

Lama Michel Rinpoche

Compassion in (Mental) Health Care

Lecture transcript

Compassion is the strong wish that the other may be free from suffering. A patient who seeks help is also looking for acceptance so working out of compassion is the first step in the healing process, makes one's work more meaningful and brings deep joy and satisfaction.

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Compassion in (Mental) Health Care

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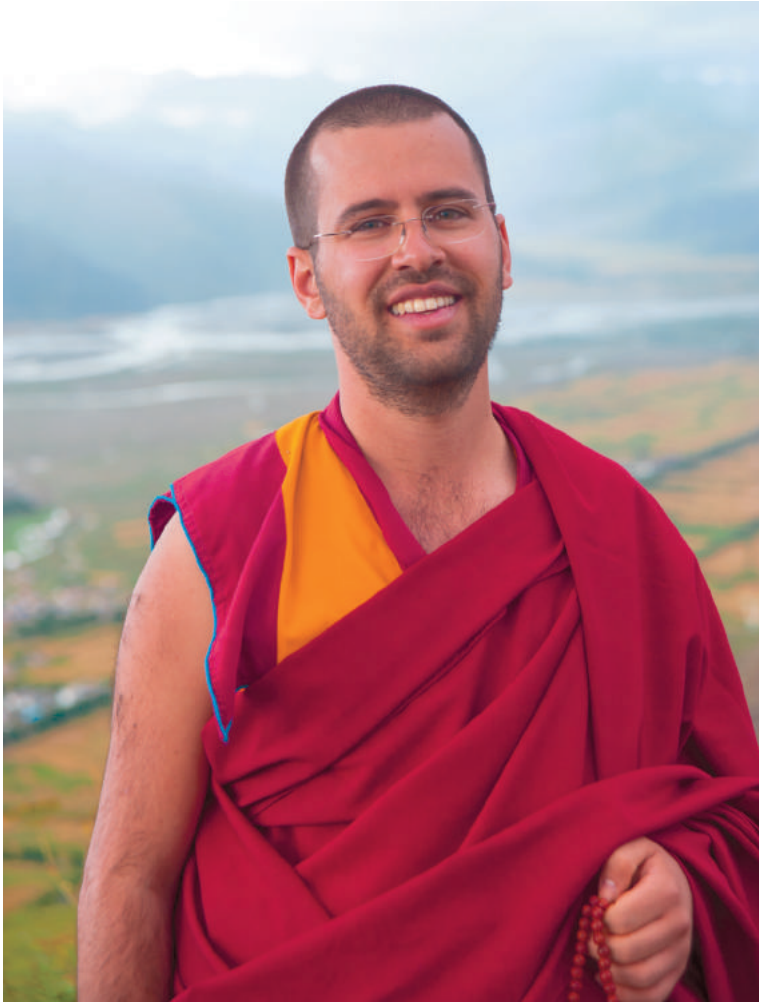
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Compassion, happiness and suffering

Compassion is one of the main driving forces in our lives. Like water, it makes things grow and remains the basis for life. It provides the energy for us to be able to do things.

The mind is full of defects, but it possesses one important ability: it can be taught and it can shape itself according to what has been taught.

In Buddhism, there is no division between the rational and the emotional mind. There is the gross, the subtle and the very subtle mind. The teachings in Buddhism aim to shape these three levels of the mind.

A starting point when talking about compassion is that there is no difference between you and others, no matter who you are or what you do. We all suffer and we all want to be happy. However, before we talk about happiness, we need to know, to understand what it means. Our whole society, economy and our health care system are all there for us to be happy. Happiness is the state of the mind in which there is no suffering. It lasts maybe for only an instant, but it is that instant in which you don't want anything to be different from how it is.

It is suffering that takes us away from happiness. Suffering is an internal and personal experience because what makes one person suffer can make another person happy. The way the hairdresser cuts your hair might make you suffer, while someone else with the same haircut might be very pleased with it. Whether suffering is big or small depends on the person. Hence, we cannot judge the suffering of others.

Physical suffering and mental suffering

We can make a division between physical suffering and mental suffering. Physical suffering is the discomfort in the body like pain, hunger, thirst, cold and heat. Mental suffering is in the mind like anxiety, anger, and jealousy. In our modern society we have overcome physical suffering, but we have a lot of mental suffering. By trying to avoid suffering all the time, we create even more.

When we talk about physical sickness there is usually also a lot of mental suffering involved because of the fear that we have about the physical suffering that comes with the illness. Not being able to deal with the situation creates more suffering on top of the actual suffering.

Looking for solutions, in general we should look to the mind for dealing with mental suffering and we should look to the body for dealing with physical suffering. But we don't. Instead, we look at external conditions for solutions, like a vacation, new clothes or more attention from our loved ones. We project the cause of our suffering onto external conditions. And this is without mentioning mental diseases. Here we are talking about the common sufferings such as anger and jealousy.

