



Compassion and Skillful Means: Diverse Views, Novel Insights, and Extended Applications for Compassion Science and Training

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Abstract

Compassion science has been shaped and guided by Mahāyāna Buddhist conceptions of compassion, including the potential for compassion to be cultivated through contemplative practices and training. Despite these influences, important Buddhist perspectives and ideas about compassion are still underrepresented in the scientific literature. This Special Issue focuses on initiating a body of literature on *skillful means*, a foundational idea from Mahāyāna Buddhism pertaining to the enactment of compassion joined with wisdom. Arising from a seminal Think Tank centered around compassion and skillful means, scholars and trainers representing diverse perspectives were invited to contribute to a Special Issue introducing a variety of perspectives, insights, and approaches that may help to advance contemporary understanding, research, and training of compassion. This includes papers that examine skillful means within Buddhism and Christianity, empirical studies that draw on skillful means to motivate or frame tractable questions, theoretical papers that reflect on skillful means in relation to other topics in psychological science, and how common compassion practices may themselves serve as skillful means. Considered together, we believe the variety evident throughout this Special Issue highlights the potential of skillful means to serve as a broad and flexible concept that can inspire many new ideas and directions for the field.

Keywords Altruism · Compassion · Self-compassion · Skillful means · Theory

Compassion science is a rapidly growing field, marked by a vibrant mix of views, training initiatives, and practical applications—all rooted in the use of empirical methods to understand compassion, how to cultivate it, and its potential benefits. In this journal alone, the volume of publications with “compassion” in the title has more than doubled in the recent 5-year period from 2019 through 2023 (e.g., Andreu et al., 2022; Han & Kim, 2023; Mey et al., 2023), when compared to the preceding five years from 2014 through 2018. Amidst this variety and escalating interest in compassion, a unifying element is the central importance of alleviating suffering. Indeed, at the heart of compassion science lies an age-old question—how can we alleviate suffering most effectively? This collective focus forms an important foundation for understanding, assessing, and cultivating

compassion. It also prompts reflection on the broader aims of compassion science: To what extent is the field contributing to the alleviation of suffering in contemporary society? Who may be left out or underserved by the current scope and framing of compassion and its training? How can compassion science further enhance its beneficial impacts? When viewed in this light, compassion becomes more than a topic of scientific exploration—it can be a critical lens and driving force that informs and motivates the efforts of the scientists, trainers, clinicians, and others who make up the field. Reflecting in this way at the outset of this Special Issue on Compassion and Skillful Means, we extend our gratitude to the many contributors who reflect this compassionate ethos, and whose contributions we believe hold considerable potential to advance the beneficial aims of compassion science.

Given this backdrop, it is also important to reflect on our overall view and understanding of compassion itself. Ideally, scientific conceptualizations of compassion would be aligned with not only its essential nature, but also its potential to be cultivated and the diverse ways it can be experienced and expressed across different individuals and settings. While a variety of definitions for compassion exist

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in the scientific literature, shared elements include mental and emotional awareness of suffering alongside a commitment to taking actions that might help to alleviate it. Furthermore, compassion science commonly distinguishes compassion by its orientation (i.e., whose suffering the compassion is directed toward). Accordingly, self-compassion has become an important focus of its own, with not only fairly distinct measurement tools and studies for examining self-compassion, but also specialized training programs that emphasize compassion-based teachings and practices for alleviating one's own suffering (Quaglia et al., 2021). Yet whether studies focus on self-compassion, compassion for others, or some combination of them, most appear focused on assessing salutary personal and, less frequently, interpersonal outcomes. To date, fewer studies have centrally focused on whether and how compassion training may support and guide task performance, goal achievement, and overall reduced suffering in a broader and more complex societal context.

To consider how representative these views and approaches are within compassion science, we can compare them with other perspectives on compassion, including those found within the world's wisdom traditions. Indeed, compassion science has been strongly informed and guided by Mahāyāna Buddhism, the largest major tradition of Buddhism with roots in first millennium India. Mahāyāna Buddhism places special emphasis on wisdom and compassion as inherent capacities of human life, cultivated through meditation practices and leading to universal benefit. This appears in some contrast with foundational Buddhist teachings found in the early Pāli canon that emphasize renunciation and mindfulness. In addition, religious traditions in the west such as Christianity emphasize compassion as a divine quality that humans can emulate rather than as an inherent quality of human life that can be cultivated, foundational to Mahāyāna. Perhaps most prominently, Davidson and Harrington (2002) and Lavelle (2017) describe ways Mahāyāna Buddhism has directly informed and guided current approaches to compassion science and training. Despite such influence and correspondence between compassion as understood in Mahāyāna Buddhism and compassion science, there are also important differences. As examples, the overtly spiritual context of Buddhist compassion training views compassion as a critical factor to be cultivated on the path to enlightenment. Additionally, Mahāyāna Buddhist views more explicitly emphasize its simultaneous benefit for both oneself and others, differing from perspectives and approaches that distinguish compassion by its orientation toward oneself—what contemporary approaches call *self-compassion*.

