

## 5. The Human Experience of Compassionate Love: *Conceptual Mapping and Data from Selected Studies*

by Lynn G. Underwood

---

In order to do adequate research on compassionate love, it is important to clearly articulate the various essential components, the conditions that might foster and those that might impede its expression, and to develop methodologies for assessment. In this way we might develop ways to encourage and foster this quality appropriately in people's lives. This chapter emphasizes the subjective experience of the person attempting to express compassionate love.

There is something essentially ineffable and powerful in the reality which the words *agape*, *compassion*, *unconditional love*, and *self-giving love* attempt to describe. The word *altruism* is nested within them, but these other words capture an investment of self, deeper than *altruism* suggests, a dimension that cannot be fully assessed through external evaluations of actions. In the following, I use the words *compassionate love* to represent that richer concept. *Altruistic love* begins to reflect these ideas as well. I describe later why I chose *compassionate love* as the most representative and acceptable phrase to describe this concept.

### **Background**

#### **Key Features**

Identifying some of the key aspects of compassionate love as it is viewed in this chapter helps to pin down the term for use here. The definitive features draw extensively on the research results discussed later in this chapter but also on the writings of others in psychology, sociology, ethics, and theology.

**FREE CHOICE FOR THE OTHER** "Compassion is a manifestation of love. And love, whatever else it may be, is something that involves choices. Love is the one true source of freedom in the midst of the suffering human finitude entails. Choosing between options is a condition of freedom in finitude" (Sulmasy, 1997). Our freedom is often constrained, but within those constraints we exercise choice.

**COGNITIVE UNDERSTANDING OF THE SITUATION** Cognitive understanding includes evaluations of contexts and meaning in religious and nonreligious frameworks. Ethical judgments and issues of justice can enter in here, as can knowledge of the details of culture and individual differences. Intellectual understanding of another's situation helps one to act effectively for him or her.

**UNDERSTANDING OF SELF** This includes knowing our agendas and ourselves adequately so that we can choose as freely as possible, in order to strengthen and to give life to the other. Sir William Osler, the famed professor of medicine, said, in 1905, “at the outset appreciate clearly the aims and objects that each one of you should have in view—a knowledge of disease and its cure, and a knowledge of yourself.” It is similar in all areas in which we express fully compassionate love for the other.

**TO VALUE THE OTHER AT A FUNDAMENTAL LEVEL** In a lecture given by Immanuel Jakobovits (at that time Chief Rabbi of the British Commonwealth) at the medical school at which I was working in the 1980s on ethics in medicine, the element that was most striking was the speaker’s emphasis on the infinite value of each human being and on the importance of taking this as a starting point for action. “The humble beauties of human nature leapt out” was a phrase used by Evelyn Underhill (1976) to describe that which we often miss in the other.

**OPENNESS AND RECEPTIVITY** Openness and receptivity can include the awareness of being part of something important beyond oneself and the freedom to let oneself be open. The role of divine inspiration could also be included here. This attitude also allows one to see opportunities for the expression of compassionate love in specific situations (Nouwen, 1972).

**RESPONSE OF THE HEART** The emotional part of the brain is essential to much of good decision making (Damasio, 1994), and this extends to decision-making in the area of compassion. Emotional understanding plays a role in fully grasping the situation in order to choose the appropriate action. Analysis of children’s prosocial behaviors links to this component as early as age 2 (Zahn-Wexler, 1979). We can listen with the heart to balance mercy and justice.

### **Limitations of Freedom**

Freedom is required to fully express compassionate love, yet each person’s freedom is limited in a variety of ways. There are *physical limitations*, such as disability or material resource limits. Hormonal and biological factors can also limit freedom (see Insel, Chapter 14, this volume). *Social structures and environment* can create undue pressures for self-protection or can obstruct altruistic behaviors through resource restrictions. Social support from others can increase ability to give. There are *emotional limitations*. People have varying degrees of baseline empathic ability, emotional stability, and extroversion (see Damasio, Chapter 15, and Kagan, Chapter 3, this volume). *Cognitive factors*, such as contexts for meaning, religious and nonreligious frameworks of values, priority structures, and intellectual capacities to understand needs in a situation, influence the starting conditions for the expression of love (see Browning, Chapter 19, Pope, Chapter 10, and Habito, Chapter 21, this volume). Much of the work represented in other chapters of this volume articulates various aspects of the substrate that affect the capacity of a person to express compassionate love in particular situations. Genetic factors, neural structure, cultural and religious cognitive frameworks, and social settings can all limit our freedom.

