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Wisdom and compassion: A new perspective on the science of relationships

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ABSTRACT

In psychological science, mindfulness and compassion are thought to promote physical health, mental well-being and even virtuous character. Yet in Buddhist philosophy, mindfulness and compassion can cause suffering when the two are not balanced. One key mechanism of mindfulness is 'dereification,' which amounts to experiencing one's thoughts just as thoughts and not as real representations of the world. If one focuses solely on thoughts as unreal representations, one can simply dismiss all such activity, leading to apathy. Compassion can be problematic if one gets caught up in other-cherishing and if others' aspirations and needs fail to align with those that one has imposed upon others. In this article, we review how the integration of mindfulness and compassion yields a novel framework to examine flourishing. As a case study, we apply these insights to the science of relationships, which leads to a re-conceptualization of 'individual' flourishing.

KEYWORDS

Mindfulness; compassion; flourishing; relationships

Mindfulness and compassion are hot topics in psychology, health and moral education. In Western psychology, mindfulness and compassion are thought to promote physical health, mental well-being and even moral character. Over the past decade, scientific evidence showed that mindfulness- and compassion-based meditation practices yield many personal health benefits, including reduced mental-health symptoms such as anxiety and depression (Hofmann, Sawyer, Witt, & Oh, 2010) and improved physical health (Carlson, Speca, Patel, & Goodey, 2003; Jacobs et al., 2011). In recent years, researchers have extended the study of meditation to the realm of social and moral decision-making. Studies show that even just a few weeks of meditation training increases actions that favor equitable distribution of resources (Weng et al., 2013) and people's willingness to help others in need (Condon, Desbordes, Miller, & DeSteno, 2013). Inspired by these findings, many institutions in the private and public sectors are now implementing secular meditation-based programs with aspirations to improve outcomes in education, health care, criminal justice and intergroup relations.

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Yet careful critics have noted that the application of meditation programs has outpaced the research that attests to their efficacy across domains and leaves many questions unsolved (e.g., Van Dam et al., 2018). Of greatest importance for our article, isolated efforts have examined the benefits of mindfulness practice, while separate efforts examined the benefits of compassion practice, but Indo-Tibetan Buddhist sources suggest that mindfulness and compassion can pose specific dangers when the two are not integrated (Dunne, 1996; Klein, 1989). In brief, mindfulness alone is not sufficient for flourishing, and compassion alone is not sufficient for flourishing. In this article, we describe a perspective from Buddhist philosophy, in which the highest form of human flourishing is derived from integrating mindfulness and compassion. We describe the function of each, the dangers of each, and discuss their importance with respect to flourishing. Finally, we illustrate how this framework offers new insight for a science of flourishing with a particular focus on close relationships.

Turning to Buddhist sources

Two overall reasons motivate our use of Buddhist sources to understand flourishing in relationships. The first concerns the process of advancing a discipline's theoretical understanding in any area. In brief, that process is often greatly enhanced by bringing in a perspective that does not share the core assumptions of that discipline. The idea here is not that this fresh perspective replaces the discipline's own account; rather, simply by offering a plausible theory about the issues at hand, that fresh perspective can help the discipline see its own assumptions while also gaining creative insights into new ways of approaching the issues at hand. In several ways, Buddhist sources can offer this type of fresh perspective to psychology in general, and to flourishing within relationships in particular. Buddhist sources represent thousands of years of intense, rigorous debate about the nature of flourishing, the psychology of human cognition and emotion, and the intersubjective world that humans occupy. In various areas, these sources often articulate theoretical accounts that are sufficiently plausible to warrant attention, and since Buddhist sources rely on assumptions that diverge—sometimes radically—from those of psychology, these accounts offer fresh perspectives that can offer useful insights for advancing our understanding. In more specific terms, our use of Buddhist sources is also motivated by the role that Buddhist practices and Buddhist theoretical accounts have played in recent work in the areas of compassion and mindfulness. Most applications of mindfulness and compassion training are explicitly based in part on Buddhist practices, such as Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR; Kabat-Zinn, 2011) and Cognitive-Based Compassion Training (Pace et al., 2009). Buddhist sources are valuable in that they can help us understand the specific features of mindfulness and compassion training, their use, degree of alignment or misalignment with tradition, and potential avenues for further scientific inquiry (Dunne, 2015).

