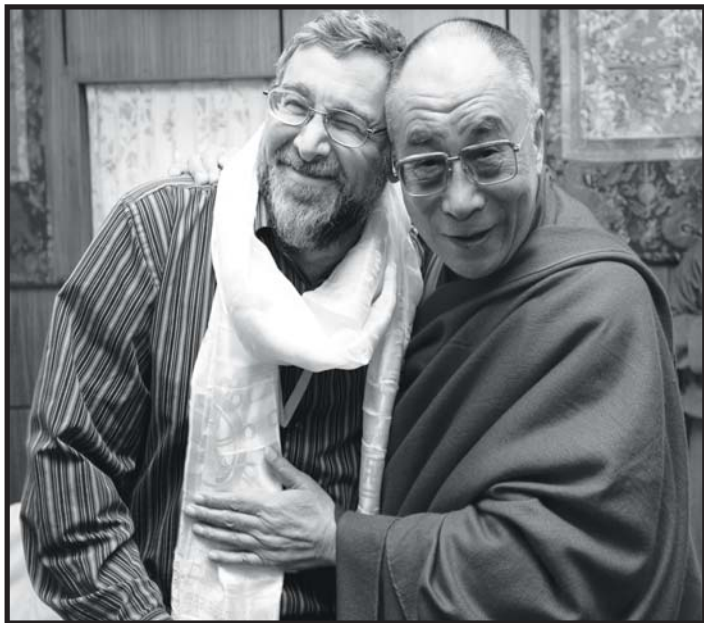


# Studying Compassion



Cliff Saron and Dalai Lama

## with the Dalai Lama

by Clifford Saron, PhD\*

Nearly 20 years ago, in a crowded Boston hotel lobby filled with psycho physiologists, I ran into a close colleague and friend, Dr. Richard Davidson. In a matter of weeks he was due to travel to the foothills of the Himalayas to present results of our research directly to His Holiness the Dalai Lama at a small, intimate private conference. However, due to a sudden family illness he would have to miss this exciting opportunity, and he asked if I'd be able to go in his place. Three weeks later I was in the Dalai Lama's living room in MacLeod Ganj, India engaging His Holiness in a 2½ hour discussion of our research about emotional states, brain function and health. Although my current work revolves around similar themes, life has not been the same since that trip two decades ago.

I had the happy privilege of talking to the Dalai Lama again earlier this year in a similar conference sponsored by the Mind and Life Institute ([www.mindandlife.org](http://www.mindandlife.org))

in which I presented findings from The Shamatha Project, a large unprecedented study of the effects of intensive meditation on brain processes, emotion regulation, psychosocial functioning, and health-related biomarkers. My conversations with His Holiness have been unlike any others. Spacious listening, focused attention, and rigorous critical regard characterized his response to every sentence I spoke. His underlying kindness was unbroken when pointing out a potential experimental confound

or challenging an assumption of the work. Most important was capacity as a collaborative listener to hold a thought, examine it from multiple points of view, and either accept it as part of the incremental unfolding of the story or come back with a question or critique that it had sparked.

When I first met the Dalai Lama I did not know that his infectious compassion would set the tone of a good part of my research for the next two decades. And when I met him again earlier this year, I did not know that the interaction would teach me yet another lesson about compassion.

During my 1990 stay in MacLeod Ganj, I had the good fortune to have as a roommate the late Dr. Francisco Varela, the intellectual father of the Mind and Life dialogues between Buddhist and Western scholars. One night, as we talked late in the darkness within our guesthouse Francisco said "we're two old EEGer's - we should do something" to investigate the effects of Tibetan Buddhist mental train-

ing of these special monks who are living in retreat in the surrounding hills. The following morning, we approached Dr. Alan Wallace, a former monk, Buddhist scholar and meditation teacher, who lived for 14 years as one of those yogis and was serving as co-translator of the meeting with the Dalai Lama. He immediately signed on and has remained a collaborator ever since. Richie Davidson and several other scientific and Buddhist scholar colleagues joined in as well.

Our task was clear, or so we thought. We had to find senior practitioner-experts, negotiate with them some common grounds for collaboration, and design experiments that would maximally reveal the effects of contemplative mental training. The Dalai Lama provided us unprecedented access to experienced meditators in retreat within hand-made mud-packed stone huts on nearby Bhagsu Mountain. In 1992, with the support of The Fetzer and Mind and Life Institutes, we hiked up the mountain to engage in life-changing interactions with advanced practitioners. We asked the monks to provide insights both from the formal teachings of their tradition and from their own direct experience of meditative practice to help shape the design of experiments on attention, visualization, linguistic processing, and emotional resilience.

