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COMMENTARY

Compassion, Self-compassion, and Skill in Means: a Mahāyāna Perspective

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Abstract

In the context of both research and clinical applications, Buddhist sources have inspired the theoretical and practical aspects of self-compassion as a construct and target of mental training. However, the Indo-Tibetan Buddhist traditions that most strongly emphasize the importance of compassion articulate it in ways that are incompatible with contemporary notions of self-compassion. This article examines these incompatibilities in terms of Indo-Tibetan Buddhist theory and practice. In theoretical terms, the articulation of compassion as centered on others (and not self) is explained in terms of its overall motivational purpose in Indo-Tibetan Buddhism. And in terms of Buddhist practices for cultivating compassion, incompatibilities in relation to motivation and phenomenological structure are examined. The possibility that self-compassion could be aligned with Buddhist notions of renunciation is next considered. The problems that arise in that attempted alignment motivate a concluding discussion about the ways that Buddhist insights about compassion suggest potentially useful ways of reconsidering contemporary conceptualizations and practices of self-compassion as a "skilful means" to address obstacles to cultivating a sincere motivation to strive for one's own well-being.

Keywords Compassion · Self-compassion · Buddhism · Mindfulness · *Karuṇā* · Renunciation

In 1990, the Mind and Life Institute hosted a dialog featuring His Holiness the Dalai Lama on the topic of "Emotions and Health" with various participants, including Sharon Salzberg, co-founder of the Insight Meditation Society in Barre, Massachusetts. At a certain point in the dialog, Salzberg posed a question to the Dalai Lama, "What do you think about self-hatred?" He responded, "What's that?" The ensuing conversation revealed a stark contrast between the experience of many Western participants at that meeting and the Dalai Lama's perspective. As Salzberg (2015) put it many years later, "While I came to meditation at 18 as a result of dealing with feelings of inadequacy and self-judgment for my entire young adult life, the Dalai Lama didn't even know what the meaning of self-hatred was." The dramatic increase in publications and research on self-compassion over the last 20 years bears witness to the implicit problem posed by Salzberg's question: what to do with the widespread problem of self-loathing in the modern world, especially the modern West?

One response to the problem of self-loathing is the notion of "self-compassion," and judging by the meteoric rise of peer-reviewed publications on self-compassion over the last 20 years, it has been a well-received response. In the psychological literature, Kristin Neff and colleagues have articulated the construct of self-compassion in ways that can be characterized as involving a shift in focus. In other words, the compassion that is directed toward others is now directed toward oneself (Strauss et al., 2016). Neff (e.g., 2003) explicitly drew on Buddhist sources, and from a Buddhist perspective, one might say that the successful reception of self-compassion practices makes it an excellent example of "skill in means" (Skt., *upāyakauśalya*)—that is, an effective method or means (Skt., *upāya*) that helps one to move along the path out of suffering and toward flourishing, especially when self-loathing is an obstacle. At the same time, however, the term "self-compassion"—specifically when conceived as a state that requires one to take oneself as an

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object of one's own kindness—is actually incompatible with the perspective of the Buddhist traditions that most strongly emphasize the cultivation of compassion, and while there is no need for contemporary psychological theories and clinical interventions to conform to traditional Buddhist theories or practices, this incoherence of self-compassion with the most relevant Buddhist traditions points to some key issues that, if examined, may clarify this construct in ways that will enhance both research and clinical practice.

To that end, although there is now a notable range of approaches to self-compassion or something like it (for reviews, see Quaglia et al., 2020; Strauss et al., 2016), we will focus on the model developed by Neff and colleagues, since it is not only the first, but also highly influential. Likewise, that approach clearly exhibits the type of self-objectification that is most relevant to the present context. In this regard, we invite readers to consider whether the issues we raise here might also apply to other, more recent formulations of self-compassion. With this in mind, and motivated by the many people who have benefitted from self-compassion practices, we begin by building on recent work by Anālayo and Dhammadinnā (2021) to unpack the notion of compassion in the most relevant Buddhist sources. Our analysis will suggest that Buddhist notions of compassion are incompatible with "self-compassion" as articulated by Neff and colleagues. We will then explore the possibility that self-compassion can be interpreted in a coherent way from a Buddhist perspective by construing it as a form of "renunciation" (Skt., *niryāṇa*; Tib., *nges'byung*). Noting the difficulties of this interpretation, we will conclude by reflecting on what these difficulties tells us about the psychological challenges that practices for cultivating self-compassion are attempting to address. In particular, we will argue that certain features of modern identity, including an emphasis on self-focus and individualism, may underlie self-loathing and related issues. And we will likewise propose that more skillful means may be found in approaches that, on the one hand, reduce self-focused narrative and, on the other, provide methods for practitioners to experience compassion directed toward themselves without any need for self-objectification.