The Indo-Tibetan integration of wisdom and compassion

According to Buddhist philosophy, the mind engages in a fundamental distortion, or *delusion*, in which it constructs a personal identity as an autonomous self that persists through time and acts as a controller of the mind/body system (e.g., Bodhi, 2011; Dambrun & Ricard, 2011; Dunne, 2004). The belief in this type of self is seen as a constant source of suffering. Competing Buddhist theories thus prescribe a variety of contemplative practices

for a practitioner to investigate patterns of experience for the purpose of deconstructing the self. For many Buddhist approaches, progress occurs with the insight (Skt: *vipaśyanā*) that the self is a construction of simpler elements.

In various ways, Buddhist philosophers point to the painful nature of experiencing oneself as an autonomous, independent agent and they promote the benefits—and the philosophical coherence—of experiencing oneself as a contingent person embedded in multiple, overlapping contexts. They likewise propose an array of contemplative practices integrated with philosophy that seeks to lead practitioners to the maximal state of flourishing embodied by an 'Awakened One' or Buddha.

Two key virtues characterize a Buddha: wisdom and compassion. Wisdom consists in 'seeing things as they are' (Skt., *yathābhūtadarśana*). As an ordinary being, one is said to be caught in the grips of 'ignorance' (Skt. *avidyā*), whereby one is deluded about the nature of reality, especially the nature of one's own identity (Gethin, 1998; Williams, 2008). By cultivating wisdom, an ordinary being can come to see that one's sense of autonomous agency and independence are illusory, and the full development of this realization leads to the endpoint that is Buddhahood. Compassion is a form of engagement with the world that is focused entirely on relieving others' suffering and ensuring their happiness. In an instrumental way, compassion can be understood as a means to obtain wisdom, inasmuch as a compassionate attitude provides an affective framework that reduces the self-focused behavioral modalities of the ordinary being. By lessening self-focus, compassion creates a psychological context that more readily allows one to let go of the essentialized sense of autonomous identity that is the product of ignorance. Moving beyond such instrumental purposes, however, compassion also provides a new way to constitute one's lifeworld. That is, from the Buddhist perspective the ordinary world of suffering is produced by self-focused beings whose narrow and contradictory interests collide in the conflict and strife that characterizes the world of ignorance. In contrast, as Buddhist practitioners develop, it is said that they constitute new worlds that are other-focused where beings flourish through their shared goals and unbiased, other-regarding attitudes. Eventually, the endpoint of the Buddhist practitioner's development is Buddhahood itself, where both wisdom and compassion have reached their culmination (Makransky, 1997; Śāntideva, 2008; Williams, 2008).

All Buddhist traditions provide various practices and philosophical analyses that are meant to lead one sequentially toward full-blown wisdom and compassion. One small but crucial step toward wisdom, for example, occurs when one experiences one's own thoughts as contingent mental events, rather than true representations of the world—what we unpack below under the rubric of 'dereification'—a core feature of the Indo-Tibetan practices of Mahāmudrā and Dzogchen (traditions that turn out to be influential in the development of modern mindfulness; see Dunne, 2015). Similarly, a small step toward full-blown compassion occurs just by virtue of focusing on the needs of another, rather than one's own. This attitude of 'other-cherishing' (Tib., *gzhan gces 'dzin*) supplants the 'self-cherishing' (*rang gces 'dzin*) that predominantly drives the behavior of a being caught in the illusion of ignorance (Dalai Lama, 2003; Dunne, 2015; Gźon nu rgyal mchog & Dkon mchog rgyal mtshan, 2006).

