Life As It Is
"A Fearless Heart"
Episode #44 with Thupten Jinpa
July 16, 2025

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Thupten Jinpa: I do believe that the collective challenges that we face in the face of the climate crisis and also the highly interconnected nature of our modern reality is increasingly going to force us to think beyond ourselves. Right now, of course, many nations are caught up in this rhetoric of "my country first" here and there, which may be a part of a reaction. But I think in the end, it is these collective challenges which really force each of us to think beyond ourselves that are going to force us to change the way we see the world.

James Shaheen: Hello, I'm James Shaheen, and this is *Life As It Is*. I'm here with my cohost, Sharon Salzberg, and you just heard Thupten Jinpa. Jinpa is a Tibetan Buddhist scholar based in Montreal. Since 1985, he has served as the principal English translator for the Dalai Lama. Today, he joins Sharon and me to discuss his 2015 book, *A Fearless Heart: How the Courage to Be Compassionate Can Transform Our Lives,* as well as some of the lessons he's learned from traveling with and translating for the Dalai Lama for forty years. In our conversation with Jinpa, we talk about what first set him on the path to becoming a monk, what he's learned from working as a translator for the Dalai Lama, how he views the relationship between courage and compassion, and why he believes compassion is fundamental to our basic nature as human beings. Plus, Jinpa leads us in a guided meditation. So here's our conversation with Thupten Jinpa.

James Shaheen: So I'm here with my cohost, Sharon Salzberg. Hi Sharon. It's great to be with you.

Sharon Salzberg: It's great to be with you.

James Shaheen: We're both in the same city. You're just down the street.

Sharon Salzberg: That's correct. I'm in New York.

James Shaheen: Yes, you are, your home. So in our last episode, we talked with Lama John Makransky about sustainable practices for cultivating compassion, and it was such a rich topic that we decided to do another episode on this theme. I don't think you can say enough about compassion. How about you, Sharon?

Sharon Salzberg: Well, I think especially in our time, it's a pretty compelling topic.

James Shaheen: Yeah. So here are a few more questions. Of course, I'm going to put you on the spot, not me. I just toss the ball to you. So to start us off, can you say more about the relationship between compassion and courage?

Sharon Salzberg: Yeah, it's an interesting question because I think mostly compassion is, to begin with, based on being able to open to suffering, to acknowledge suffering. And that's not easy when it's our own and even when it's someone else's. To bear witness to it, to be ready to not deny or obfuscate or cover over, that takes a certain amount of courage because most of us, not all of us, but most of us probably have some conditioning that's pretty phobic about opening to suffering. So I think we have a lot to look at in terms of our own conditioning, and even realizing how conditioned we are, I think, can embolden us to have a new perspective about opening to pain and suffering.

You know, it's like I grew up in part with my grandparents, who are Eastern European immigrants, and it was a world where you never said a word like "cancer" out loud. You know, you had to whisper, like, "She has cancer." And I remember years later, of course, I was teaching, I was invited to teach at a university hospital on the oncology ward, and I felt that incredible impulse to say, "Well, people who come here have cancer," and they were not immune from that kind of conditioning, even with the work that they were doing. And so, it is also a place, I think, where in many cultures, when you are in pain, when you're frightened, when

you're sick, even when you're dying, perhaps there's such a tremendous sense of isolation because it's not just generally accepted that this is part of life, that this happens to everybody. And so you feel humiliated at your own frailty or whatever, and with others, you know, we want to kind of not have to look at them or see them if they're struggling in some way. And so it's kind of amazing to understand just the weight of that conditioning and that we can be free of it, you know, that it is really habituated perception.

James Shaheen: Well, you've talked about it a little bit, but why are we so afraid to open our hearts? Why are we so afraid of compassion? What do we understand the risk to be?

Sharon Salzberg: Most people express their feeling about the risk as being in relational terms: "People are going to take advantage of me," "I'm going to be a sucker," "I'm going to be a loser." And in personal terms, internal terms, it's like, "It's too overwhelming," "I can't possibly recognize the suffering in the world," and "I could never do enough, so anything I do is like failing because it's so small given the immensity of the problem," or whatever it is, and we think compassion is going to bring us down. And part of that, I think, is that we do feel so alone, so isolated, we don't have a sense of interconnection that when others do well, we are doing well too, that that can lift us up. And I think we have an image of compassion, and partly it's the language as burning up ourselves with someone else's suffering, and that it's just too much. I mean, who needs that, you know? It's hard enough, and yet it doesn't mean that, really. It's not going into the fire to be destroyed yourself.

James Shaheen: You know, Sharon, you've done a lot of work with people in the helping professions who suffer from burnout. What do you say to people who are experiencing that sort of burnout? What can they do?

