Medicine and Compassion
Medicine is Inherently Compassionate

• Correct diagnosis and treatment relieves suffering
• This occurs whether motivation of doctor is consciously “compassionate” or not
“De facto” Compassion

• Compassion is built into practice of medicine
• “Of course I care for you, I’m caring for you aren’t I?”
• Somehow unsatisfying to both patient and doctor
“He discerned a great irony: at the very time that medicine was improving, a decline in the physician-patient relationship was taking place. Physicians, he argued, were in danger of forsaking the patient for science.”

Francis Peabody, 1927
Caring

• It often seems that the act of caring more is a burden

• It seems impossible to care more and at the same time not have it affect you personally
Catch-22

• The only way we can continue to care for all our patients is to not care as much for individual patients
What is compassion?
Compassion

- The desire to relieve suffering in others
Loving Kindness

• The desire that other beings should be happy
• Recognizing that other beings are just like yourself—they want to be happy
“I was half way through my first year of residency when I found myself wishing that a patient would die so that I could go back to sleep.”
• “For many residents, fatigue cultivates anger, resentment, and bitterness, rather than kindness, compassion, or empathy.”

Green, Michael J. What (If Anything) is Wrong with Residency Overwork? Annals of Internal Medicine 1995;123:512-517.
Learning Compassion

- Learning takes place whether it is positive or negative
SONATA
QUASI UNA FANTASIA ‘MOONLIGHT’
OP. 27 NO. 2

Adagio sostenuto.
Si deve suonare tutto questo pezzo delicatissimamente e senza sordini.

sempre pp e senza sordini
Practice

- If we don’t stop to correct our mistakes, we are actually training in the mistakes.
- The mistakes become our habits.
• In 7 to 10 years of medical training, our bad habits may become quite ingrained
Medical School

• Almost all schools make efforts to encourage better connection between doctors and patients
• Generally occur in first two years of curriculum
Medical School

- Main focus tends to be teaching empathy
- The ability to experience or at least recognize the feelings of others
Empathy

• Necessary in order to experience compassion
• Not sufficient by itself to help others
Why is Compassion Limited?

• Why can’t we choose to be compassionate towards every patient and every person we meet?
• What limits us?

“I’m only human…”
Limits to Compassion

• Our compassion is unstable—wears out over time (often a short time)
Limits to Compassion

- Our compassion is selective—it’s easier to be compassionate towards people we know and like.
Limits to Compassion

• Our compassion is ego-dependent—we need to get positive feedback from the patient or our peers.
How can we become more compassionate?

- How do we get better at anything?
- We need to train
What is the cause of medical suffering?
Physical Illness

Emotional Reaction

Combination of the two
If physical illness is unavoidable, can the emotional reaction to illness be modified?
Other People’s Emotions

• In order to feel that we are caring about others, we share their emotions
• Just like our own emotions, we may have trouble letting go
• It’s natural to experience emotions, positive or negative

• How much of an effect that they have on us depends on how much we cling to those thoughts
A Thought Appears

I can’t do this any more!
• The thought, “I can’t do this any more” is just a thought
• Repeated over and over again, it becomes painful
• Released, one becomes relaxed
Clinging to Thoughts

- What makes it stay?
- It depends on how much attention we focus on that thought
- Excessive attention on the thought is called “clinging”
Clinging to Thoughts

- How can we avoid clinging to our thoughts when we don’t want to?
The Purpose of Buddhist Training

• “To dispel the suffering we experience as a result of the uncontrolled, relentless activity of our minds.”

Nyoshul Khen Rinpoche
• How can we help patients deal with their own emotions?
“With diseases, some can be cured and some not. However, feeling emotionally ill at ease can always be cured if we know the right methods and apply them intelligently.”

Chokyi Nyima Rinpoche
How do we deal with our own emotions?

• We simply react to the emotions that we experience

• We can’t prevent them, and we have a hard time making them disappear
When faced with emotions we can’t handle we turn to:

- Distraction—television, movies
- Exercise
- Eating
- Alcohol, drugs (legal or recreational)
What is the Basis of Compassion?

• We tend to assume that compassion is a character trait
• We believe that it can be increased by simply trying harder
Compassionate VO2 Max?