Here, the most relevant Buddhist traditions make four theoretical claims that are especially relevant. The first is that ordinary beings already possess the core constituents of Buddhahood. Thus, becoming a Buddha—the state of maximal flourishing—does not require one to construct or acquire new virtues; instead, one cultivates core human capacities that are already present, if sometimes only to a slight degree, in all humans. The important

implication is that dereification and other-cherishing can be understood as dispositions that are already present in varying degrees in humans (Dunne, 2011, 2015; Ruegg, 1989).

A second theoretical claim is that the greater one's wisdom and compassion, the more one will experience flourishing. This increased flourishing expresses itself as an ever-greater tendency toward virtuous mental states and behaviors such as kindness and generosity and a decrease in negative mental states and behavior such as hatred and harm (dBaṅ-phyug-rdo-rje, 2009; Patrul Rinpoche, 2010). As these examples suggest, the primary context in which virtue emerges is interpersonal relationships. As the influential Buddhist author Śāntideva says, 'It is on the basis of other sentient beings that one achieves Awakening' (Śāntideva, 2008). In other words, the field of interpersonal relationships is where the virtues that become Buddhahood are primarily expressed, and it is also where they are primarily developed. Based on this claim, we hypothesize that persons with higher dispositional dereification and other-cherishing will exhibit a higher degree of flourishing, and that this flourishing will express itself especially in interpersonal relationships.

A third important claim for these Buddhist traditions bears on the issue of intentionality: specifically, a mental, physical or vocal act is not determined to be virtuous on the basis of the *content* of the intention (*cetanā*) that drives it, but rather by the psychological context within which that intention arises (Goodman, 2014; Heim, 2013; Keown, 2001). For example, on the Buddhist analysis of a deliberate physical action in the act of giving alms to a beggar, the immediate content of that act's intention is to move one's body in such a way that the beggar receives the gift. This intention to act physically might occur in a mind predominated by other-cherishing, such that one sincerely seeks to aid the beggar with alms. But the same act could occur (and famously, in Buddhist examples, does occur) in a mind that is predominated by self-cherishing, such that one is focused on how good a person one is when giving alms (Patrul Rinpoche, 2010; Śāntideva, 2008). On this model of virtue and non-virtue, the issue of intention can thus be sidestepped by focusing primarily on the intention's psychological context. Is the mind dominated by the delusion of autonomy and independence, or is it occurring with a sense of self that is socially embedded and contextual? Is the mind suffused with other-cherishing, or is it caught in the self-focus that comes of self-cherishing?

Finally, a fourth crucial claim from these Buddhist traditions is that wisdom and compassion must be balanced; otherwise, they will not contribute to flourishing. The many discourses on the dangers of wisdom without compassion point to a basic problem: apathy. In the case of dereification as an aspect of wisdom, if one focuses uniquely on the way in which one's thoughts and imaginings are unreal representations, one can simply dismiss all such activity—even kind thoughts about others—as pointless. And if one is caught up entirely in other-cherishing that is untempered by wisdom, then one can suffer greatly when others' aspirations and needs fail to align with those that one has imposed upon them in one's own mind. Here, what comes to mind is the modern example of parents who sincerely wish for their child to succeed, but only in terms of their own imagined model of success. Much suffering can come from this inability to 'dereify' that model and experience it as a contingent representation (dBaṅ-phyug-rdo-rje, 2009).[1]

Buddhist contributions to the science of close relationships

The Buddhist framework of wisdom and compassion presents the opportunity to explore current assumptions, develop novel hypotheses and advance the science of close relationships and flourishing. In the remainder of this article, in the interest of brevity, we focus our discussion on romantic relationships, but the implications are applicable to other settings where virtues impact the trajectory of human bonding and cooperation (e.g., parent–child, co-workers, friendships, etc.). One might find it ironic to apply Buddhist theory to romantic relationships, given that Buddhist practice has little concern with romance. Nevertheless, we believe romantic relationships are worthy foci for three reasons. First, romantic relationships are the iconic relationship in Western culture and central to many people's lives. Second, in that cultural context, romantic relationships are instrumental to health and flourishing (Cohen, 2004; Pietromonaco, Uchino, & Schetter, 2013). People who lack social ties or social integration suffer from higher rates of diseases, including cardiovascular disease and cancer (Holt-Lunstad, Smith, & Layton, 2010). Thus, close relationships are an important source of protection and support in everyday life (Feeney & Collins, 2015). Third, people in relationships inevitably experience conflict, which offers a readily available context where wisdom and compassion, or the lack thereof, have the potential to play out over time and impact health and flourishing. Wisdom and compassion might function as a protective balm, serving to strengthen and preserve relationships in times of adversity.