Compassion and Self-compassion in Indo-Tibetan Buddhism

Compassion (Skt., *karuṇā*) is valued by all Buddhist traditions, but when the form of Buddhism known as the Great Vehicle or Mahāyāna first began to emerge in South Asia around the start of the Common Era, compassion became a central theme in Mahāyāna literature, theory, and practice (Gethin, 1998). As Mahāyāna Buddhism spread to other parts of Asia, compassion remained an important theme, but it became an especially salient aspect of Tibetan Buddhism. Practices focused on the deliberate cultivation of compassion are a ubiquitous feature of the typical forms of daily contemplation found across all Tibetan traditions ('Jam dbyangs mkhyen brtse dbang phyug, 2004; Jamgon Kongtrul, 2005; Rdza dpal sprul, 1998; Tsoṅ kha pa Blo bzaṅ grags pa, 2000b), and in collaboration with a handful of Indian teachers, the Tibetans developed a unique, compassion-focused style of literature and practice known as "Mind Training" (Tib., *blo sbyong*) (Jinpa et al., 2006). Likewise, Tibetan traditions were especially attentive to the Sanskrit philosophical and contemplative literature that articulates the central role of compassion in Mahāyāna Buddhism. Here, the popularity of Śāntideva's seventh century Sanskrit text, the *Bodhicaryāvatāra* or *Guide to the Bodhisattva's Way of Life* (as translated into Tibetan), serves as an obvious example (Jinpa, 2019). In the next two sections, we will examine Mahāyāna theoretical and practical perspectives on compassion and see how a straightforward construal of self-compassion is incompatible with these perspectives.

Mahāyāna Theory

The strong emphasis on compassion in Indo-Tibetan Mahāyāna Buddhism emerges in part from a number of core philosophical texts in Sanskrit whose Tibetan translations still remain part of a typical monastic education in Tibetan institutions (Dreyfus, 2003). In short, according to the overall theoretical perspective found in these works, one can achieve the highest spiritual goal of buddhahood or "awakening" (Skt., *bodhi*) only if one has cultivated two essential virtues: wisdom (Skt., *prajñā*) and compassion (Skt., *karuṇā*) (Kamalaśīla, 1985; McClintock, 2010). From this theoretical perspective, wisdom is what enables one to uproot the fundamental ignorance (Skt., *avidyā*) that perpetuates suffering, and with wisdom alone, one can obtain a form of spiritual "freedom" (Skt., *mokṣa*) constituted by the complete cessation of one's own, personal suffering. However, to achieve the highest Mahāyāna goal of complete buddhahood, wisdom alone is not sufficient; one must also cultivate compassion—or more specifically, unbiased "great compassion" (Skt., *mahākaruṇā*)—for all sentient beings. This is the theoretical impetus for the various contemplative practices for cultivating compassion first found in Indian Mahāyāna Buddhism and then further elaborated by Tibetan traditions (See Anālayo & Dhammadinnā, 2021 for additional sources).

According to typical Buddhist accounts, compassion is distinct from love (Skt., *maitrī*, also translated as "loving kindness"). Specifically, love is the aspiration that another sentient being be happy, while compassion is the aspiration that another being be free of suffering (Dalai Lama et al., 2020; Makransky, 2012; Mi pham rgya mtsho, 2002; Tsoṅ kha pa Blo bzaṅ grags pa, 2000b). Building on this