Generally speaking, poor people suffer physically and rich people suffer mentally. So the fact that we suffer more from mental problems shows us that we are in a rich part of the world.

Listen, comprehend and familiarize

So mental problems require mental solutions. According to the Buddhist path, first we need to understand how this works by listening, then we need to comprehend and finally we need to familiarize ourselves with this insight.

The first step, to listen, is to understand on an intellectual level how suffering works.

The second step, to comprehend, means that we go through a process until we have no more doubts. In Buddhism there are no dogmas; this means that we don't take things for granted. You believe something because you have experienced that it is like that.

And the last step is to familiarize. This means that we bring it from our head to our heart. Talking about compassion, it is not enough to understand compassion; we must feel it. Familiarization comes from meditation. The literal meaning of meditation in Tibetan is to familiarize. It means that we repeat it again and again, until it becomes familiar.

What is compassion?

In Tibetan, the meaning of compassion is the strong wish that the other (or yourself) may be free from suffering. The definition of love is similar but different: it is the wish that the other may be happy. Love and compassion are different but they cannot exist one without the another. When you look at the real etymology of the word compassion: *com* comes from comprehending, and *passion* comes from suffering. So compassion means to understand the suffering of others.

In Buddhism, it doesn't mean that I suffer for your suffering. If it were like that, the whole society would end up suffering because everybody would suffer for the suffering of others.

The most difficult aspect of helping others is the fact that the one who is helping must adapt to the other. It is difficult to help someone help himself, to change someone's reality.

Reality is subjective

We see reality as objective but it is subjective. In fact, according to Buddhism, there are infinite individual realities, but to make it easier, let's call it a subjective reality for now. So we all live in our own subjective world. Your reality is a result of your history, education, the society you live in, your experiences. But even though we live in a subjective world, we feel that our individual subjective reality is objective.

Sometimes we think that we would not suffer like the other person if we were him or her. It is necessary to understand the subjective reality of that person before we are able to help. However, we are so attached to our own reality that we are not able to do so. Compassion starts with understanding the suffering of others but often we don't take the feelings of others into consideration.

Passive compassion and active compassion

There are two types of compassion. Passive compassion is when you can understand and see the suffering of others and you wish the other to be free from suffering. Active compassion is when you want to do everything you can to take away the suffering of the other.

Sometimes the best thing to do in order to help is not to help at all. Genuine compassion is when the priority lies with the other person. But sometimes it is the *I* that wants to help, even when the other doesn't want to be helped. The person that helps should adapt to the person that needs help.

The whole system of healthcare exists because of the patients, not because of the doctors. Three thousand years ago in China, the doctors would only be paid when the people were healthy, not when they were ill. Imagine that as a doctor your salary would only be paid if you had no patients. Only all healthy families would pay you something at the end of the month only if nobody had been sick. If our system were like that, many unhealthy products would be taken off of the market and Tv programs would not be shown anymore. Everything harmful, like video games, would probably no longer be available. On a side note, research has proven that playing video games leads to more violence, but society doesn't act on these drawn conclusions. In any case, the relationship between doctors and patients would be totally different. The doctor would not depend on the sickness of his patients.

In our reality, we study the mind and the body, but very little time during our studies focuses on a healthy body or a healthy mind. So we don't have health care. We have sickness care. Take for example the efforts made to find a cure for cancer. Cancer depends mainly on lifestyle, but hardly any money is spent on promoting lifestyle changes. So what is our objective? Do we invest in health or are we taking care of the symptoms?

The first level of compassion is to understand the symptoms of the suffering of others. The second level is to understand the causes. And the third level is to see the potential for helping the other person to be free from suffering.

Life is cyclic

In life everything is cyclic. When we get sick, we usually look for the causes in the present, while the causes have probably been accumulated a long time before. For example, most of the sicknesses that come from environmental pollution are created ten years or more before the sickness actually manifests itself. The process is always cyclic, so when a sickness appears, the causes were created long before. Once we identify the symptoms, we must look at what happened in the past. We can allieviate the symptoms, but if we don't go deeper into looking for the causes, the symptoms will return. For example, somebody who has a problem with her partner realizes that the problems she has are the same problems that she has always encountered in her life. It is a pattern, so the problem lies within her, not with her partner. In Brazil there is a joke: "Wherever I touch myself with my finger, it hurts. So I go see a doctor and the doctor explains that it is my finger that is causing the pain and not a problem in my body." In the same way, the person with problems in her relationship was projecting her problems outside herself, but it was a pattern inside herself.

The symptoms that come with an illness are the result of something which is mostly cyclic.

