



## Dolpo Tulku Rinpoche Teachings

### Compassion in medicine

#### 1) The role of compassion within the Buddhist philosophy

The two central points in Buddhism are wisdom and skilful means. Wisdom is the same as the knowledge we acquire through study and contemplation. Skilful means is the same as compassion.

Wisdom and compassion complement each other. If someone just has compassion but no wisdom, although they might want to help others, they would not know how. A mother, for example, will have great compassion and love for her sick child, but unless she has the appropriate medical knowledge, she cannot help.

Wisdom without compassion on the other hand can prevent someone with medical knowledge to help a sick person, because he or she doesn't feel a connection to the patient. These days we use words like self-defence to argue for the manufacturing and use of bombs and other weaponry. But no matter what terms we use, the underlying problem is that a great amount of knowledge is used devoid of compassion.

This connection between wisdom and compassion is not only important in a religious sense, but also in our everyday lives, as we can easily find out through our own experience.

#### 2) The importance of compassion within the Himalayan medical tradition

The Buddha expounded four main tantric texts on medicine, which are considered the basis for the Buddhist-Himalayan medical tradition. They list three main requirements for a doctor to be successful in treating a patient. These requirements are said to be even more important than the instruments or the medicine used during the treatment.

Generally, we think it depends mostly on the medicine whether a doctor can cure a patient or not. But from the philosophical standpoint of these tantras, the medicine is only secondary to these three points.

**The first is to generate compassion** as the underlying motivation to help the patient.

**The second is to overcome the conceptual divisions made, considering something as being clean or unclean.**

**The third is to treat everyone alike** without taking family status, wealth or social position into account. This point includes speculating on any kind of compensation the doctor might get from treating the patient.

As said before, these three points are essential for being a good doctor in the Himalayan-Tibetan medical tradition, because they mark the difference between people becoming doctors merely to gain a livelihood and those whose intention it is to benefit others.

Now we will look at these three points in more detail.

## **1) Compassion**

Compassion makes a great difference, for example, if a doctor is called to someone living far away. A doctor, who is compassionate, will first of all consider of the situation of the patient and not the hassles connected with reaching the patient's house. Compassion here would make the difference whether the patient gets treated or not.

For you here in Germany this might sound strange, but where I come from in Dolpo<sup>1</sup>, the situation is like it was in Europe more than a hundred years ago. At that time you probably also had no ambulances, but the doctor had to visit the patient at home. It is quite clear that it was vital for the patient that the doctor make the journey, no matter how difficult.

Maybe there are some doctors or other people in the medical profession listening to this talk. I am sure you feel a difference in your stress level whether you have compassion or not. When we feel compassion for the other, we are more inclined to help and whatever needs to be done feels easier to do. Without compassion, helping is harder, more tiring and the goal is to finish as quickly as possible.

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<sup>1</sup>In the north-western Himalayas of Nepal

## **2) Casting aside concepts of clean and unclean**

Again this point makes a fundamental difference in treating a patient. If a doctor is bothered by perceptions of filth, uncleanliness and so on, it will be difficult to help a patient, whose sickness brings about dealing with bodily fluids, vomit, excrement and so on. This is quite clear, I think. The less the doctor is concerned with what is clean or unclean, the more he can be of help.

## **3) Treating everyone alike**

If the doctor is concerned about what he will get in return for treating the patient, he will concentrate more on that than on giving the right treatment. Thoughts like: 'How much can the patient actually pay me? What will I get if I treat her in this or that way?', make it doubtful whether the patient will get the help she needs, if she is not wealthy enough in the doctor's eyes.

We call these three requirements 'The Three Practices of a Doctor'.

If a doctor is not trained in these three practices, he will not be able to use his knowledge efficiently to help patients. The better he is trained in them, the better he will help. Anyone who has been to a doctor or visited a hospital knows that.

When I went to the hospital a few years ago, the doctor I met took a long time to explain in detail and with care what my illness was, how I had to take the medicine and what I had to do to get better. Afterwards, I really wanted to take the medicine and trusted in his recommendations. So, just the way a medical professional talks to us is important in whether we have faith in his advice or not and whether we follow it or not. At least that is the case with me.

But if on the contrary everything is done correctly, like the physical examination and the blood test for example, but the person treating us is disengaged, we will feel uncared for and won't be able to trust his counsel fully, even though there might be nothing wrong with the medicine or the advice as such. It is just a matter of demeanour.

## **How to develop compassion**

Everyone would agree that compassion is important. The question, though, is how we can develop it. Therefore, I will introduce a method from the Buddhist teachings to do so, as this is the most effective way I know through my studies.