Somewhat surprising to us scientists, what mattered the most to our collaborator monks was whether our study was altruistically motivated. Would the outcome of the study be of benefit to others such that it would help to attenuate suffering? We articulated our own conviction that, if it proved possible to demonstrate that attentional skills and positive qualities such as compassion and kindness could be trained, there would be significant potential benefits for healing and education in the Western world. Not so surprising in retrospect, compassion became the most salient recurring theme in our conversations. One of the monks described compassion as being a state "beyond sadness," in which the heart is filled with a desire to help those suffering. In compassion, he explained, the sight

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Cliff Saron and Dalai Lama April 2009 at the Mind and Life meeting

or contemplation of suffering moves one to action. Sadness can often serve as a catalyst for the arising of compassion. We learned that a compassionate response to others' suffering implies a genuine concern for others, but also an absence of personal distress, which can shift the focus away from others' suffering toward one's own distress. Rather than sympathetic despair for the plight of others or oneself, which is seldom helpful, genuine compassion involves commitment to creative and skillful action in accordance with the deepest and broadest understanding of the causes and conditions of the present situation.

That trip to India left us changed by our encounter with extraordinary individuals wholly committed to a life of contemplative practice. We had many questions, such as: Were the monks we met exceptional from the start, or is it possible for one to "train" individuals in compassion? Is it possible to compassionately regard the plight of loved ones and strangers with the same depth? From a Buddhist point of view, the answer is yes to both questions. Through a philosophical and contemplative understanding of the interdependence and impermanence of all phenomena, particularly one's mental states, and a rich meditation tradition emphasizing cultivation of qualities such as mindfulness, attentional stability and flexibility, loving kindness, compassion, empathetic joy, and equanimity, the Buddhist path offers many ways of self-discovery of human capacity. Happily for scientists, some of those ways can be studied empirically, something I

Family Foundation and many others, we had 30 participants undergo 3 months of intensive meditation training and a wait-list control group of 30 others who later underwent identical training. Retreatants lived in the Shambhala Mountain Center, Red Feather Lakes, Colorado, for 3 months and received instructions from Dr. Alan Wallace in practices designed to promote relaxation, attentional stability and vividness, and complementary practices to develop compassion and kindness toward others. We collected extensive longitudinal qualitative and quantitative psychological, perception-, attention-, and emotion-related behavioral and physiological data at pre-, mid-, and post-training.

I will mention only a couple of examples of our findings here relevant to compassion. We found that participants' self-reported self-compassion improved over the course of training. Participants also reported improvements in their capacities of perspective taking and empathic concern for others and reduction in personal distress related to empathizing with others. To assess participants' emotional responses to suffering, we showed them film footage from a recent war, depicting both the perpetrators and victims of violent acts. Currently, we are conducting detailed analyses of participants' facial expressions in response to these scenes. Initial analyses indicate that the retreat group showed increased spontaneous expression of sadness compared to the control group. Within the retreat group, in response to specific scenes of civilian casualties, those who had engaged in more

have been doing with my collaborators on The Shamatha Project. Our results so far suggest that it may indeed be possible to become more compassionate with training. With support from the Fetzer Institute, Hershey

compassion meditation did not show emotions that would typically be interpreted as distancing themselves from others. To test whether increased compassion practice supported these differences, we are currently conducting similar analyses from data obtained at the beginning of the retreat. The rich dataset of the Shamatha Project is allowing us to not only answer our original research questions but also generate new hypotheses and test them. For example, to further assess compassion, we are planning to examine how cultivation of "non-attachment" or release from mental fixations during the course of a retreat relates to the growth of compassion during training as indexed by electrophysiological and emotion-related behavioral changes. Such work is important because compassion requires going beyond personal distress in the face of suffering, and non-attachment allows one to be released from one's own distress.

Finally, compassion is not only an individual-level phenomenon. I learned another aspect of compassion when I presented some of the findings of the Shamatha Project to the Dalai Lama last April. At the end of my presentation, I asked him how we, Westerners, can effectively encourage secular individuals in our societies to engage in contemplative practices that cultivate positive qualities such as compassion without recourse to Buddhist metaphysics that often accompanies such practices in Buddhist contexts. He brilliantly threw the ball in the court of Western scientists. Through a rigorous investigation of compassion using state-of-the-art scientific methodology, he reminded us, we are instilling the value of compassion in the society at large. Up until that point, I had thought of compassion as an immediate response to one's own or other's suffering, not as a systemic solution to suffering of individuals in the system. As I pursue our ongoing research and make plans for future studies on compassion, I often think of the Dalai Lama's highly affirming and encouraging comment about compassionate research. ☸

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