Sharon Salzberg: I think it's a multi-step process. One is really not to stigmatize their experience. People often get freaked out, like, "I failed, I'm a bad nurse, I'm a bad practitioner, I'm not strong enough," and to realize that it's not like a lack of caring that produces those

symptoms of burnout. It's because people care. That's precisely what happens, but there's often a kind of imbalance, both a tremendous imbalance in the system, but even within oneself. You know, within oneself, maybe we have an awful lot of compassion for others and not so much for ourselves, or the imbalance can be between compassion, which is the caring, and wisdom, like knowing I can't do everything, or there are limits, or this might take time, or whatever wisdom tells us, and we can learn to bring those together, so it's more of a force, and then, in working in what seems perhaps an unjust or even crazy system, we do what we can do to seek change, but not from a place of such exhaustion.

James Shaheen: You know, these qualities, compassion, loving-kindness, equanimity, sympathetic joy, these are the four *brahmaviharas*. And they're qualities that we need to cultivate if we want to develop them, and it's sort of interesting because a lot of people feel like, "With everything going on in my life, I really just don't have time," you know, and then they just burn out. I talked to somebody the other day who said he didn't really have time to go to the doctor to treat a condition, so it reminds me of that, of putting aside your own mental health for some treadmill that you're on and can't get off.

Sharon Salzberg: It is partly that, and I think it's partly recognizing the system is crazy. Like when you say go to the doctor, you know, I've tried to make doctor appointments, other friends of mine have tried to make doctor appointments, and especially with a specialist, being told, "Try 2026," you know, or there were situations in Massachusetts where I actually had to have somebody go into the doctor's office to make an appointment for me because fifty phone calls later, it wasn't working. But I think if we recognize that this is the system and we need to keep going, we need to take care of ourselves, you know, that that's a primary kind of reality. And so doing what we can do, including having a sense of community and support and realizing it's not necessarily you, but we have to persevere and be diligent. And the other part aside from opening to suffering that feeds compassion is connection. It's understanding it's not just those people over there, which have nothing to do with me. This is a part of what we share in life, the joys and the

sorrows, and we don't want to get so disconnected that we're kind of living in a so-called virtual world rather than a world of connection.

James Shaheen: Yeah. You know, you mentioned joy, and that was just going to be my last question before Jinpa joins us. You know, some people feel bad. They say, "Here I am having fun or experiencing joy when all of this suffering is going on in the world," and yet that's a necessary component of our lives, and so many people find themselves incapable of experiencing joy. I think it's something Ross Gay talks a lot about. Anything to say about that?

Sharon Salzberg: Yeah, I think it's interesting. For years I've needed models and I've found models like His Holiness the Dalai Lama. It's like, he's certainly got plenty on his plate in confronting a tremendous amount of suffering of his people and the people of the world, which he really cares about. And if he seemed morose and broken, that would be really, really scary and sad. And he doesn't. And so kind of just having a sense that there are people, and they're not oblivious to the pain, and they could be very ordinary people too, you know, just in a neighborhood taking care of their neighbors or something like that. And it always struck me with my meditation teachers, every single one of them, that they talked about suffering all the time, and they seemed awfully happy in a certain fundamental way, and there we are. You know, that's the potential.

James Shaheen: OK. So now we'll bring in Thupten Jinpa, a scholar, former monk, and translator. Hi Jinpa. Thanks so much for joining us.

Thupten Jinpa: I thank you for including me in your conversation in this series here.

James Shaheen: So Sharon and I wanted to talk to you about your book on cultivating compassion written some time ago, *A Fearless Heart: How the Courage to Be Compassionate Can Transform Our Lives*. But first, I wanted to ask you a bit about your background. What first set you on the path to becoming a monk?

Thupten Jinpa: Oh, that's a long story. To put it simply, I grew up as part of Tibetan refugee children in the early sixties, and we were all sent to boarding schools at a very early age, around the age of 4. The adults in the school, among the adults, the ones who were in monastic robes were the ones that inspired me most. They were kind and warm. Even physically, they looked kind of radiant. So there was a kind of a level of serenity that I noticed in them, which was absent in other adult figures. So I think that kind of seed for wanting to become a monk was planted fairly early. And then later, we had a group of monks—later I found out they were teacher trainees assigned to each of the classes. I was in grade two or grade three, I think. And so the monk that was assigned to us taught us elementary debate, which is part of the medium for scholarship in the Tibetan monastery. And I was fascinated. And that was it. I just wanted to be like that. So it has nothing to do with seeking enlightenment or higher purpose; it was just inspiration and wanting to become like them.

James Shaheen: Right. So you say you first met His Holiness the Dalai Lama when you were just 6 years old. So can you tell us about this meeting and how it influenced your path?

Thupten Jinpa: Yes, I'm sure I must have met him before, but my first memory is really around 6 years old. So as a Tibetan refugee child, my parents took me to see him when they arrived in India. So that's a standard thing, which every Tibetan family would do. But around age 6, he came to visit the school that I was at called Sterling Castle Tibetan School. It was really set up for Tibetan refugee children, and it was run by the Save the Children fund. And I remember it's on a hilltop, two bungalows of the British era that have been merged together and turned into a major children's school. His Holiness visited, and because there were a lot of multi-day preparations for his arrival, it left a very strong impression. So when he arrived, we were all taught to act in a particular way to sing this and chant this. Luckily, I was chosen to be one of the two young children to walk beside him as he arrived, so that was the first time I really remember him vividly.

