentally-friendly behaviour.

However, as valuable as such research is, it somewhat fails to capture the profound impact that compassion may potentially have on the actor themselves. That is not to say that this has been entirely overlooked in PP; a number of studies have suggested that compassion is linked to wellbeing, particularly eudaimonic flourishing. For example, introducing the notion of 'positive social work,' Radey and Figley (2007) argue that, if the right factors are in place (e.g., adequate work resources), social workers can attain fulfilment through engaging compassionately with clients. Likewise, Seligman et al. (2006, p.777) argue that serving and belonging to 'something that one believes is bigger than the self' is central to finding meaning in life; clearly, caring for others would fall within such a description. Arguably though, the true import of compassion has not yet been quite articulated within PP, perhaps because the field, like psychology generally, is still largely rooted in the individualistic view of selfhood introduced above (Becker & Marecek, 2008). As Harrington (2002) argues, since compassion is fundamentally an intersubjective phenomenon that happens 'inbetween' individual selves, it has remained a lacuna within Western science. This conventional psychological perspective – centred as it is on discrete, bounded, atomistic individuals – struggles to accommodate the type of ontological shift implied by the concept of self-transcendence, and as such fails to appreciate the significance of compassion (which helps engender this shift). So, to appreciate why self-transcendence may be valuable for wellbeing, we end this chapter by briefly considering another school of thought which has given much attention to these issues, namely Buddhism.

Buddhism comprises such a vast body of knowledge, accumulated over 2,500 years, that even a lifetime would be insufficient for fully appreciating the depth of the wisdom contained within. It goes without saying then that this chapter can but scratch the surface of these teachings, hoping merely to draw upon certain glimmers of insight that can illuminate some of the ideas discussed above. And... here we find that Buddhism has a very helpful perspective on the value of self-

transcendence. In particular, this is valued because Buddhism attributes much of the unhappiness and suffering in this world to one specific cause: the *self*. Now, as we would expect with a tradition as rich as Buddhism, with its various schools of thought that have emerged over the centuries, it does not feature just one single perspective on the self. However, without getting lost here in esoteric philosophising around subtle doctrinal differences, Buddhism generally upholds a teaching of *anātman* (a Sanskrit term meaning no-self/soul). That is, Buddhism regards the self, *as conventionally understood*, to be an unhelpful construct, or phrased more powerfully, a destructive 'illusion' (Epstein, 1988). The individualistic model of selfhood (the idea that we exist as separate, fixed, bounded entities) is not only regarded as an incorrect fiction, but a fiction that underlies much of the problems in the world.

To put this view of selfhood into context, Buddhism proposes that existence is characterised by three key qualities: *anātman* (no-self, or insubstantiality), *anitya* (impermanence) and *duhkha* (frustration or suffering) (Sangharakshita & Subhuti, 2013). All phenomena, including humans, are ultimately seen as insubstantial (they are not self-existing entities; their existence depends on a network of supporting conditions) and impermanent (they change as their supporting conditions change). A useful metaphor is that of a whirlpool in a river: the configuration of the natural environment is such that a repeating pattern of water is created; however, the whirlpool does not exist as a separate object apart from these conditions. In Buddhism, the self is regarded in much the same way. However, Buddhism further argues that people tend to deny these two fundamental aspects of reality (*anātman* and *anitya*), and instead regard phenomena, including their own self, as being stable and permanent. Crucially, it is this misperception that is seen as the cause of the third aspect of existence, *duhkha*. This is partly because people become attached to phenomena that are inherently subject to change; people then suffer when this change does in fact occur. It is also because, in the case of the self, attaching to the idea that one exists as a separate individual is the premise and foundation for a constellation of destructive behaviours, whether pertaining to the drive to aggrandise the self (e.g., egotism, pride and jealousy), or the urge to defend and protect it (e.g., hatred and aggression towards anything which threatens it).

Given these key teachings, given the idea that clinging to the notion of a separate self is the root cause of much suffering, Buddhism holds that the way to overcome suffering is by transcending the self (Ho, 1995). To return to our definition of self-transcendence, this does not mean the kind of dissolution of self-other boundaries that may occur in psychopathology, but rather appreciating one's narrow view of selfhood as an unhelpful construct, and 'seeing through' it. (After all, Buddhist adepts are certainly still capable of clothing and feeding their 'fictional' self; yet in a deeper sense they have come to regard it as ultimately illusory.) This is the point of many meditative practices in Buddhism: to understand, on a deep experiential level, that the self is 'not real,' to transcend this narrow sense of selfhood and to create a more expansive identity, one encompassing other people. Above we saw this kind of 'intersubjective' selfhood perhaps emerging naturally in the case of parents caring for their baby. Even if we did acknowledge this as an idealised example, Buddhist practices endeavour to at least move people *towards* this I-thou regard for the other, along the continuum towards the ideal of selflessness. This is the point of practices like LKM, in which people are encouraged to generate feelings of care for others. And, as this section is attempting to argue, empirical studies indicate that such practices are associated with increases in wellbeing, partly because people feel greater connectedness with others (Fredrickson et al., 2008). A less-well known practice is *Tonglen* meditation, which aims to engender compassion in practitioners, as introduced in the box below.