distinction, the theoretical need for compassion as essential for achieving buddhahood is complex, involving both overt arguments and more implicit positions. The overall context involves the theory of two "obscurations" (Skt., *āvaraṇa*): an "afflicted" (Skt., *kliṣṭa*) obscuration that underlies the dysfunctional mental states that cause one's own suffering, and a subtler obscuration about "what is to be known" (Skt., *jñeya*) that prevents one from achieving the kind of wisdom that a buddha manifests. With this model in place, one overt line of argument about the need for compassion focuses on motivation. In short, while the desire for oneself to be free from suffering is sufficient to remove the afflicted obscuration (and thus end one's own suffering), the second, deeper obscuration can only be eliminated with the much stronger motivation provided by great compassion, which is driven by the need to eliminate the suffering of infinite sentient beings (Candrakīrti, 1970; Go rams pa Bsod nams seng ge, 2011; McClintock, 2010). In simple terms, the narrow focus on eliminating one's own suffering is insufficient to motivate the arduous practice, often depicted as requiring effort over "three incalculable eons," that leads to complete buddhahood (Mi pham rgya mtsho, 2002; Paṇ chen Bsod nams grags pa, 2006; Tsoṅ kha pa Blo bzaṅ grags pa, 2000b). One must instead be motivated by the suffering of other beings—*all* of them—in order to reach the highest goal of Mahāyāna Buddhist practice.

Mahāyāna arguments that interpret compassion as indispensable, based on its motivational power, point to another basic feature: compassion directs concern away from oneself and toward others. In motivational terms, the notion here is that one can become completely free of suffering, but without sufficient compassion, one will simply remain content in that state. Compassion rouses one from that complacency, and this is reflected in a traditional (but linguistically fanciful) etymology of the Sanskrit term for compassion, *karuṇā,* as *kaṃ ruṇaddhi*, "that which blocks happiness" (Dalai Lama et al., 2020, p. 136; Sthiramati, 1925, p. 28). In other words, compassion disrupts one's personal contentment by directing one toward others' suffering, and according to the literary depictions of bodhisattvas—the paradigmatic Mahāyāna practitioners—they find the suffering of sentient beings to be "unbearable" (Rdza dpal sprul, 1998; see also Anālayo, 2017). Another, less explicit, theoretical perspective emerges from this emphasis on the bodhisattva's concern for others: namely, that the removal of the deepest obscuration requires the uprooting of what Tibetan traditions call "self-cherishing" (Tib., *rang gces'dzin*).

The attitude of "self-cherishing" is the main target of the Tibetan "Mind Training" tradition, and it involves a style of practice that seeks to radically reverse the tendency to prioritize one's own welfare over others (Jinpa, 2019). The precise relationship of self-cherishing to the second, subtlest obscuration is less clear in the theoretical literature, but one possibility is that a radical uprooting of self-cherishing enables one to achieve the type of wisdom that comes from "abandoning all views" (Nāgārjuna, 2013, p. 314). Relinquishing the need to cling to any particular "view" or perspective, in turn, enables one to fully adopt others' perspectives so as to be maximally effective in helping them to undo their suffering. This form of maximal efficacy is an essential feature of the Mahāyāna account of buddhahood (McClintock, 2010). In any case, this emphasis on concern for others in the Mind Training tradition serves to underline a key point: in Mahāyāna Buddhist theoretical materials, compassion is necessarily about others, and the very notion of "self-compassion" is tantamount to speaking of a "square circle." In this regard, Anālayo and Dhammadinnā (2021) noted that "self-compassion is conspicuous by its absence in any of the constructs of compassion inherited or developed by the Mahāyāna traditions," with the caveat that the achievement of buddhahood, the highest Mahāyāna goal, would also include one's own emancipation from suffering (p. 1355). Even though the problematic nature of "self-compassion" for Mahāyāna Buddhism is perhaps already obvious from a theoretical perspective, a consideration of the Tibetan practices for developing compassion will add further clarity. At the same time, a possible case of something like a self-compassion practice in a traditional Tibetan context will raise the possibility that self-compassion might be construed in another way that Mahāyāna Buddhists could embrace.

Mahāyāna Compassion Practices and the Notion of Self-Compassion

Compassion is an important theme throughout all strands of Mahāyāna Buddhism, but Tibetan traditions have developed specific practices for developing compassion that, while based on earlier Indian precedents, are unique to Tibet. Three uniquely Tibetan practices are attested in Tibetan literature by at least the twelfth century: (1) the Sevenfold Cause-Effect Practice (Tib., *rgyu 'bras man ngag bdun*) (Tsoṅ kha pa Blo bzaṅ grags pa, 2000b); (2) Giving-and-Taking (Tib., *gtong len*) (Jinpa et al., 2006); and (3) Equalizing and Exchanging Self and Others (Tib., *bdag bzhan mnyam brje)* (Rdza dpal sprul, 1998; Tsoṅ kha pa Blo bzaṅ grags pa, 2000b). All three of these practices (especially the third one) are indebted to Indian precedents, but their instruction sets and interpretation are uniquely Tibetan. The instruction sets for these practices were systematized by the fourteenth century, if not before, and they have remained stable over the centuries, as is exemplified by their recent presentation in publications by Tibetans considered to be accomplished teachers of meditation (e.g., Dalai Lama XIV, 2003). These practices have also inspired various aspects of contemporary compassion-based interventions, including especially Cognitive Based Compassion Training (CBCT)