James Shaheen: Mmhmm. And eventually you became his translator. A lot of years passed, but how did that happen?

Thupten Jinpa: That, again, was more of a coincidence. The first monastery I had joined was a major academic monastery. In the Tibetan tradition we have two types of monasteries. One is more like a parish monastery that serves a need of the local community by performing rituals and so on. The other one is more academic oriented and scholarship oriented. These are parallel to theological seminaries in medieval Europe. They are quite large, and I joined Ganden, as one of the three main monastic universities now reestablished in South India. So, I went to see someone in Delhi, an American woman who just recently passed away at the age of 94, and she was a member of a community in Los Angeles, but she used to live in Hawaii. She had been sponsoring me as a kind of godmother. So I went to see her, and she had already left for Dharamshala. So I went to see her in Dharamshala, and it so happened that the group that she was part of had requested His Holiness for a formal teaching, and the translator who was supposed to be translating this series of teachings could not make it on the first day. So the word spread around there is this young monk who has a reasonably good English around here. So one thing led to another, and they sought me out and asked me to translate on that day. Fortunately, it was a simultaneous translation, which was much less nervewracking because there's no silence in between. And so it was done through FM radio.

And then the next day the translator came, and then His Holiness looked down and said, "Oh, there are two of you. So why don't you take turns?" We did that, but then the Western Dharma students sent a message saying that it's too confusing to shift between two styles, so could the original one do it? So that's how I ended up, and then a few days later, the secretary asked me to say that His Holiness wanted to see me. When I went to see him, he said, "I know you, you are a good scholar from South India." He said, "How come I never knew you spoke English?" So I said, "I kept it quiet because otherwise you get inundated by requests to do administrative chores because very few monks spoke English." So he told me, "Well, that was clever," and then he

asked me, "Would you make yourself available when I need you to travel with me?" So I was of course in tears, and that was in October 1985. That's how it began. And then of course I took my English way more seriously. Up until that point, English was a language of leisure for me. I read novels, and I had never even written a single essay by that time in English, which meant that all of a sudden I had a much heavier responsibility to get my act together and improve my English.

James Shaheen: Well, that's a good motivation, being His Holiness's translator.

Thupten Jinpa: Yes.

James Shaheen: So you describe your role as serving as a medium between classical Tibetan Buddhism and the contemporary world. Can you say more about this role? How do you translate between these worlds?

Thupten Jinpa: Well, there is the straightforward translation, which is from one source language to another language. That is the standard understanding of translation, which is a large part of my work is actual textual translations. I oversee a major translation project, and I myself do a substantial amount of work translating classical Tibetan texts. But for His Holiness, there's another level of translation, especially when he is traveling around or when he's sitting down in deep conversation with major thinkers of key ideas in science or philosophy or social science. Then there is a conceptual level of translation that becomes important because the key point here is to communicate across the two different language systems.

I have this idea of language, and it's not a new idea language. Each language system represents a kind of cognitive interpretive system of our experience of the world and perception of the world. And even though there is a lot of correspondence, no two language systems actually map each other exactly, because the way in which we carve the pie is a little different based on the cultural background, the geography, what is important, what is more urgent, what is an immediate threat, as well as the social structures and whether or not to what extent the society is deeply religious or

not, which then influences the way in which we actually interpret the world. So part of the translation that I do, especially for His Holiness as well as my own Tibetan tradition, is the second level of conceptual translation, because in the end, all languages aim to do the same thing, which is to communicate deeper insight and experience. And at the fundamental level, human experience is universal and the human condition is universal. Some postmodernist scholars may question that assumption, but I believe that there is a certain universality when it comes to the basic human condition, and if that is the case, then language aims to communicate that and express that in its own framework. And then in order for a successful facilitation of communication across languages and cultures, you do need to move beyond the literal word-to-word translation to a more conceptual level translation. So that's the role I see myself as playing.

Sharon Salzberg: So one example of this bridge is your work on compassion, which brings together classical Buddhist practices and modern neuroscience. So my first question is, how are you defining compassion?

Thupten Jinpa: Well, fortunately, when it comes to compassion, on the definition of compassion, there is a very high degree of consensus between not only Buddhism and science but also Buddhism and Christianity. Whether we call it mercy or love or compassion, there is an understanding that it is about another person or another being. It's about suffering, and it's about making a connection and wanting to do something about it. And contemporary psychology's definition of compassion, you know, whether they admit it or not, is actually heavily influenced by engagement and interaction with Buddhist studies scholars and Buddhist teachers.

So, you know, for example, people forget that many of the constructs that relate to mind, like mindfulness or attention or meta-awareness or compassion or loving-kindness, which we use now as part of a common English vocabulary and scientific vocabulary, have been informed by a rich conversation with Buddhism because one of the things about Buddhism is that in Buddhism, because of the Abhidhamma tradition, there is a much more systematic approach to defining key

terms, primarily from the perspective of their specific function. And that's what makes it very easy to communicate with science, because science also seeks to operationalize key constructs so they can measure.