Prominent extant theories in relationship science focus on aspects of compassion as critical to the health of a relationship, including validation and care for the other. Yet in ways these existing theories contradict the Buddhist prescription for compassion. In what follows, we focus on two contradicting theories within relationship science about the means to realize compassion in relationships: self-verification and self-enhancement. In juxtaposition to the Buddhist theory of no self—which we discuss in the following section—these two theories on self-processes in the context of relationships appear problematic. We discuss how the Buddhist integration of wisdom and compassion offers an alternative solution to this paradox.

The paradox of self-verification and self-enhancement

According to predominant perspectives in relationship science, relationships are satisfying and healthy when one's partner cares for, understands and validates *the core self* (Reis & Clark, 2013; Reis & Gable, 2015). Here, the core self refers to 'the defining features of the self—in other words, the needs, goals, values, traits, abilities, attributes and affects that best describe who one is and what is important to the self' (p. 11, Reis, 2007). Confirming this view, empirical findings show that people are attracted to others who verify or confirm one's own self-concept, including traits, skills, attitudes and so on, even if those views are negative (Letzring & Noftle, 2010; Swann, De La Ronde, & Hixon, 1994). People value those who provide verifying feedback about positive and negative information because such feedback provides a sense of coherence about the self and a sense of control and predictability—a phenomenon called *self-verification* (Swann & Bosson, 2010). In a notable empirical example of this phenomenon, married couples completed a series of questionnaires about attributes of themselves in which each person reported on their own qualities such as physical attractiveness, intelligence, social skills, athletic ability and artistic ability (Swann et al., 1994).

Each person then rated the partner on the same questionnaires. As expected, people with positive views of themselves indicated greater commitment to the relationships when the partner confirmed those positive views. However, people with negative views of themselves indicated greater commitment to the relationship when their partner confirmed those negative views. Similar patterns have been replicated across laboratories, demonstrating that self-verification processes predict marital satisfaction and divorce (Cast & Burke, 2002). Processes that validate and support the sense of a core self thus appear critical to long-term relationships. Nevertheless, this emphasis on a coherent, core self directly contrasts the Buddhist framework, which we explore in detail in the next section.

A second prominent perspective in relationship science suggests that relationship quality flourishes when partners have exalted views of each other—a phenomenon called *positive illusions* (Murray, Holmes, & Griffin, 1996). The theory of positive illusions states that people have a fundamental desire for self-enhancement, and relationships flourish when a partner sees positive qualities that the other does not see in him or herself. This desire for self-enhancement is in direct contrast to the desire for self-verification, where people prefer to receive confirming information in accordance with one's own views on the self, even if negative. In a highly cited empirical demonstration of this process, married and dating couples rated themselves and their partners on a variety of interpersonal traits and attributes, including virtues, faults and social skills (Murray et al., 1996). Results indicated that people's impressions of their partners tended to reflect a mirror of their own self-images and ideal partner—as opposed to accurate reflections of the other's self-image. Moreover, people tended to see their partners in more positive light than the others viewed themselves, and this pattern predicted relationship satisfaction. In short, people report greater happiness in their relationship when they idealized their partner, and when their partner idealized them. Positive illusions about the self have also been associated with positive outcomes in contexts beyond romantic relationships, inspiring a sense of hope and persistence in the face of difficult circumstances, and potentially improving health outcomes (Taylor & Brown, 1988, 1994; Taylor, Kemeny, Reed, Bower, & Gruenewald, 2000).