Reflecting on differences such as these highlights a number of interesting directions for how traditional perspectives, such as those in Mahāyāna Buddhism, may further contribute to and refine the views, approaches, and priorities within contemporary compassion science and training. This

includes attention to some of the more exceptional expressions of compassion that may not be readily identifiable as compassion based on current views and studies within compassion science. For example, while compassion science and training have been shaped by Mahāyāna notions of wisdom and compassion, the third integral foundation of Mahāyāna has traditionally included skillful means as the enactment of compassion joined with wisdom. In Buddhist traditions, *skillful means* (*upāya-kauśalya* in Sanskrit; *thapla kepa* in Tibetan) refers to the diverse, incisive, and appropriate deeds that spontaneously arise in the pursuits of an awake being who has fully integrated wisdom and compassion. In classical texts, examples of skillful means included the Buddha's many intuitive teaching methods, inventive compassionate interventions, and miraculous acts to convey the true meaning of the dharma. Applied in secular settings of compassion science, we assert that skillful means can relate to a broad range of manifestations of compassion, such as compassion-based decision-making and specific enactments of compassion that may not necessarily appear compassion-based to outside observers.

This Special Issue

Originating from a Think Tank hosted by Naropa University on compassion and skillful means in April of 2020, this Special Issue aims to introduce the concept of skillful means into contemporary compassion science and training. We further hoped a diverse set of contributions to this Special Issue could suggest new norms, measures, and approaches to compassion training more broadly. The generative exchange between leading compassion researchers, scholars, and trainers in our Think Tank helped to shape and underscore the value of a number of critical questions about skillful means and compassion—questions that highlight the nuances and complexities surrounding the integration of this concept into contemporary compassion science. This included acknowledging the ways in which compassion science is currently considered “secular,” problematizing Buddhist practices and spirituality in the public square while privately appropriating them (Hsu, 2021). Accordingly, invited contributions included not only scientists, but also scholars within the humanities and meditation teachers, helping to address the need for reflection from multiple disciplines and diverse perspectives. In this context, we asked the following set of questions pertaining to the contemporary secular relevance of skillful means to compassion:

- 1) How could *skillful means* be conceptualized within secular compassion training and related research? Can we develop a precise definition of skillful means amenable to scientific investigation? What might be an accessible

description for introducing skillful means to compassion training novices? Are there any clear, intuitive examples of skillful means?

- 2) What can *skillful means* teach us about the nature and functions of compassion broadly? Might skillful means demand a more expansive view of compassion, so to include uncommon or even taboo expressions of compassion?
- 3) What are the opportunities and risks of integrating *skillful means* into secular compassion research and training? Is skillful means best thought of as a separable construct from compassion, rather than an expression of compassion per se? Regarding teaching skillful means, might it be better situated within more advanced trainings on compassion?

As is evident in the variety of contributions to this Special Issue, exploring compassion and skillful means together holds the potential to help advance compassion science in several ways. But while the three questions posed above hint at some possible directions, we were delighted to receive a wider range of contributions, including a number of empirical reports and training-related papers. Next, we discuss what we consider to be some of the most noteworthy examples, introducing and grouping the different contributions as much as possible by theme. Yet we also want to underscore the variety evident throughout, which we believe is further indication for the potential of skillful means to inform and motivate many new ideas and questions in compassion science. Considered together, the varied contributions to this Special Issue highlight how skillful means can be seen as a broad and flexible concept that motivates a variety of exciting new directions for the field—directions we hope can further enhance the beneficial impacts of compassion science.

Enriched Understanding of Skillful Means

Given our central interest in initiating a foundational literature for integrating the concept of skillful means in compassion science, this Special Issue contains contributions that elucidate and develop understanding of what skillful means is. Rather than aiming for a consensus perspective, these contributions exemplify a fascinating variety of complementary perspectives that together enrich conceptualization of this new topic for future scholarly and scientific inquiry. Articulating an early Buddhist perspective on skillful means, Anālayo (2023) surveys early references to “skill in means,” finding these references to be fairly rare and distinguishable into two types based on a practitioner’s level of accomplishment. This exploration closes with a recognition of a natural relationship between skillful means and compassion, particularly as it relates to modern adaptations of mindfulness for scientific audiences. In exploring skillful

means as it relates to modern compassion science and training, Condon and Makransky (2023) similarly emphasize the adaptation of traditional teachings for modern times, as well as for diverse practitioners. They highlight how the concept of skillful means has been previously used in the continual adaptation of Buddhist teachings and may similarly apply to adapting these teachings in modern contexts, including through the integration of theories from psychological and cognitive science.