The key point here is to develop empathy. The more empathy we have, the easier it is to engender compassion. This is not just something that we value in a religious or spiritual sense. In our everyday life, we consider someone to be a good person if they have an understanding for the situation of others. We can also see this in families. The closer the

family members are too each other and the more understanding there is between them, the happier they will be together. If they cannot relate to each other, then problems will arise.

Compassion arises from empathy. So what kind of empathy do we need? We need the deep understanding that the other person is just like us. Everyone wants happiness and well-being and everyone wants to avoid suffering just the same way we do. This is the basis for empathy, which leads to compassion when we meet someone suffering.

Usually we only empathise with people we feel close to, like our friends, relatives and a partner, but not with others we don't know so well. As medical professionals, of course, we don't just treat our loved ones. So if we can only relate to our inner circle with compassion but not to others, we have a problem. Therefore, we also need equanimity, which means to view all people as being fundamentally equal. This is achieved by contemplating the above mentioned point - everyone wants happiness and nobody wants to suffer. In this we are all the same. Without this equanimity, we might favour people from our country, who belong to the same community or faith as we do and have a lower regard for foreigners and people who belong to another community or have another faith. If we make these kinds of differences, we cannot develop empathy for the patients.

Empathy and compassion are part of human nature. Religions are only there to explain methods how these aspects of our nature can be developed, but no religion owns them. These feelings are accessible to anyone.

Based on equanimity, we can develop empathy through the method to exchange one's own place with that of the other. When we take the perspective of the other, we contemplate that this person just wants to be happy the same way we do and doesn't want suffering, the way we do. So we imagine what it feels like for the other person when they are sick or treated harshly.

We can use this method under any circumstances, not just within the medical field. Most important are the people we deal with on a daily basis, like our colleagues, the patients we treat as doctors and our family members. For example, we can think: 'Oh, today I was really harsh with my partner. That's not good. How would I feel if someone talked to me like that?' Then we will quickly feel sorry for what we did and apologize. If we don't ponder in this way, we might actually believe we haven't been harsh enough and continue to be unkind.

Someone told me once she was secretly quite happy when her partner had a hard time because she was under the impression she was the only one to go through difficulties in their relationship. If she had really been to imagine the problems her partner was facing

and put herself in his shoes, then she would have felt more compassion and an urge to help him.

We can also use this contemplation as a kind of meditation and imagine in front of us the person whose perspective we want to take – may it be our partner, colleague, patient – whoever we have to deal with. Then we put ourselves in their shoes. The moment we gain some understanding for their situation, it'll be easy to change our behaviour towards them. This will definitely help to improve our relationships.

### **How compassion helps us physically and mentally**

These days, a lot of scientific research is being done in the field of compassion and how it affects our health. For example, researchers look into how the body cells and the brain functions change due to a training in compassion. The Buddha already described these processes by using examples, but of course not with the precision modern science provides.

A couple of years ago I had a discussion with the University of Freiburg, where they were planning to conduct some research on the benefit of developing compassion for medical professionals. A group of nurses and doctors was to learn a meditation on compassion and then to train in it for a few weeks. The idea was that if the outcome was good, a compassion training of this kind could be incorporated in the curriculum for nurse training. When I went there again last year, they showed me the results of the study. Differences in blood pressure and the heart rate were measured as well as the individual capability to deal with stress. Most people involved yielded very good results, reporting a decrease in blood pressure and feeling more empowered to deal with a difficult situation. Only a few of the participants said that nothing changed for them.

So with the use of machines it was possible to measure physical changes due to a more compassionate outlook. But we also know this by observing our own behaviour. When we are upset or angry, our breathing becomes fast and shallow and our heartbeat quickens. When we are relaxed and happy, our breathing deepens and our heartbeat slows down. This is something that is also explained in the Buddhist yoga texts.

The Buddhist texts explain compassion to be the wish to be free from suffering, whilst love is the wish for the other to be happy. Whoever feels this kind of kinship with others will immediately have a slower heart rate and feel more in tune with others. That is a natural sign of physical wellbeing that can be observed easily. When we are in a loving and caring mood, we will not get angry, be jealous or have the wish to harm someone. This is a natural occurrence and this also has an effect on our inner tension and heartbeat. So it is very clear that love and compassion are beneficial to us.

So far, I have mainly spoken about physical effects. The psychological effects of love and compassion are that we do not get worn out easily by whatever we do and we feel more inclined to help. It feels easy to do something for our family or a friend. But to do the same thing for a stranger can feel almost unbearable. This is something all of us have experienced before, I am sure. That is why it is important to train in these positive states of mind if we want to be of help to others in the field of medicine.

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