and Compassion Cultivation Training (CCT) (Lavelle, 2017). We will see that these practices exhibit features that can help us to understand how self-compassion is "conspicuous by its absence" in Indo-Tibetan Mahāyāna not just theoretically, but also in contemplative practice.

For the present context, these practices exhibit several relevant features. One key feature is that, while they do not involve directing one's own compassion toward oneself, they do begin with visualizations or other practices through which one experiences receiving compassion from another, especially a spiritually realized being such as a buddha (Condon & Makransky, 2020b; Makransky, 2012). Additionally, the first two practices (the Sevenfold Cause and Effect practice and the Giving-and-Taking practice) involve receiving compassion from a close relative or caregiver, and this reflects a strategy for developing unbiased "great compassion" for all beings by drawing on one's inclination toward biased compassion. These practices thus begin with intense visualizations of one's close kin, paradigmatically one's mother, for whom one feels a sense of deep fondness (Tib., *yid'ong gi byams pa*), enacted in part through visualizations in which one experiences receiving care and concern. One then visualizes the loved one as they undergo hardships, and through that visualization, one is meant to evoke and enhance the spontaneous compassion we tend to feel for close kin or others with whom we identify, a tendency that is well documented in the scientific literature (Goetz et al., 2010; Zaki, 2020). Various other techniques are used to draw other beings into the circle of our close kin so that we feel the same spontaneous compassion for them, and the outcome is the unbiased compassion that is the goal of this practice (Tsoṅ kha pa Blo bzaṅ grags pa, 2000b). The key point there is that the phenomenology of these practices assumes a relational, "second-person" stance (Zahavi, 2015). That is, one is neither evoking the experience of suffering from one's own, first-person stance, nor simply observing another's suffering from a third-person stance. Instead, one is empathetically engaging with another's suffering in a relational way.

The second relevant feature of Tibetan practices for cultivating compassion applies especially to the more cognitive practice of Equalizing and Exchanging Self and Others. In this practice, one usually dispenses with the evocation of close kin, although that may have been already performed earlier in the same meditative session (Dalai Lama XIV, 2003). In any case, with or without the prior evocation of kin-based relationships, this practice begins with what the current Dalai Lama calls our "common humanity," particularly in terms of the notion that we all wish to be happy, and no one wishes to suffer (Dalai Lama XIV, 2012). With this in place, the practitioner then is invited to ponder how one reacts spontaneously to relieve one's own suffering—if my hand is burning, I immediately move it away from the flame—and then to ask why one's own suffering is of greater concern than others'. One then contemplates various arguments, some perhaps designed simply to disrupt one's cognition around self/others and in-group/out-group distinctions (Dunne, 2019). Although the Indian version of this practice articulated by Śāntideva seems to require a full exchange in the identity of self and others, the Tibetan approach emphasizes an exchange of priorities, such that another's suffering is counted as more important than one's own (Jinpa, 2019).

Assessing the features of the Exchange of Self and Others practice, we see two key points. The first is that, akin to self-compassion practices, this practice involves some engagement with one's own suffering from a first-person perspective, but only to demonstrate one's biases and one's spontaneous urge to be free of suffering. The second key point is that the prioritizing of others' suffering is meant to conclude in a lack of concern for one's own happiness, in favor of a strongly enhanced concern for others' happiness. This is nicely evoked by Śāntideva's well-known verse: "All those in the world who are suffering are so because they desire their own happiness. All those in the world are happy are so because they desire the happiness of others" (*ye kecid duḥkhitā loke sarve te svasukhecchayā / ye kecit sukhitā loke sarve te'nyasukecchayā*; Śāntideva, 1960, p. 163; cited by Anālayo & Dhammadinnā, 2021).