Scholars have highlighted various dangers of positive illusions and self-enhancement. The most obvious problem with positive illusions lies in the unrealistic optimism and sense of control that it promotes (Colvin & Block, 1994; Colvin, Block, & Funder, 1995). For example, scholars have documented the severe financial consequences associated with overconfidence and unrealistic optimism in various settings, such as starting a new business, predicting the stock market and starting wars (Makridakis & Moleskis, 2015). In close relationships, positive illusions can be damaging if they promote forgiveness and maintenance of an abusive relationship (cf., McNulty & Fincham, 2012), or if they promote conflict when a partner violates a particular positive illusion that the other holds. Thus, as with self-verification, positive illusions appear to involve a distortion of reality that is contradictory to the Buddhist emphasis on no self and the causes of suffering. We propose that the integration of wisdom and compassion resolves this paradox by deconstructing the illusory self while simultaneously contributing to a sense of coherence and meaning through relationships.

Resolving the paradox: deconstructing and reconstructing the self

In Buddhism, the notion of an enduring, autonomous self is the root cause of suffering and dissatisfaction with life (Gethin, 1998). In the context of close relationships, this account

would predict that efforts to bolster a core self—either through self-verification or self-enhancement—would inevitably fail and promote dissatisfaction precisely because no core self exists. According to this view, the mind engages in a fundamental distortion, or *delusion*, in which it constructs a personal identity as an autonomous self that persists through time and acts as a controller of the mind/body system (e.g., Bodhi, 2011; Dambrun & Ricard, 2011; Dunne, 2004). One cannot find an unchanging, isolated self amidst the fleeting components of body and mind. Rather, the sense of an autonomous, stable self is a construction that emerges from elements of the body and mind (including physical components at the atomic level, sensations, various affective and cognitive features and thoughts). As long as that sense of self is not recognized to be a construction synthesized from these basic constituents, situations and experiences are interpreted in a way that supports the impression of that unchanging self. Likewise, with that sense of an unchanging, autonomous sense of self in place, a basic framework for behavior emerges that focuses on ensuring that self's survival and flourishing, primarily by seeking pleasure and avoiding pain. However, since there is actually no such autonomous and unchanging self, the attempts to bring it pleasure and protect it from pain are inevitably frustrated. And since there is no such self, cognition is constantly distorted by the interpretation of the world and other persons in terms of an approach/avoidance framework organized around that delusory sense of self (Gethin, 1998). The notion of self-enhancement and self-verification both appear to be synonymous with the Buddhist notion of self-clinging. Both involve interpreting situations and experiences in a way that bolsters a sense of self, ultimately seeking to acquire things deemed pleasurable for the self and to avoid things distressing to the self.

The integration of wisdom and compassion addresses the paradox of self in close relationships. While Buddhist theorists reject the existence of an autonomous, essentialized self, they affirm the notion of a relative, intersubjective sense of self that provides a coherent sense of identity for organizing thought and direct action. Buddhist theories thus prescribe practices and rituals that aim to promote a self that can interact coherently in the world while eliminating the delusion of an autonomous self. Here, wisdom serves the function of deconstructing the perception of an autonomous, enduring self and compassion serves the function of reconstructing the perceptions of a self that is impermanent and is co-emergent in relations with others.

Through dereification, one can retain the recognition that the self is a construction—a dynamic set of representations that is influenced by and embedded in one's social relationships and culture. These representations are ultimately a story, or a fiction (Swann & Buhrmester, 2012) that aids in the navigation of the world and one's relationships, supporting a sense of coherence (Mead, 1934). In a romantic relationship, people maintain stories about the self and others. Wisdom supports the perception that one's stories about self and other are dynamic constructions that represent only a limited aspect of reality. The story that one holds about another—the traits, attributes, values—ultimately represents only a limited aspect of the other's existence and nature. In a moment of dereification, one can recognize the limited nature of one's perceptions, and can entertain flexible perceptions of the self and other, dynamically adjusting to the ebb and flow of life and the nature of one's relationship.