So I think the definition of compassion, the simple definition in Buddhism of compassion, is a sense of concern in relation to a need or suffering that involves wishing to see the situation changed, to relieve the suffering. So there is a kind of perspective or cognitive aspect, which is the understanding of the situation and perception of the situation; there is an emotional connection, which is feeling for and getting involved; and then there is a more motivational action orientation, wanting to see the situation change, or if you are more active, then you want to do something about the situation. So I think on the definition part, there is a very striking consensus, and I think the modern science definition, which is actually today based on a 2010 influential paper by Emiliana Simon-Thomas and her team, which did a matter literature review, is heavily influenced by the engagement with Buddhism.

Sharon Salzberg: I'm wondering what the Tibetan term is for compassion. How would you translate it?

Thupten Jinpa: For the Tibetan term, we have two terms. One is *tsewa*. Tsewa is a more informal colloquial term, which is closer to love. But *nying-je* is the technical term, or the formal term. Nying-je literally means the sovereign heart. It's the idea that it's the highest quality of your heart. It's interesting because normally, when we translate these key terms from Sanskrit, we tend to go more literal so that we can keep the etymological connection with the Sanskrit term, but when it came to compassion, Tibetans chose a different route. So the Tibetan term is very different from *karuna*, which has an action orientation in the Sanskrit term. So the Tibetans chose to emphasize the quality of the heart.

Sharon Salzberg: You've written very beautifully that compassion is fundamental to our basic nature as human beings, and nurturing our compassion is the key to our individual and also societal well-being. I'm wondering if you can say something about that.

Thupten Jinpa: Well, here, I'm actually drawing primarily on His Holiness's teachings. Of course, in Buddhism in general, and particularly in Mahayana Buddhism, the idea of buddha-nature is very, very fundamental, this idea of a seed that is inherent in everybody for the possibility of attending enlightenment. Part of that idea is compassion. The sense of concern for another person's well-being and suffering is a very natural part of expression of that buddha-nature. So that is very fundamental in Buddhist thinking.

For His Holiness, he tends to frame it more in scientific evolutionary terms, where he sees compassion and empathy as a deep expression of our social nature. As social animals and as social animals, a key part of our survival and well-being is our ability to connect with key figures in our life, and there must be something that is endowed by nature evolutionarily that makes us able to make that connection at a deep level. He sees empathy and compassion, which includes the appreciation of someone else's kindness and the ability to naturally express this kindness in response to situations, as part of that inherited social nature, and that's why he argues that compassion is a natural human quality. It's not a learned behavior. It's a natural human quality, which can be strengthened. But it is a part of our nature of who we are as an empathetic social being.

So His Holiness in his public secular formulation of teaching compassion tends to emphasize more the language of social animals and social connectedness and how that sense of connection is so tied to our ability to have well-being, which is how the science of happiness pans out. I try to replicate that approach in my book as well. I mean, very rarely do I use the budda-nature concept in this secular formulation.

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James Shaheen: So Jinpa, you've written that while most religious and humanistic traditions center compassion, we often fail to give it a central role in our lives and in our society. Can you say more about this? Why is this the case that we fail to center it while our traditions do center it?

Thupten Jinpa: Well, this is again coming from His Holiness. His Holiness argues that if you dig deeper, any system of ethics would take compassion as the foundation of ethical principles. In Buddhism, of course, it's very explicit: Why should I avoid harming others? Because I don't want to be harmed. So that's the golden principle, and you see that in other religious traditions as well. And then furthermore, it is very clear that in all major religious traditions, compassion is highly valued to the point where we identify it as one of the key attributes of an enlightened being, or one of the key attributes of God. So it's seen as one of the very important qualities of God, but in contemporary society, where the public worldview is really more secular, our worldview tends to be grounded more in scientific evolutionary understanding, and here, either consciously or subconsciously, the influence of a particular reading of Darwin and evolution, where human beings are seen as highly competitive and the rhetoric of survival of the fittest rhetoric, has really shaped our collective societal value. I think because of that, not much space is given to compassion in the formal structure of society. We expect it informally within our own family, in our relationships with people in our life, but we don't expect it from the society or the collective, or in the public space. And this is, I think, probably because of the influence of a particular view on human nature.

Now, several authors like Frans de Waal have argued very persuasively that for a long time in the contemporary scientific world, we have struggled with finding a place for empathy and compassion. You know, we tend to look at empathy and compassion as a kind of a veneer that is imposed on what is essentially a negative sentient kind of a human nature that needs to be reigned on by imposing constraints of morality and religious views, and compassion and empathy is part of that constraint, so it's kind of something imposed from outside. Frans de Waal

has pointed out that a large part of the struggle is because of this overwhelming influence coming from this kind of ideology. His work has demonstrated that if the evidence for empathy can be demonstrated among animals—a lot of these researchers on nonhuman primates—then the whole argument about it being imposed externally as a result of religion or ideology or morality goes out of the window because you can't attribute morality and religion to the animal world. So I think that's probably the reason.