The Incompatibility of Self-compassion with Mahāyāna Practice and a Possible Exception

To assess self-compassion in relation to Indo-Tibetan Mahāyāna practice, at this point it is useful to clarify what we take "self-compassion" to mean in the approach developed by Neff and colleagues, including most notably Christopher Germer. We agree with Strauss and colleagues (2016) who wrote that, drawing on a previous definition of other-focused compassion, Neff "developed this definition of compassion for others into a model of self-compassion, arguing that self-compassion can be viewed as compassion directed inward towards the self" (p. 17). On this account, self-compassion requires a type of self-objectification—an "othering" of oneself—that enables one to take oneself as the object of one's own compassion. For Neff, Germer, and colleagues, self-compassion exhibits three features (Neff, 2012; Neff & Germer, 2017, 2018): "self-kindness," which involves being warm and understanding toward oneself as an object of that kindness; "common humanity," which involves recognizing that suffering is a universal and inevitable aspect of human existence; and "mindfulness," which is understood largely in terms of contemporary, clinical applications of mindfulness that derive primarily from the work of Jon Kabat-Zinn and colleagues (Kabat-Zinn, 2011). Of these three features, mindfulness is the least problematic from a Buddhist perspective, since one can argue that contemporary

mindfulness, while emerging from multiple influences, exhibits clear continuities with Buddhist traditions (Dunne, 2011, 2015). The second feature, common humanity, if taken merely as a technique to cultivate compassion, is not at all problematic for Indo-Tibetan traditions (Dalai Lama et al., 2020; Dalai Lama XIV, 2012). But if common humanity is meant to be an essential feature of compassion itself, then this requirement is not easily accepted, inasmuch as these traditions maintain that the goal of their practices is precisely a life without suffering (Gethin, 1998; Jamgon Kongtrul, 2005; Rdza dpal sprul, 1998; Tsoṅ kha pa Blo bzaṅ grags pa, 2000b). As Strauss and colleagues (2016) put it, common humanity could be summarized in the phrase, "There but for the grace of God go I" (p. 17). But if one has achieved a state in which suffering is no longer possible, that phrase no longer applies, even though universal compassion for all beings remains. Be that is it may, the first feature, self-kindness, is the most problematic, since it is articulated very directly as an othering of oneself so that one can become an object of one's own kind concern for the purpose of self-soothing and self-care.

The self-objectification required by this approach to self-compassion seems incompatible with the key features of the Tibetan compassion practices discussed above. In the first two practices (Sevenfold Cause and Effect and Giving-and-Taking), the phenomenology requires a relational, second-person perspective. One must focus on the suffering of others, not self. And clearly, if the practice is not inviting attention to one's own suffering, self-compassion will not be a feature of the practice. In the Exchange of Self and Others practice, one's own suffering is evoked, but only to highlight the biased nature of one's spontaneous response to avoid or alleviate suffering. And since the endpoint of that specific practice is to promote a lack of concern for one's own happiness, it is hard to see how this would cultivate self-compassion.

There is, however, a possible and intriguing exception to the general incompatibility of self-compassion with Tibetan compassion practices. It is found in some of the earliest Mind Training texts, such as the *Root Lines of Mahāyāna Training* (Jinpa et al., 2006). A comparatively late example occurs in the *Great Path of Awakening* (Tib., *Byang chub gzhung lam*), a text focused on Mind Training by 'Jam mgon kong sprul blo gros mtha' yas (pronounced, "Jamgön Kongtrül Lodrö Tayé"), a famed nineteenth century Tibetan contemplative philosopher (complete English translation found in Jamgön Kongtrul, 2005). The instruction in question is part of the aforementioned Giving-and-Taking practice. To put it very succinctly, in that practice one uses the breath as an attentional anchor, and along with various visualizations, one "takes" the suffering of all sentient beings with the inbreath and "gives" all of one's happiness to them with the outbreath; this continues in a sequence of inbreaths and outbreaths. After describing this practice in some detail, 'Jam mgon kong sprul (1979) included an instruction that is found in some accounts of this practice: "Begin the sequence of taking [suffering] with yourself" (*len pa'i go rims rang nas brtsam*) (p. 253). He briefly explained further:

> To be able to take on others' suffering, at the beginning of the sequence start with oneself. That is, take onto oneself right now all the suffering that will ripen to one in the future, and having purified that, take on others' suffering. (*gzhan gyi sdug bsngal rang la len nus pa'i phyir / go rim gyi thog mar rang nas brtsam ste / rang la ma 'ongs par smin 'gyur sdug bsngal thams cad da lta yid kyis blangs la / de byang nas gzhan gyi sdug bsngal rnams blang go*) (p. 253).