• VO2 max can be increased about 10% with training
• Is this also true for our inherent compassion?
Increase in gamma oscillation for practitioners over anterior electrodes.
A Monk’s Viewpoint

“Being a doctor is the best life you can live because you make your living easing suffering in others.”
“A remarkable book.”
—Harvey Fineberg, President of the Institute of Medicine

MEDICINE & COMPASSION
A TIBETAN LAMA’S GUIDANCE FOR CAREGIVERS

CHOKYI NYIMA RINPOCHE
WITH DAVID R. SHLIM, M.D.
Can You Train in Compassion?

• If you think that having more compassion is beneficial, what can you do?
• Particularly if you feel that you are already trying as hard as you can
Origin of Compassion

• Evolution?
• God?
• Upbringing?
• Natural part of our mind?
Origin of Compassion

• All people (and all animals) express compassion in some way
Origin of Compassion

- All people (and all animals) express compassion in some way
Origin of Compassion

• If it is naturally present, can it be expanded?
Two Types of Compassion

• Conceptual compassion
• Non-conceptual or spontaneous compassion
Conceptual Compassion

• Based on a specific person or event
• Elicits a specific response
• Requires a conscious effort
Conceptual Compassion

- Feels limited
- Wears out over time
- Must be “recharged”
Rechargeable Battery

- Has a certain amount of charge
- We only turn it on when we need it
- When it runs down, must be recharged

We call a holiday “a chance to recharge our batteries”
HOW TO RECHARGE A BATTERY

A body in motion deserves to be a body at rest. With the Platinum Card® from American Express, that part is easy. Your every whim is promptly attended to. Just stay at one of our Fine Hotels and Resorts and you can receive privileges such as a complimentary massage, a round of golf or late check-out at over 500 properties.

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Conceptual Compassion

- Easier with people we know and like
- More difficult with strangers
- Most difficult with people who dislike us or treat us badly
Non-Conceptual Compassion

- Spontaneous feeling of warmth and kindness towards others
- Does not need an object to exist
- Doesn’t wear off over time
Where does non-conceptual compassion come from?
“Brain” versus “Mind”

- Medical model is that the brain is an organ that creates consciousness
- Therefore, consciousness ceases when brain function ceases
Survey

• How many of you believe that some type of awareness continues beyond death?
• If awareness continues beyond death, then “mind” must be separate from brain
Buddhist Concept of Mind

- Mind is empty—not a physical entity
- Mind is aware—has the qualities of consciousness
Buddhist Concept of Mind

• Mind has inherent qualities of compassion and wisdom
• These qualities are obscured by thoughts and emotions
Non-Conceptual Compassion

- Non-conceptual compassion is the state of our mind when we are not attached to any particular thought

“Awareness beyond thought”
When we are relaxed, we are naturally more compassionate
How do we learn to relax?
Relaxed Mind

• Relaxed means being less disturbed by our own thoughts
Meditation

• A technique that trains you to watch your own thoughts
• We can practice letting go of thoughts and emotions
Benefits of Meditation

- When our mind is relaxed, the positive qualities of compassion and wisdom are revealed.
Our basic nature is like the sky—our emotions are like clouds
Impermanence

• A fact of life
• Everything constantly changes
• There is no stability
Impermanence

- Lack of stability leads to suffering
- Health is impermanent
- Our lives are impermanent
Four Major Causes of Suffering

- Birth
- Old age
- Sickness
- Death
Death

• The cause of death is birth
• Inevitable—no one who was ever born has not died
• The fact of death is known, but the time and circumstances are not
Purpose of Medicine

- The purpose of medicine is to relieve suffering
Purpose of Medicine

- Some of the worst suffering occurs around the time of death
How Do We Become More Compassionate?

• First need to resolve that we want to be more compassionate
Training in Compassion

• When you train in the right way, compassion becomes more stable and takes less effort
The Ultimate Goal

- The mind has the capacity to become and remain perfectly relaxed
- This is the awakened state—thought free, yet aware
“In an absolute sense, compassion is the awakened nature of the mind.”

—Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche
Not limited by time or space

Matthieu Ricard
“I feel that it’s critical at the present time to invest more effort into systematically developing love and compassion..."
If we could advance the cultivation of love and compassion to the extent we have developed technological improvements, the entire world community would benefit immeasurably.”

—Chokyi Nyima Rinpoche