And then also, one thing that is challenging is that compassion is a more of a shared value. I mean, the modern Western world has been very successful in instituting respectful, individual freedom, liberty, and human rights as part of the structure of a society. But those are defined from the point of view of individuals. When you look at compassion and empathy, then we are looking at interpersonal and mutual relationship issues, which are harder to translate into a social level. I don't think it's impossible, but I think it's tougher, because with human rights and individual freedom, then the protection can be done from the point of view of a kind of *via negativa* in the form of a protection, a guarding, rather than in the form of a proactive need to institute them, whereas for compassion, it's not a matter of simply preventing harm. So I think that's probably one of the reasons why it's harder.

James Shaheen: Mmhmm. So you say that the Darwinian narrative of competition and self-interest can be a self-fulfilling prophecy. So how do we disrupt this narrative?

Thupten Jinpa: I mean, clearly, we shouldn't be naive, and His Holiness often points out that clearly competitiveness and aggression and pursuit of self-interest, all of these are very powerful motivating forces within human nature, but equally powerful—that's the point he wants to make—are those more constructive, soothing, connecting, connection-seeking, meaning-seeking parts of who we are. And furthermore, now many evolutionary scientists have argued that if we don't find a way to incorporate empathy and compassion within our conception of human nature, then it is very difficult to give a full account of the emergence of cooperation at a higher level

because cooperative behavior is motivated by people taking into account other people's perspective and needs and so on.

I think in evolutionary science, the shift has already occurred, but we need the evolutionary science insights getting translated into applications. For example, if you look at economic theory, the standard, conventional economic theory is heavily defined and influenced by a specific Darwinian picture of human nature. And there is this basic idea that we're all profit maximizers and rational choice makers and in the end we will always be motivated to act in what they call our rational self-interest. Now this is shifting but very slowly. For example, there's a whole discipline called neuroeconomists who are looking beyond immediate behavior to see if there are other powerful motivating forces that influence people's behavior. So there is beginning to be a shift, and here I do believe that the collective challenges that we face in the face of the climate crisis and also the highly interconnected nature of our modern reality is increasingly going to force us to think beyond ourselves. Right now, of course, many nations are caught up in this rhetoric of "my country first" here and there, which may be a part of a reaction. But I think in the end, it is these collective challenges which really force each of us to think beyond ourselves that are going to force us to change the way we see the world.

James Shaheen: Yeah, I always thought this idea of rational self-interest was pretty funny, because how often are we rational?

Thupten Jinpa: It's true. I mean, in the West, I think the role of emotion in motivating human behavior was not appreciated for a long time. I mean, in Buddhism it goes all the way back to the Buddha's time with the three poisons. The idea that there are powerful emotions as key motivations behind human acts has been there. But in the West, I remember when I was studying at Cambridge, I did philosophy, and there was a whole area called rational choice theory. You know, I had to read papers, and it was quite mathematical. It's kind of rational, linear, step by step. And I kept thinking that human beings don't behave like this. You know, we may use rational argumentation to explain after the fact. But this generally tends to be after the fact in the

form of a rationalization rather than the actual reasons for behaving in a particular way. But now, of course, with the advance of neuroscience, and also to some extent, engagement with Buddhist thought has really made Western science, including evolutionary science, take a more serious look at these other motivating forces like empathy, compassion, loving-kindness, and so on.

Sharon Salzberg: So Jinpa, before you came on, James and I were chatting about how difficult it can be sometimes to open to the reality of suffering, both our own and others, and especially given a certain kind of personal or cultural conditioning. And you've talked about compassion letting us open ourselves to the reality of suffering and seek its alleviation. I wonder if you can say more about that.

Thupten Jinpa: Well, that's the interesting thing about compassion because compassion is clearly, in its natural setting, a response in the face of suffering, especially other suffering people in our life, and need as well. So it is a very natural response that we all are capable of, and clearly because it focuses on a problem, because it's the perception of a need and problem or suffering that triggers that, there is clearly an orientation toward suffering. So one would expect, if we are truly rational, to think that if, in addition to my own problem, now I'm taking on someone else's problem, one plus one should be two, there should be more problems. But it turns out that actually even simply by making that shift from the self to the other, by paying attention, it actually opens up something in us. I think here, one of the key insights that we are finding through the interface of Buddhism and contemporary research is the critical distinction between empathy and compassion, because empathy clearly is way more emotional experience. In many cases, it involves mirroring someone's suffering. There's a resonance or an echoing of that experience. Given the predominance of emotion in the experience of empathy, there's going to be a lot more energy that is expended as well, because emotional experiences are exhausting, even the positive ones and they're not meant to last very long. But the difference between empathy and compassion is not they are either/or, but compassion seems to be empathy plus something. So empathy is clearly the route. But when compassion arises, then there is a shift of attention away

from not just the suffering but also for a solution, a way out, a resolution. So it seems that when compassion arises, there is a greater sense of agency on your part, and also it seems to be almost like an outlet for that experience of the emotion of empathy. So that's what makes compassion quite powerful.