At first glance, this might seem to be a case of self-compassion, even if it is not named as such. After all, just as one takes on the suffering of other beings, so too one is taking on suffering that, while in the future, could still be construed as "one's own." In some ways, the 2nd person phenomenological feature noted above may also be present in this case, inasmuch as this practice could involve visualizing one's own future selves as if they were "others." Likewise, taking on the suffering of one's future selves in the present seems to downplay the notion that one should discount concern for one's own happiness.

However, despite these features, this particular step in some versions of the Giving-and-Taking practice does not appear to be a full-blown case of a self-compassion practice. While one is imaginatively removing the suffering of one's own future selves, one is also deliberately inviting suffering onto one's present self. Likewise, while one certainly takes on one's own (future) suffering, one does not then engage in the "giving" part of the practice, where one would be giving one's present happiness to one's future selves. And the motivation for taking on one's future suffering amounts to a courageous preparation for taking on the suffering of all beings, rather than the compassionate and self-soothing response to one's own suffering that is typical of self-compassion practices (Neff, 2012; Neff & Germer, 2017). Indeed, one traditional explanation for this instruction is that its purpose is to reduce the fear one may feel about taking on others' suffering, rather than being motivated by self-focused compassion (Jinpa et al., 2006). Despite these caveats, this particular variation on the Giving-and-Taking practice still resonates with the notion of self-compassion, and it bears some resemblance to the notion of "renunciation" as a form of self-compassion. This is an issue that we will now explore.

Is Renunciation a Form of Self-compassion?

Two previously mentioned interventions—Cognitive-Based Compassion Training and Compassion Cultivation Training—that draw their inspirations from Tibetan traditions

involve practices that target self-compassion, even though the notion of self-compassion as an explicit concept or term is entirely absent from Tibetan traditions (Ash et al., 2021; Jinpa, 2015; Lavelle, 2017). Nevertheless, one may hold that self-compassion is implicit in the notion of "renunciation" (*niryāṇa*; Tib., *nges'byung*), as was suggested by Lobsang Tenzin Negi, the creator of CBCT (personal communication). In this section, we will explore this possibility, while pointing to some ways that it is problematic.

Overall, the notion of renunciation relates especially to the Truth of Suffering, the first of the Four Noble Truths that are central to Buddhism. In short, without acknowledging that one is indeed in a state of suffering, there can be no access to the Buddhist path out of suffering (Rdza dpal sprul, 1998; Tsoṅ kha pa Blo bzaṅ grags pa, 2005). A notable parallel in psychotherapeutic contexts is the barriers to treatment that emerge when one denies or downplays the degree of one's dysfunction (Mojtabai et al., 2011). In Mahāyāna Buddhist traditions (and in other Buddhist traditions as well), "renunciation" is both the acknowledgement of this suffering and the fervent aspiration to transcend it (Rdza dpal sprul, 1998; Tsoṅ kha pa Blo bzaṅ grags pa, 2000a). The English translation "renunciation," as a rendering of the standard Sanskrit term (*niryāṇa*), is in some ways unfortunate, since it misses the positive valence of this expression. Rather than "renouncing" or rejecting something that one wishes to avoid, the traditional term emphasizes that one is moving forward or "definitely emerging" from suffering, to use a literal rendering of the Tibetan translation (*nges'byung*) of the Sanskrit term.

Already, some resonance with contemporary notions of self-compassion is evident. In particular, renunciation requires not only that one attend directly to one's own suffering, but also that one actively seek to put an end to that suffering. In this regard, it is thus closely parallel to compassion, and Buddhist theorists have explicitly noted the parallelism. The influential Tibetan philosopher Tsongkhapa (2000b), for example, noted that compassion and renunciation have different "objects" (Tib., *dmigs pa*)—compassion focuses on others, while renunciation focuses on oneself. Yet for Tsongkhapa, these two mental states have the same "form" (Tib., *rnam pa*): they both seek to relieve suffering for their respective objects. In saying that renunciation and self-compassion and renunciation differ in their objects but not their form, Tsongkhapa might seem to be claiming that renunciation is simply compassion directed at the self.