Try me!...

In Buddhism, a beautiful practice for evoking *karuna* (compassion) is *Tonglen* meditation, a cyclical visualisation process in which the practitioner imagines 'taking in' another person's suffering, and 'giving' them happiness in return (Lomas, 2014). If you would like to try this, please sit in a quiet, comfortable place, and follow the following instructions:
 	
   • Close your eyes, and take a few moments to feel your breath slowing down.
   • Bring to mind a person, to whom you are close, who has recently suffered hardship.
   • Spend a few moments reflecting on their suffering, and how you would like to relieve them of this if possible.
   • Visualise their suffering as a cloud of noxious black smoke, enveloping them.
   • Breathing in, imagine that you are drawing in this smoke through your nostrils.
   • As you do, softly say, 'May I take away your troubles.'
   • At the still-point at the end of the in-breath, imagine this black smoke being dissolved in your heart by the force of your affection for this person.
   • Visualise this affection as a clear, white light.
   • Breathing out, imagine that you are emanating this white light, which bathes the person in a radiant cloud of your affection.
   • As you do, softly say, 'May I give you happiness.'
   • Repeat this process, 'taking in' suffering on each in-breath, and 'giving out' happiness on each out-breath.
   • Continue for as long as you feel comfortable, ideally for no less than five minutes.

It is not only that cultivating compassion, and thereby transcending the self, can help alleviate one's suffering (as well as the suffering of others); more radically, some scholars view this process of self-transcendence as the very definition of psychospiritual growth (Wilber, 1995). There are of course many different ways of conceptualising such development; even in canonical Buddhist teachings there are at least six different stage-wise conceptions of the spiritual path (Bucknell, 1984). However, scholars such as Wilber have sought to identify commonalities across all these different conceptualisations, with one conclusion being that psychospiritual development can be defined, at least in part, by an expansion of one's moral concern. Transcending one's individualistic view of selfhood and developing a deep sense of care for another – whether a parent's devotion to their child, or any other dyad suffused with love – is a beautiful start. However, this is perhaps just the beginning of a much longer spiritual journey, in which we can attempt to expand our vision of selfhood in an on-going process of transcendence. Wilber argues that we can continue to expand our circle of compassionate concern, not stopping at the inclusion of one other beloved person, but including all those we come into contact with, and even beyond, up to and including all sentient beings. Indeed, this expansion of care is cultivated in Buddhist practices like LKM – which expands 'outwards' in just such a way – and is central to Buddhist moral philosophy, which argues that we have a duty to protect all sentient beings in the universe (Lecso, 1988).

And finally, without straying too much into esoteric mystical territory, we might ask, what is the omega point, the goal of this journey of psychospiritual development? Where does this process of self-transcendence – of expanding one's circle of compassionate care, of entering into an ever-wider intersubjective experience of selfhood – lead to? Many religious traditions suggest that

the ultimate end-point of this development is an experiential union with some kind of numinous power, whatever name we give to this. Monotheistic religions might describe this as sharing in the divinity of God; as the 13th Century Christian mystic Meister Eckhart (1980, p.217) phrased it, 'I discover that I and God are one.' Likewise, Buber (1958) felt that the particular power of I-thou relationships was that they constituted a spiritual relationship, in which both partners entered into the 'eternal thou,' a supra-personal union suffused with the grace of God. Alternatively, non-theistic religions such as Buddhism might conceptualise this as union with the *bhavanga*, with the 'ground of being' (Wallace, 2001). And what do people experience in such a union? In the end, most reports characterise this ultimate intersubjective selfhood as being suffused with an overwhelming sense of love. As Wallace (2001, pp.4-5) puts it, 'Buddhist contemplatives have… concluded that the nature of this ground of being is loving-kindness.' Although such ideas may currently sound rather radical from the perspective of conventional psychology, these kinds of reports do suggest that the cultivation of compassion – and all of the 'other-regarding' qualities implicated in self-transcendence – may have great, even profound consequences. PP has an exciting journey ahead in exploring further these powerful ideas.

Summary – this chapter has…

- Summarised different conceptualisations of compassion within psychology
- Positioned compassion as one of a number of 'other-regarding' qualities
- Explored the prosocial impact of compassion, including as a foundation for morality
- Examined how other-regarding qualities might also be highly beneficial to the actor
- Suggested that compassion is connected to self-transcendence
- Linked self-transcendence to psychospiritual development

Resources and suggestions…

- A wonderful resource on compassion is the 'Charter for Compassion,' for which Karen Armstrong was awarded the TED prize in 2008. It aims to help people take action to create a peaceful global community. Please visit: www.charterforcompassion.org/
- In terms of activities and interventions to cultivate compassion, for more information on cognitively-based compassion training, please visit www.tibet.emory.edu/cbct/

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