Start with yourself

Normally we talk about the patients, but it is important as doctors to start talking about ourselves. What are our own cyclic patterns? These patterns have repeated themselves since we were young, wherever and with whomever we are. Usually we ask ourselves what we have done to always find ourselves in the same situations, as if someone or something were harming

us. But the problem is in the finger, not in the rest. So if we are able to understand these patterns, we can help the other person as well.

Compassion is not about suffering for the suffering of others. It is about doing something about the suffering of others. Sometimes we believe that being compassionate means being very emotionally involved with the other person, but it is not like that.

Be present with empathy

Having compassion means being present with the other person. The person becomes your universe. We give our full attention. In verbal communication there is always distortion. I send you a message, but a different version arrives. Whatever you talk about, the other person listening never really understands what you mean because he is not you. There was a study done about the recognition of facial expressions like angry and happy. A little part of the brain gets activated when people are confronted with these expressions. But the interesting thing about this study is that they also performed it with blind people. So people would make an angry or a happy face to a blind person. And the surprising result in this study was that the blind people had the same amount of right answers about the kind of facial expression that was performed in front of them as the people who could see. The report concluded that “blind people could see the facial expressions,” but this is not correct. In fact, they perceived the intention of the people who made the faces, not the face itself. We communicate beyond words and we all know this. Often we understand each other without using words.

When somebody comes to us for help, he looks for acceptance and this is the first step in the healing process. This empathy creates so much positivity already. If I go to a doctor and he understands my suffering and difficulties, I will take his medicine. But if not, if I am just another number, I will not take the medicine he prescribes because I won't trust him. The most important thing is trust. As a doctor you must respect the trust that a patient gives to you, by having a strong and sincere interest in the patients' suffering. If a patient feels that the doctor cares, it makes a difference. A doctor with compassion understands the sickness of others.

Compassion gives strength.

In a modern Western system, compassion is often seen as a weakness. On the contrary, compassion is power and gives strength. If we love someone, it is not difficult to help. If a child is in the middle of a fire, the mother is easily willing to step in there and take her child out. If you love someone, you don't care about going through difficulties for the other person.

The life of a doctor is a life of dedication. If you have compassion, it will give strength, it will give joy because you know you are helping someone. And even if you are not able to help completely, you are still doing something by being compassionate. It takes ten years of study to become a doctor. You can become a doctor for selfish reasons, such as status because you feel special as a doctor. You can also become a doctor because you want to learn how and create the conditions to help others.

Being a doctor is not about having studied medicine. You become a doctor when you put your knowledge into practice. Having compassion gives you the daily strength to do the job.

It is a positive kind of pride. “I can help and it makes me feel good. I want to make you happy.” So the moment that we see the suffering of others, and we wish the other to be free from suffering, we are compassionate and we are already making a difference. It is sad to see that there are cold-hearted doctors who only give help in a mechanical way.

Compassion starts the healing process

In Tibetan Buddhism there is no distinction between the mind and the body, and it has been like that for at least 2,000 years. There are many sicknesses that are related to the state of the mind and the healing process is also found in the state of the mind. The moment you trust the other person and you feel that he loves you, you automatically open up to everything that comes after. If you act with compassion, the patient will feel it, so it already makes a difference and it is the start of the healing process. We have to show our patients that we are worthy of their trust in us, and this we can do by having strong compassion. Compassion is important not only with patients but also with friends, family and colleagues.

The quality of time we have with a person is more important than the amount of time we have. When we have only two minutes and we are present, those two minutes become eternal. But both patient and doctor need to be present. If the patient has his or her mind somewhere else, it is also difficult. It is important to know that we are not solely responsible for the healing of the other person. There are many factors involved and we are just one of them. But if you start with wanting the person to feel good about himself, this also shows an intention that comes out of compassion.

We cannot have compassion for others if we have no compassion for ourselves. The moment you understand that suffering comes from internal rather than external conditions, you can understand the person and have compassion for him. And the moment you understand that your own suffering comes from the fact that you see your reality as objective, you also understand the suffering of others. When you understand the interdependence of phenomena, your compassion will go beyond. You understand the other person better and you are more able to help.

Compassion brings joy and satisfaction

Compassion brings joy and satisfaction. There was a study done by the United Nations; it is a yearly study they do. They took a random group of people in New York, gave them a sum of money and divided them in two groups. One group was told to spend the money for themselves and the other was told to spend it on others. At the start of the day they somehow measured their level of satisfaction and by the end of the day, after the people spent their money, they measured again. The people who had spent the money for themselves had the same or a lower level of satisfaction than in the morning. The people who had spent the money for others mostly had a higher level of satisfaction by the end of the day. Doing something for others brings more satisfaction, joy and happiness. So the moment that we love the people who come to us to be helped, whatever we do with compassion brings joy. The moment that you give, you receive. The pleasure we can have by helping people is much greater than any other pleasure. I help you and I receive a smile; this makes me happy.