Despite these parallels, traditional Buddhist accounts of renunciation exhibit certain features that make it difficult to interpret simply as self-compassion as it is understood by Neff and colleagues. One key difference is motivational. Accounts of self-compassion and its practices often note how one of its functions is to "comfort and soothe ourselves" (e.g., Neff & Germer, 2018, p. 2), or to in some way pause and reflect on how difficult our own suffering may be (Neff, 2012; Neff & Germer, 2017). It is apparently this function of soothing and pausing that raises the doubt that self-compassion might be "lazy" or undermine one's motivations (Neff & Germer, 2017). In contrast, Buddhist renunciation is meant to instill a sense of urgency about one's predicament and strongly motivate one to escape the sufferings of "cyclic existence" or *saṃsāra*. As a visceral means to evoke this sense of urgent effort, the image of being caught in a burning house (Tsoṅ kha pa Blo bzaṅ grags pa, 2000a) is often cited, or even more viscerally, it is said that the intensity of one's effort and sense of urgency should be akin to what one should feel if one's head were on fire (Rgyal sras thogs med bzang po, 2012). These metaphors for the sense of urgency and effort that renunciation promotes do not seem compatible with the self-soothing that is a feature of self-compassion.

Another particularly important way that Buddhist accounts of renunciation seem incompatible with self-compassion is their respective phenomenological structures in the context of one's own suffering. Some textual passages in the Mind Training corpus, when addressing renunciation, strike a second-person stance toward oneself so as to offer criticisms that are meant to enhance one's efforts toward renunciation, as when Śāntideva (1960) said to himself, "Fool! This is not the time for sleep…." (p. 112: *muḍha kālo na nidrāyāḥ…/*). But in the context of one's own suffering, the metaphors and rhetoric adopt a first-person stance, as is evoked by the image of being caught in a burning house or having one's head on fire. In contrast, self-compassion often assumes a phenomenological structure in which one deliberately observes oneself as if one were observing another who is suffering. As Neff and Germer (2017) put it, in self-compassion "we take the stance of a compassionate 'other' toward ourselves" (p. 480). This "othering" can be expressed as a conversation with oneself, where "Self-compassion is expressed in internal dialogues that are benevolent and encouraging rather than cruel or disparaging" (p. 479). And this same phenomenological structure is seen in some of the items in the Self-Compassion Scale, such as, "I try to be loving towards myself when I'm feeling emotional pain"; or "When I'm going through a very hard time, I give myself the caring and tenderness I need" (Neff, 2003, p. 231). This phenomenological structure of "othering" the suffering self, which is also recognized (and implicitly critiqued) by Quaglia et al. (2020), seems incompatible with the way one's own suffering is treated in traditional Buddhist presentations of renunciation.

Finally, a third incompatibility between typical Buddhist accounts of renunciation and self-compassion concerns a fundamental assumption made by Buddhist traditions: in short, it is assumed that all sentient beings have ready access to "an unimpaired aspiration to well-being," as Anālayo and

Dhammadinnā (2021) eloquently put it (p. 1357). The metaphor of "head on fire" clearly assumes that, once one has recognized the depths of one's suffering, one is instantly ready to do whatever it takes to alleviate that suffering. This is illustrated by the many tales of great Buddhist practitioners, such as Kisā Gotamī, whose spiritual careers emerge from great suffering (Nyanaponika & Hecker, 2003). A refusal to acknowledge one's situation or a confusion about how to proceed may be great obstacles, but such tales do not assume that the practitioner would not want to escape from suffering, once it has been fully recognized and acknowledged. In contrast, the numerous scientific and clinical efforts that have gone into the development of self-compassion practices would appear to be motivated precisely by the apparent lack of this spontaneous and unimpaired aspiration to well-being experienced by so many individuals in our contemporary cultures.

On Being Skillful

Although there are some doubts about some aspects of self-compassion's clinical efficacy (Muris & Otgaar, 2020), there seems little doubt that many individuals have found it useful (Ferrari et al., 2019). Thus, in pointing out the ways that self-compassion is incompatible with Mahāyāna Buddhist theory and practice, our intention is not to undermine the utility of self-compassion, but rather to enhance its potency as a "skillful means." Here, we would like to reflect on two issues: the impairment in one's aspiration to well-being that self-compassion addresses, and the role that the phenomenological "othering" found in self-compassion practices plays in addressing this impairment.