From a Buddhist point of view, one of the important things about genuine experiences of compassion is the move away from self to the other. So there is a kind of shifting, because in empathy there is still self, because a key part of empathy is the distinction between self and other. So that's what differentiates empathy from emotional contagion. In emotional contagion, there's no differentiation, but in empathy there is a differentiation. You are not confused about someone else's suffering as being yours. You are responding to the suffering. But the difference is from empathy to compassion, there is an additional aspect which manifests more in the form of wanting to see the situation change. So in Buddhism, there's a wish element or a desire of wanting to see the situation change or wanting to do something to help. So that I think is what makes it powerful.

Also, in the face of someone's suffering, we can either avert our gaze or be engaged. When we engage, empathy kicks in, and the research shows that empathy can lead to either compassion or personal distress. With empathy in itself, there's no guarantee that it's going to culminate in compassion. When empathy moves into personal distress, then the focus becomes yourself. You can't handle what you are seeing, and then all the negative and aversive associations with suffering kicks in, whereas if empathy moves into compassion, the focus still remains on the other person, but now you are looking beyond the suffering for helping, and that's why compassion is in the Buddhist psychology recognized as the key motivating factor for helping behavior.

Another important aspect of compassion in the Buddhist texts is what we call *mi kyo wa*. Mi kyo wa is what makes us not become weary or tired or overwhelmed. So there seems to be a kind of a preventative quality to compassion, which in modern terminology we can say kind of a

resiliency. There's a kind of protective element, and in fact, the Mahayana sutras that extol the virtues of compassion often talk about how the Buddha was donning the armor of compassion. So it's a kind of a proactivity, that you actually choose to pay attention to someone's suffering and wear compassion as your armor so that it gives you this kind of protective resiliency.

And also, one thing about compassion is because it's clearly not about yourself, there is also a shift away from self-focus. In Buddhist psychology, which is now being established or kind of proven also in contemporary psychology, there is this idea that excessive focus on self is actually quite costly, both cognitively because it blinds us from seeing situations around us and emotionally because it can be costly.

There is this beautiful, and I cite this in the book, the Kadampa, a dharma master, says that someone with excessive self-focus is like someone carrying a big target on his back that can be hit from any different directions. So there's a kind of a vulnerability that excessive self-focus brings. I think here, one thing that is helpful is to make a distinction between compassion as a felt emotion versus compassion as an attitude. I think compassion as a felt emotion is a tough one because with emotions, you can't will it, whereas compassion as an attitude is something that we can choose. This is why I think the Buddhist texts are quite nuanced. Even though they may use the term compassion in many different contexts, sometimes they're speaking from the perspective of an attitude and a perspective and a standpoint, and sometimes they're speaking from an actual felt emotion in response to a situation.

So I think being able to appreciate these distinctions really helps because sometimes people feel that if you are asking for compassion, how can I forgive or condone someone's horrible behavior? So people miss it and start thinking that you have to love the person. Loving someone is a tough one because that would involve liking someone, and liking someone, especially if someone has done something horrible to you, is a really tall order. But it is possible, even in relation to someone that has been horrible to you, that you do not forget their humanity. That is

possible. I think this is why I think compassion training needs to be approached in this multidimensional way.

Sharon Salzberg: Well, of course, the common term is compassion fatigue, but it seems clear that the more precise term would be empathy fatigue.

Thupten Jinpa: Exactly. In fact, there is a Canadian scientist who wrote a meta-review paper looking at the place of compassion and its usage in the health care systems, looking at many, many papers, and finally made the point that the term needs to be modified because compassion fatigue indicates that having too much of it can be a problem, whereas empathy fatigue is an issue.

Sharon Salzberg: Yeah, it seems clear it is. You know, I'm wondering if all the distinctions that you just named lead to something that you've said, which is that compassion is something we want to do, not just something we should do.

Thupten Jinpa: Exactly. Yeah, definitely, and this is why I think His Holiness, paradoxically, in his public teachings beyond Buddhist audiences, when he advocates for compassion, he uses self-interest as part of the argument, which is paradoxical because compassion has nothing to do with self-interest. It's completely oriented toward others' needs and situations. But he also wants to make the point that compassion is good for yourself as well. I think it's an important point to communicate because otherwise, traditionally the language around compassion has been embedded in religion and morality, and people immediately think in terms of, "Oh, I'm being told not to be selfish," so I think being able to take the language out of morality and religion and situate in within the broader understanding of human nature, I think, is a powerful one.

James Shaheen: You know, sometimes when we're most in need of compassion, we're most likely to resist it—we close off out of fear and defensiveness. Can you say more about this? Why do we resist others' compassion, and how do we end up hurting ourselves in the process?