Compared to the paucity of skillful means references in early Buddhism, Simmer-Brown (2023) begins by highlighting a strong emphasis on connecting skillful means and compassion in the Mahāyāna traditions of India and Tibet. In this context, an important clarification of the concept of skillful means emerges in which actions may only qualify as skillful when they are motivated by both compassion *and* wisdom and presents a paradigm for how to include skillful means in secular compassion training settings. Moving beyond the explicit references of skillful means in Buddhist traditions, Dreitcer (2023) explores the concept of skillful means as it relates to Christian-tradition contemplative practices invoking divine love to be emulated in contrast to the nontheistic practices of Buddhism that draw on inherent human qualities. This reveals a variety of compassion formation practices that could be meaningfully integrated into contemporary compassion training programs and highlights the potential for compassion training to source from a wider variety of contemplative traditions. Finally, Yong (2023) discusses how skillful means can be applied in structuring compassion training programs with more inclusive pedagogical interventions—qualitative, decolonial, and participatory—especially for interreligious, intercultural, and intersectional communities. This analysis uniquely addresses how compassion science and training could transform to better meet the needs of underserved or excluded populations.

Reflecting on the Nature and Functions of Compassion

The next set of contributions offer insights into how skillful means may help to expand or otherwise refine scientific understanding of compassion, whether through comparing modern conceptualizations of compassion with those found in Buddhism or by reflecting on relevant ideas and insights from other areas of psychological science. For instance, Dunne and Manheim (2023) reflect on potential incompatibilities between self-compassion as articulated in compassion science and views from Indo-Tibetan Buddhism. Interestingly, this includes consideration of self-compassion as itself a possible skillful means, uniquely suited for deficiencies in people’s aspirations toward personal well-being in the highly individualistic milieu of modern times. Chodron (2023) similarly reflects on additional ways Buddhism may help to inform and

refine contemporary compassion science, emphasizing how the abundant teachings on compassion and skillful means in Buddhism still have much to offer that could enhance understanding of what compassion is. This includes specific suggestions for applying traditional compassionate mind-training (*lojong* in Tibetan) practices to secular compassion training.

Integrating ideas and insights from other areas of psychological science, Gilbert and Van Gordon (2023) consider how evolutionary perspectives on compassion can provide unique insights into understanding and training compassion skills. By comparing evolutionary and contemplative approaches, the authors find that approaches to training compassion skills rooted in evolutionary psychology tend to emphasize thinking, reflection, and guided behaviors, whereas contemplative approaches tend toward methods of directly experiencing compassion and related self-transcendent insights such as nondual awareness. Relating more specifically to self-compassion, Cha et al. (2023) explores the need to expand the construct at multiple levels—from conceptualization and measurement to mediators and outcomes—in order to advance both theoretical and empirical research. Finally, drawing on relevant theory and findings from the Big Two literature, relating to the distinction between agency and communion, Quaglia (2023) considers how these ideas can be applied to delineating diverse expressions of compassion, including those of skillful means and “fierce compassion.” This analysis provides science-based terminology and a tractable framework for distinguishing skillful means from other, more recognizable expressions of compassion.

Integration and Application of Skillful Means

To date, compassion research has shown that those who work in various sectors of society commonly experience overwhelm and burnout, and that compassion training could help ameliorate these symptoms. Additionally, we have seen a number of exciting developments in applying compassion-based tools and practices to mental health care and treatment. While this is inspiring and much-needed work, the largest number of contributions to this Special Issue bolster the relevance and efficacy of contemporary compassion science and training to a wider range of issues within society—including some of the most pressing ethical issues of our time. We believe this highlights the relevance of skillful means for enhancing the reach of compassion science and training in service of maximizing beneficial outcomes. Indeed, these contributions demonstrate how integrating skillful means into our conceptualizations of compassion naturally increases the scope and complexity of challenges for which compassion may help to address, with applications ranging from intrapersonal to interpersonal to broader group, organizational, and societal applications.

As applied to interpersonal and group contexts, Kang et al. (2023) demonstrate how mindful attention and awareness can contribute to higher empathic accuracy—a social competency that appears critical for providing skillful care. This relationship was strongest when individuals did not share similar past experiences with those they empathized with, suggesting a possible distinct role for mindfulness in promoting skillful means. Related to the potential distinct value of mindfulness, Zheng et al. (2023) examine the contributions of either mindfulness or compassion training to prosociality toward ethnic outgroup members, finding differential improvements in either parochial empathy or prosocial behavior. Specifically, compassion training led to larger reductions in parochial empathy, whereas training in mindfulness drove greater outgroup altruism and support. Related to this broader context of intergroup prosociality, Berry et al. (2023) present an interdisciplinary framework for how mindfulness may promote such prosocial feelings and behavior. The innovative framework delineates how mindful attention influences key social cognitive processes in ways that ultimately foster intergroup prosociality.