As discussed previously, Anālayo and Dhammadinnā (2021) noted how Buddhist traditions simply assume an unimpaired aspiration to well-being, and this raises the question of why this is the case. We concur with Condon and Makransky (2020b) that some plausible answers may be found in the ways that modernity has constructed highly individualistic identities for individuals who become susceptible to feelings of alienation, isolation, and social disconnection. Here, we especially note the relevance of Charles Taylor's (1989) notion that, in the modern West, a new sense of subjectivity emerges from what he calls a "subjective turn." Drawing on the work of Taylor and others, the cultural historian David McMahan (2008) described this development:

> Theorists of modernity have declared this turn toward interiority a new thematization of subjectivity, even the making of a new kind of selfhood, constituted by increased self-reflexivity—making one's own experience an explicit object of reflection and becoming aware of self-awareness itself (p. 188).

On this account, modern persons are not just autonomous (and often alienated) individuals; they are also steeped in a cultural milieu that teaches them, from an early age, to turn inward and focus on themselves. This strong tendency toward self-focus, moreover, often manifests in narrative form, such that modern individuals are hypothetically far more caught up in stories of the self than our pre-modern ancestors (Schechtman, 2011). The correlations between self-focus and depression, along with the prevalence of ruminative scripts or narratives about negative self-schemas in such contexts, may help explain the impairments that are so often observed in a modern individual's aspiration to personal well-being (Nolen-Hoeksema et al., 2008; Tackman et al., 2019; Wielgosz et al., 2019). In short, the story of the self, having somehow gone awry in these cases, will not allow well-being to be a part of the story. We might suppose further that our pre-modern ancestors (along with others in modern cultures that do not so heavily thematize self-focus) were not caught up in self-narratives to the same degree, and this would in turn explain why pre-modern Buddhism did not need any practices for self-compassion.

From this perspective, the skillful method that is self-compassion invites us to tell different, kinder stories about the self, and to do so in ways that, by emphasizing common humanity, reduce the alienation of modern individuals (Neff & Germer, 2017, 2018). Yet one must also wonder whether the "othering" of the self—the act of self-objectification—involved in many self-compassion practices may sometimes perpetuate the underlying problem. The subjective turn, especially in its narrative form, involves precisely this same phenomenology, where standing apart from oneself as an "other," one tells tales about the self, good or bad. The aforementioned correlation between self-focus and depression may already suggest that telling more stories about the self could be counter-productive, but this would appear to be especially true in individuals who find it challenging to receive compassion from either self or other (Condon & Makransky, 2020b; Gilbert et al., 2011).

Overall, interventions focused on self-compassion may thus benefit from approaches that do not require self-objectification and that reduce the need to tell stories about the self. In approaches that do not require self-objectification, one is invited to experience compassion, not for oneself as an "other," but rather from a first-person perspective. Here, Sustainable Compassion Training, developed by John Makransky, has great promise. Makransky's method invites practitioners to experience receiving compassion and love without any need to "other" or objectify themselves (Condon & Makransky, 2020a; Makransky, 2007). Likewise, interventions that employ virtual reality to allow individuals to

receive compassion from themselves in ways that may lessen self-objectification appear to be promising (Falconer et al., 2016).

For those individuals, however, who find it challenging to recall or simulate what it is like to receive compassion from others, a method that invites them to set aside their negative self-schema and its accompanying narrative may be the most promising approach. Here, certain aspects of mindfulness—already a feature of the approach developed by Neff, Germer, and colleagues—could be more strongly emphasized. Specifically, clinicians could highlight "the need to step outside the story line of our suffering" and the importance of using mindfulness to "let go of the story of what is happening," especially the story of the self (Neff & Germer, 2018, p. 44). This feature of mindfulness, which we call "dereification," is still being explored, but research thus far suggests that seeing that stories are just stories, and that thoughts are simply thoughts, may have powerful clinical impacts (Lutz et al., 2015; Segal et al., 2019). This may well be especially the case for those who seem most in need of self-compassion, since they may be especially prone to getting cognitively "stuck" in their own stories (Joormann et al., 2011). Here, the suggestion from a Buddhist perspective is that, while it may sometimes help to replace self-critical and negative stories of the self with kinder ones, at times, it may help even more to let go of all stories, even the good ones.

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Declarations

Ethics Approval This article does not contain any studies performed by the authors with human participants or animals.

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