Thupten Jinpa: Thank you. This is a really big challenge, particularly in contemporary society, and this is one area where I think Paul Gilbert's articulation of three dimensions of compassion is helpful: compassion for others, compassion from others, and compassion toward yourself.

Compassion is the same experience, but it can manifest in three different ways. And it turns out in contemporary society, many people struggle from receiving compassion from others. There's a kind of a resistance, and that may also have to do with the kind of cultural biases of prioritizing independence and autonomy and not being dependent on others. So those are probably important cultural considerations, and also there's an element of pride and self-dignity involved, wanting to not be challenged, because when you accept someone's help, you are admitting that you need their help. So there is that kind of resistance. Those probably have to do with a certain self-image of yourself of who you are as an individual.

Also, the interesting thing about contemporary Western culture is that on the one hand, to an outsider, for example, when I first came to the West, one thing that I noticed is the massive advertisement culture where there's all this glorification of how you look and how you behave and what you own. To an outsider, naively, it feels like the society is so obsessed with self, and self-gratification and self-care and self needs. But on the other hand, on a psychological, spiritual level, the people in the West also—you know, I'm now being very generalizing here, but people in the West seem to have an aversive reaction to thinking about one's legitimate needs for care. You know, I remember when I first developed the compassion training protocol at Stanford, of course, like many programs developed at universities, undergraduates are the guinea pigs to try them out. So the first version of the program, the progression was mirroring the traditional approach where you start with self, then to a loved one, then to a neutral person, then to a difficult person, and then to all beings, and it just got stuck there because many students have so many aversive reactions to sitting in a guided practice where they're being asked to silently say the phrases, "May I be free from suffering, may I find happiness." So there is this kind of very visceral aversive reaction to using these phrases. I think probably all of this indicates a much

more complicated relationship when it comes to kindness and compassion toward yourself in contemporary society. So I think that's probably one of the reasons why.

And then, you know, in Paul Gilbert's work, he works primarily with clinical patients. He was a pioneer in adapting compassion-based approaches to the clinical setting, and he actually developed a scale, a questionnaire, in assessing what he calls the fears of compassion, and these fears about compassion, he correlates them to receiving compassion from others, compassion for others, and compassion for yourself. He actually correlates them in a systematic way, so I think it would be helpful, especially for people who struggle to bring compassion to themselves, to take a look at that questionnaire in relation to the self-compassion component, and then pay conscious attention to them and bring awareness.

I mean, one of the beautiful things about Buddhist practices that have spread in the West and contemporary society, increasingly in the East too, is the importance of being able to bring awareness into situations, whether it's through mindfulness practice or whatever. When we are able to bring awareness to a certain pattern in our behavior, in our relations, particularly in our relation to ourselves, then we can begin to see how it can be modified or changed. So I think self-compassion seems to be one area that quite a lot of people struggle with, even though I don't believe that self-compassion is a true condition for having compassion for others. My own sense is that compassion for others is probably more fundamental because it's there right from the very early stage of infancy, and self-compassion requires the ability to turn yourself into an object, which probably comes developmentally much later. But without some healthy dose of self-compassion, I think the ability to keep compassion for others in a sustained way is probably going to be a challenge because you are much more likely to be exhausted. That I believe to be true.

Sharon Salzberg: Thank you for saying that. I agree with you, and I've gotten into some contentious debates with people who say, "Well, you have to love yourself before you can love

anyone else." And I said, "I don't really think so," but sustaining that in a wise way is a very different question.

Thupten Jinpa: That's true, because otherwise, self-compassion requires a degree of self-awareness because individuals differ on what tires you and the triggers for getting tired are very different from individual to individual, and without some degree of self-awareness, you are not going to be able to recognize the early indicators of becoming exhausted or burned out.

So here, I think, a large part of the self-compassion challenge and the practice has to involve cultivation of self-awareness, being able to know yourself better, and then framing it in a more altruistic context because otherwise you end up with this false dichotomy of self versus others compassion, and which one should I choose, which I think is a false dichotomy because even compassion for ourselves has to be motivated by the broader altruistic frame, where choosing compassion is an important value for yourself. Otherwise, you end up getting to this dichotomy.

Sharon Salzberg: Well, one of the things that was very important for me, especially in my early practice, was when I see my own greed, hatred, delusion, and all those factors, not to call them bad or wrong or terrible, but these are states of pain and suffering, and when I'm entangled in them, I cause suffering to others, and that whole reframing was very important.

Thupten Jinpa: Yes, definitely, and you have been a pioneer in bringing loving-kindness as a concept as well as a practice in the contemporary world, so you know how being able to bring loving-kindness to oneself is an important challenge but also an important skill. If you want to be able to be efficient in helping others, that's an important skill.

Sharon Salzberg: Yeah. Thank you.

James Shaheen: So Jinpa, early on in the book you talk about how your good fortune is heavily due if not entirely due to the compassion of others, and they couldn't have known what effect their compassion was going to have, and you also talk about the transformative quality of

compassion and how it ripples outward. But I was very moved because it brought me to also consider my own good fortune and how entirely dependent on others' compassion that was. Can you say something about that, the compassion people expressed toward you and what happened?