Regarding broader organizational, work, and societal contexts, Mascaro et al. (2023) examine the relationship between compassion and linguistic patterns among chaplains in a hospital setting. Consistent with the view that compassion may promote more skillful approaches to care, findings indicated a significant relationship between compassionate capacity, constructive linguistic patterns, and beneficial outcomes for patients. Relatedly, two contributions to this Special Issue focus on the relevance of compassion and skillful means in school settings. Potvin et al. (2023) examine how a compassion training that was co-designed with educators could support more skillful caring actions in schools, including the development of new ideas for responding to suffering more effectively. Results highlighted numerous ways compassion can serve as a tool and lens for educators, such as through extending compassion in interactions with students, colleagues, and families, as well as through envisioning changes that could skillfully promote more just and compassionate schools. Another contribution examines possible mechanisms by which compassion training may support educators (Jennings & Min, 2023) through reducing empathy-based stress. In particular, through developing competency in transforming empathy-based stress into compassion, Jennings and Min (2023) suggest teachers could reduce adverse experiences of empathy that may lead to burnout, especially in the context of students exposed to trauma. Finally, as compassion applies to a broader societal context, many contributions note the enhanced value of skillful means for addressing complex social justice issues of bias, prejudice, and discrimination. Perhaps most notably, King (2023) focuses on the role of compassion and skillful means in social engagement such as what is called “engaged

Buddhism.” This international movement emphasizes strategic social actions focused on alleviating suffering, both individual and societal, due to complex political, environmental, and social factors.

Of course, applying compassion and compassion training to these varied contexts depends on skillful pedagogy of compassion itself. Regarding the cultivation of self-compassion, Reilly and Stuyvenberg (2023) meta-analyze literature on how lovingkindness meditation can impact the development of self-compassion, finding evidence across seven studies that such practice was indeed effective at cultivating self-compassion. Yet even in the context of effective approaches to compassion training, difficulties may arise. Accordingly, Marx (2023) speaks to obstacles and resistances that may arise in the context of kindness and compassion practices, particularly when reflecting on compassion for those who have perpetuated profoundly unethical actions and harms. Given this context, Marx (2023) emphasizes the key role of intentions in the skillful training of compassion, focusing foremost on the cultivation of good will over the generation of good feelings, since good feelings may not always arise during practice. Finally, Wilson-Mendenhall et al. (2023) highlight a potential mechanistic pathway by which compassion training may lead to prosocial actions—episodic simulation. Specifically, the important role of visualization and imagery in compassion practices may shape prosocial perception and behavior in the midst of daily life, explaining in part how compassion training can catalyze real-world social benefits.

An Opportune Moment

The growing scientific interest in compassion and its training presents numerous parallels to the study and secularization of mindfulness. On the positive side, there have been great strides in making compassion more accessible and applicable to diverse contemporary audiences, similar to the spread of mindfulness training in myriad forms and for a variety of purposes. On the other hand, compassion science appears equally at risk for potential misinterpretations, oversimplifications, or superficial applications of compassion. Thus, as with the science of mindfulness, there is value in revisiting foundational assumptions of the field—what compassion is in the fullest sense, how it can best be trained and developed, and how can we further extend and strengthen its beneficial potential for all members of society. Starting with our Think Tank in 2020 at Naropa University, and continuing through this Special Issue, we have held the view that now is an opportune moment to begin integrating the concept of skillful means into compassion science, something we believe can help to advance the field on multiple fronts. Foremost, the contributions to this topic from numerous scientists,

scholars, and trainers to this Special Issue have articulated a more complex, comprehensive, and nuanced understanding of compassion. This includes both theoretical and empirical papers that not only aid compassion science generally, but also begin to lay a foundation of research for future work on skillful means more specifically. These contributions have led to novel insights about compassion and its training that we believe have implications for measurement and training of compassion, thereby informing researchers and trainers alike. Finally, we see numerous examples of how skillful means may strengthen and expand the integrations and applications of compassion, further aligning contemporary compassion science and training with the overarching aim of compassion itself—alleviating suffering. Given its clear relevance to understanding how to most effectively alleviate suffering, we close with a call for greater attention to skillful means in future research on compassion.

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Declarations

Conflict of Interest The authors declare no competing interests.

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