So, if compassion in health care were not important for patients, it is at least important for the doctors. It makes your work more meaningful. Being a doctor is an honor, because this field of health care is really for the benefit of others. If you look at other jobs like supermarket cashiers, or the toll collector on the highway, they also help somehow, but it is much different.

Compassion is the feeling of standing up for others, not feeling the suffering of others. Doctors might find it difficult to engage emotionally with their patients, and if you believe this is what compassion means, you are way off the mark. You have to remember that you are not responsible for the other person. Sometimes people feel frustrated because they cannot eliminate the suffering of others. But that doesn't depend solely on us: it depends on infinite variables, of which the person himself is the most important. You can try your best based on your own level. The more you feel compassion for others, the stronger your determination to develop yourself becomes. The more you see that what you are and what you have is not enough for being able to help others, the more you will realize that you have to be strong, healthy and that you have to take care of yourself.

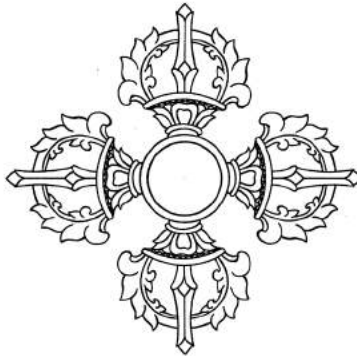
So when I do something for others, I am doing it for myself and vice versa. This is how you overcome the usual duality. Compassion brings joy and makes life meaningful, no matter where we are, with whom we are and what we are doing. Sometimes we are afraid to look at others because we are afraid to look at ourselves; we see ourselves in others. But we can be grateful because you are there and you give me the opportunity to help you.

Compassion cannot be abstract. If you say, "I love everyone except these five people," you love no one. Train your mind

in compassion, not only with patients but also among your family and with colleagues. The way we look, the way we talk, whatever we do, bring it into your daily life; don't turn it into an abstract concept.

Meditation to develop compassion

In Buddhism, we apply an antidote, which is not far from the poison itself. So you cannot meditate on compassion without recognizing your own indifference. When you have generated the mind that understands compassion, keep this mind aside and invite the mind of indifference. Then again bring in the mind of compassion. So you generate a state of mind by looking at the opposite state of mind. This is applying the antidote.



Biography Lama Michel Rinpoche

Lama Michel Rinpoche is a Buddhist master following the NgalSo Ganden Nyengyu tradition of Tibetan Buddhism, under the spiritual guidance of Lama Gangchen Tulku Rinpoche.

He was born in São Paulo, Brazil in 1981. At the age of five, he met his master Lama Gangchen Rinpoche who was visiting Brazil for the first time during a trip organized by the young child's parents. In the years that followed, they travelled to holy places in Tibet, India, Nepal and Indonesia. During this period, Lama Gangchen Rinpoche and other renowned masters recognized Lama Michel Rinpoche as a Tulku, the reincarnation of a master who had previously lived in Tibet.

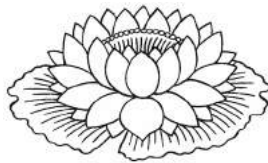
At the age of twelve, inspired by the experience of daily life with Lama Gangchen and other Tibetan Lamas, Lama Michel decided to follow their paths. He thus went to live and study at the Monastic University of Sera Me in South of India where, for the following twelve years, he received the formal education in Buddhist practices and philosophy according to the Gelupa tradition of Tibetan Buddhism. Today he continues his studies with annual visits to the Monastery of Tashi Lhumpo in Shigatse, Tibet-China.

Since 2004 he has been residing in Italy, dedicating his life to serving his Guru, Lama Gangchen Rinpoche, and generously sharing his experience and wisdom in many formal and informal situations, such as conferences, teachings, retreats, school visits and freely on social media.

Lama Michel is fully dedicated to transmitting Buddhist philosophy. His clarity, wisdom and pragmatic mind is a living expression of his profound knowledge and understanding of Buddhist tradition integrated into today's world. His teachings reveal life wisdom, gained both from direct daily contact with great Tibetan masters in spiritual retreats, pilgrimages, as well as from those to whom he dedicates his spiritual guidance.

Together with Lama Gangchen, he oversees several Buddhist centres around the world, such as the Kunpen Lama Gangchen in Milan, Italy; Albagnano Healing Meditation Centre above Lake Maggiore, Italy and the Centro de Dharma da Paz in São Paulo, Brazil.

For more information and NgalSo Livestream video teachings, visit:
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