Thupten Jinpa: I mean, growing up as a refugee in India, of course, I was at the mercy of many international aid groups and the entire support of the Tibetan community in India. Of course, as a kid, I wasn't aware. But I do remember, for example, later, I was a little older, and I started to recognize, for example, the USAID logo was on many sacks of grain and everything, and many had Catholic Relief service logos on them, so I think it became more obvious. In my own personal life, after my mother passed away, I was in a boarding school, and my mother's brother, my uncle, was hugely important because he brought me on short vacations whenever he took his children with him, and he treated me almost exactly as if I was one of his kids. That left a very strong impression on me, and of course, he remained a hugely important person in my life until he passed away. And then, even as an adult, when I was in the monastery, I was the beneficiary of sponsorship from people, including a woman who just recently passed away, Neville Jacobs from Hawaii, and then later, when I went to Cambridge, scholarships and all of this.

So I think my sense is that whenever you are the recipient of someone else's kindness, it is important to recognize and appreciate that and then also remember that some of these gestures on the part of the person who's extending the care may not be big, but the effect that is experienced by the recipient is hugely significant. So I think this is something that I keep in mind in my own life. Sometimes there may be situations where if someone is going through a tough time and the gesture on my part, it may involve a little bit of challenge or struggle, but compared to the sacrifice I'll be making, the impact on the recipient side will be way more enormous. I think just being able to recognize that, and this would also mean that even in intimate relationships sometimes, one partner goes through a very difficult time, and it was those moments when the other partner needs to show magnanimity and special attention, because one of the key principles in Buddhist conceptualization of compassion is what we call *men la lhag par tse wa*, which

literally means someone who chooses compassion should be able to pay special attention to the immediate need. It could be oppressed people, people who are suffering in the immediate. Choosing compassion requires us to pay special attention to urgent needs, so I think those kinds of things are important. And also on the part of the recipient, when you recognize the impact of that compassion by someone in your life, your response to this manifests in the form of gratitude, and gratitude is a highly positive emotion.

So I think that those kinds of things are what makes extending kindness hugely important. And also one thing that is clear is that in the context of an interaction, feeling kindness and compassion alone is not adequate. It needs to be expressed in some form, because without it being expressed, it's not real from the recipient's point of view. So I think that's something that, especially those of us who have a much stronger leaning in Buddhism, this is something that we need to pay attention to because we highly value the mental states that are virtuous, but sometimes in the process we forget to also appreciate the importance of its outward expression, which can actually make a real difference on the ground.

James Shaheen: OK, Thupten Jinpa, thanks so much for joining us. It's been a great pleasure. We like to end these podcasts with a short guided meditation, so I'll hand it over to you, Jinpa.

Thupten Jinpa: Thank you. So thank you for including me in this important series of conversations, and particularly I'm happy because this year, many of us are celebrating the 90th birthday of His Holiness. Especially for the Tibetan world, it's a landmark, so I'm so happy to be a part of our conversations here. Thank you.

So let me just invite everybody to posture ourselves so that we can adopt a more relaxed posture, and if necessary, we can even stretch our shoulders a bit. Find that posture that is relaxed but facilitates alertness, and then gently bring your attention inwards by using your breathing as an anchor, resting your attention just on your breath, noticing the air coming in and going out. As

you do this, just notice the energy of your body and mind slowing down so that you can feel that serenity, the calmness that silence brings.

Now I'd like to invite everybody to connect with the aspiration that is in all of us wanting to see a kinder, more compassionate world. Many of us are right now feeling a sense of the pain of the current reality that we see in the world with the ongoing wars such as in Gaza and Ukraine, increasing tension between nations, and many people still struggling to meet their day-to-day needs.

Let's open our hearts and create a space to bring to our mind this hugely complex current reality of the world we all share. Let's make the aspiration that each one of us shares this same human condition and desire that nobody wants to suffer and everybody wishes to find happiness and meaning in their life. Let's make the aspiration that may each one of us, everyone on this planet, connect with that fundamental human aspiration and recognize each other's shared human condition, this basic disposition, not wanting to suffer and finding happiness. And let's pray that a time will come when all of us, each one of us, will collectively bring out the power of this deeper aspiration to make our world a little bit kinder, more equitable, more compassionate, and more peaceful. So let me end with a short recitation of Tibetan prayer.

jang chub sem chok rinpoche / ma kye pa nam kye gyur chik // kye pa nyam pa me pa dang / gong nay gong du pal war shog //

pha ma sem chen tham chay de dang den / ngan dro tham chay tag tu tong pa dang // jang chub sem pa gang na su zhug pa / de dag kun gyi mon lam drub gyur chig //

Thank you.

James Shaheen: Thank you so much, and thank you, Sharon.

Thupten Jinpa: Thank you, Sharon.

Life As It Is
"A Fearless Heart"
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