Consider the moment in which a couple has a conflict. During a heated argument, couples in unhappy relationships engage in characteristic behaviors that can be explained by the tendency to reify. Among these couples, partners are more likely to attribute the other's actions to stable and internal negative traits ('He's inconsiderate and selfish') (Gottman,

1998). On the other hand, these couples also tend to attribute positive experiences to fleeting situations, as opposed to the person ('Oh well he's nice because he's been successful this week at work. It won't last and it doesn't mean much') (Gottman, 1998). Dispositional attributions are a clear example of reification—treating one's constructed impression of another as if it captures the reality of the other person. Yet just as with self-representations, impressions of others are fictional constructions based on one's current goals and expectations (Festinger, 1954; Murray, Holmes, & Griffin, 2003). In theory, dereification occurs the moment in which one is able to see through representations of others and consider different perspectives. It enables a person to re-imagine his or her relationship with others. In an initial attempt to capture this phenomenon in a fine-grained manner, we are currently using experience-sampling techniques to assess people's thoughts about their partners, their tendency to make dispositional attributions, and their relation to those thoughts in terms of flexibility and willingness to consider alternative views.

Compassion helps construct a narrative of interdependence. Whereas dereification supports the ability to see through narratives of the self and other, there is a clear need to adopt some narrative or interpretive lens. In Buddhist contexts, compassion represents the construction of a narrative that helps dissolve the reified self and promote a healthier engagement with the world that expands the self to include others. In secular compassion programs inspired by Buddhism, such as CBCT, participants learn reason-based arguments that all people seek happiness and all people seek a relief from suffering or dissatisfaction. Others' actions then become interpreted through this lens. Another's negative emotional state or aggressive action is attributed to the need for happiness and a relief from suffering, as opposed to a disposition that captures the essence of the other person. This stance might provide an observer with greater flexibility in responding to another with care and lessen the grip of habitual negative reactions. The ability to see the self and another in a more flexible manner through compassion might give rise to growth within a relationship. Through compassion, a partner could have the courage and resolve to question or challenge a partner while also communicating care for the other, thus conveying the benefits of self-verification and self-enhancement while potentially avoiding their dangers. Finally, wisdom and compassion might protect against the dangers of positive illusions and abusive relationships (cf., McNulty & Fincham, 2012), leading one to dereify positive illusions about the partner while also motivating the courage and resolve to leave the relationship. A final possibility to emerge through the construction of a self and other through the lens of compassion is that two partners embed/construct their relationship within a broader community and societal context—which is one indication of a healthy marriage in Western culture (e.g., Aron, Aron, & Smollan, 1992). Such couples might see their relationship more broadly than just contained within two people, but as a foundation that supports engagement in the world and contributing positively to others more broadly—similar to the process of self-expansion (Aron & Aron, 1997).

In summary, the integration of dereification and compassion may help convey some of the benefits associated with positive illusions and self-verification while avoiding their pitfalls. Compassion helps construct a positive narrative of self and other, which may not be ultimately real. Meanwhile, dereification prevents any narrative from becoming fixed and thus a source of illusion if violated. Dereification facilitates the process of constructing a highly flexible narrative such that a person can absorb information without being reactive. Of course, this perspective remains speculative and awaits empirical examination.

Conclusion

Early research findings support the potential role of wisdom and compassion-related processes for relationship functioning. Dispositional mindfulness and mindfulness-based interventions, for example, are associated with relationship benefits (for a review see Karremans, Schellekens, & Kappen, 2017) whereas everyday compassionate acts contribute to the quality of the relationship among newlyweds (Reis, Maniaci, & Rogge, 2017). The field stands to benefit from more finely grained analyses of the phenomenological experiences that characterize wisdom and compassion and examine their impact on social interactions, perceptions of the self and others, and relationships more broadly. In the end, this will require a science that moves beyond the psychology of the individual and examines the self in the context of key social relationships, including significant others, families and communities.

Note

1. Dereification is similar but distinct from constructs such as defusion, decentering and self-distancing (see Lutz, Jha, Dunne, & Saron, 2015).

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