

Training in Compassion: Zen Teachings on the
Practice of Loiona by Norman Fischer

...The training suggested in this second point of mind training is the cultivation of all three of these capacities: empathy, sympathy, and compassion. The technical term for this training in Mahayana Buddhism is development of bodhicitta, which means, literally, the impulse or desire for spiritual awakening. This doesn't sound much like compassion or sympathy. Yet implicit in the Mahayana Buddhist understanding of spiritual awakening is the thought that spiritual awakening means awakening to a heartfelt concern for others, since any selfish effort, even with a goal of wisdom or enlightenment for one's self, would never lead to real awakening; it would always lead to more narrowness. Spiritual awakening is exactly dropping the sense of one's narrow separateness; it is essentially and profoundly altruistic. So cultivating bodhicitta means cultivating true and heartfelt concern for others in a way that is not clingy or arrogant but is based on the accurate wisdom that none of us is alone, we all need each other and are closely related to each other. As they say in Japanese Zen, "We all belong to the same nose hole society."

In our culture, intelligence and caring seem to be quite different from each other. A highly intelligent person may often be a little arrogant or abstract; a deeply feeling person may appear to be a fuzzy thinker. But in Buddhist thought true intelligence and real caring always go together. They are like the two wings of a noble bird that must be activated together in flight, in perfect harmony and rhythm. Buddhism assumes that true intelligence and true altruism always merge.

To be sure, Western culture and religion also value empathy, sympathy, and compassion, as all human beings do, but we do not link these feelings to intelligence and we have no concept that one could train in them. We take it for granted that we will be capable of caring or we won't, depending on our personal character and upbringing, and that if we are not capable of it now, perhaps we will at some point in our lives be inspired or turned around by something that happens to us, or by a person who influences us, and will suddenly see the light. While Buddhism certainly appreciates such possibilities, it adds to them the sense that the impulse to altruism if absent can be encouraged to appear, and if present, can be extended and strengthened with training....

Bodhicitta is the feeling of love based on the deep recognition that what we call "self" and what we call "others" are designations, concepts, habits of mind, not realities of the world. Real altruism isn't self-sacrifice for the benefit of others, a guilt driven sense that we should be good, we should be nice, we should be kind. It is the profound recognition that self and other are not fundamentally different, only apparently different. Because of this the range of activity and feeling of bodhicitta is much wider than we would expect. A whole world of altruism and its effects opens up before us. We now see that the only way that we could love ourselves is by loving others, and the only way that we could truly love others is to love ourselves. The difference between self-love and love of others is very small, once we really understand. Taking this truth into our hearts and actions is truly life changing....

Absolute bodhicitta is absolute love, love that's bigger than any emotion, bigger than any object, so big that there is no lover and no beloved (the two merge into one under absolute love's force). Love that amounts to a total vision of life as love itself. Within such love there can be no loss, because this love is so big it includes everything—even absence—so that nothing can ever be lost. Absolute bodhicitta is the empty, perfect, expansive, joyful, spacious nature of existence itself. Nor is it something that we have added on to existence. It's always been there in life, as life; it's always been the nature of how things are. Love has been there all along, but we've been so convinced by our smallness that we have failed to look around and notice it. Maybe we could

say that absolute bodhicitta is like God, who is always present everywhere, even in absence, and that our awakening to absolute bodhicitta is our coming to know that there is nothing but God and there never was anything but God and there never will be anything but God, and that everything is always held and always has been held, and that we are always loved and have always been loved and so has everything and everyone always been loved.

In contrast to this exalted state and exalted view, relative bodhicitta involves our doing a bit of work. Relative bodhicitta is when I roll up my sleeves and get on with the business of actually loving somebody. Relative bodhicitta is when I try to do something, to help somehow, to offer encouragement, support, food, clothing, better laws, improved political systems, and so on. With relative bodhicitta we make efforts that we are successful at or unsuccessful at, we suffer losses and cry over those losses, our hearts are broken and we grieve, or we take delight in our own delight and the delight of others. With relative bodhicitta we try to defend our friends and help people in need. There is no end to the work demanded by relative bodhicitta. Sometimes we take on very big projects that cause us to make a big effort for years, maybe decades or a lifetime. But relative bodhicitta is a project without end, so that when we are successful at one small part of the job, we are happy but don't have unrealistic expectations: tomorrow we will have to start all over again with the business of helping, of righting wrongs, of healing the sick, mending broken hearts.

You may be feeling exhausted just hearing about relative bodhicitta, but actually relative bodhicitta is the antidote to fatigue because it is built on a foundation of absolute bodhicitta. If relative bodhicitta is an endless task, absolute bodhicitta is the endless peace that underlies that endless task. So it's okay. In Zen we frequently chant four vows, the first of which is "Beings are numberless, I vow to save them." What a commitment! Who in their right mind would make such a vow? And yet people who come to Zen centers routinely chant this vow after every lecture, even the first lecture they attend. Maybe they do not notice what they are saying. On one hand, the vow seems like another extravagant and paradoxical Zen expression. Not really. The vow is quite sensible when you think about it: endless need matched perfectly by endless love, endless caring—and this is not something we have to somehow laboriously produce: it is already what we are and how the world works.

Relative bodhicitta: we try hard to help in a practical way, with real feeling.

Absolute bodhicitta: but we don't really need to worry about it, because even if our helping doesn't do any good, it's still okay because of the big love that's everywhere and that heals anyway, no matter what we do, so we can drop the desperate idea that everything is up to us. Everything is up to us, but the big us, not the little us, and the big us can take care of it all because it is already taken care of. And because of this, we can love, and we can do our best to help, and we can work really hard, but without having to be burned up by our concern.

So absolute and relative bodhicitta depend on each other as two sides of a coin. Without absolute bodhicitta, relative bodhicitta will become forced and we will become angry and worn out with all of our caring and all of our helping; we can even become furious with the very people we are helping. "Look at all the help I've given you, how come you haven't improved one bit? What's the matter with you? How come you are not grateful? Where is my reward, my prize? At least the smile I was expecting, where's that?" So, helping can become really exhausting and disappointing. That's why we need absolute bodhicitta to sustain us.

And without relative bodhicitta, absolute bodhicitta becomes a kind of grand abstraction, a big, lofty religious idea with no substance to it. What good is a really big love if it never gets applied

in the world? What good is a big love if we never love anyone, if we never support anyone? And when we do love someone, when we do support someone, we become awakened, thanks to that person or those people. We become liberated from the dream of self-clinging. We become truly and lastingly happy.