### **MOTIVES THAT DETRACT FROM COMPASSIONATE LOVE**

There are motives that detract from the quality of altruistic, compassionate love in words or actions. Some of these more negative motives are frequently present in our acts of love, but as these factors dominate, the quality of compassionate love, other-regarding love, in the act decreases. These include factors such as:

- need for reciprocal love and affection
- need to be accepted by others or by God
- need to belong
- guilt
- fear
- seeing the other as an extension or reflection of oneself (ego)
- pleasure in looking well in the eyes of others
- control of the other through their indebtedness
- desire to exercise power over others
- desire to reinforce positive image of self and feelings of superiority • desire to avoid confrontation

It is assumed in this chapter that the motives for compassionate actions and words are important. This is not to say that altruistic actions without other-regarding motives are not of value, but that they are somehow qualitatively different.

The motives just mentioned and others have been articulated well by a variety of authors. C. S. Lewis (Lewis, 1960/1991) describes “need loves” as a baseline of different feelings on which more “other-regarding” love is built but that can also detract from the full expression of compassionate love. As Vanier writes, “We set out on the road to freedom when we begin to put justice, heartfelt relationships, and the service of others and of truth over and above our own needs for love and success or our fears of failure and of relationships” (1998, p. 115). Thomas Merton often argued that as we enhance our inner capacity for wholeness and freedom, we strengthen our outer capacity to love and serve. If this inner freedom is lacking, all our efforts to help others or the world will be marred by what he called “the contagion” of our own ego-centered attachments and illusions. Van Kaam writes of “developing an ability to respond fully, not just react, which can contribute to the growth of inner holiness, because it is not easily poisoned by the heady wine of successful behavior which makes me look well in the eyes of those around me” (1964, p. 101).

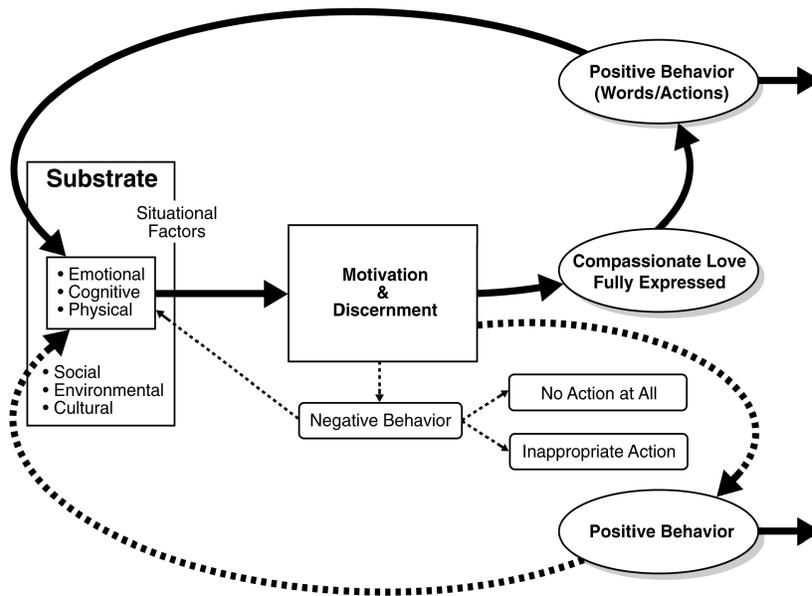
## **ADDITIONAL ISSUES**

Any research or investigation into factors that might encourage the expression of compassionate love needs to address some additional questions: Where are the boundaries between self and other (how do we define self—the issue of true self vs. masks or inaccurate understandings of self)? Where does compassion for self come in? How do we effectively balance mercy and justice as we try to express loving compassion? Another important issue is that of creating spaces for compassionate behavior from others, being open to receiving the generosity of others, and creating opportunities and settings in which expression of compassionate love in others is encouraged.

## A Basic Model

The various elements in this model can be represented in Figure 5.1. On the left-hand side of the diagram is the individual, nested in his social and physical environment. This is where the “limitations of freedom” discussed previously fit in, including physical, social, emotional, and cognitive limitations. In this substrate there are also characteristics that encourage the expression of compassionate love in people. For example, preliminary results from a study in Lithuania, supported by the Fetzer Institute, which is looking at health outcomes, also examines what enables people to make positive moral choices in difficult circumstances. Factors important in encouraging compassionate choices in people in that population included experience of suffering by the giver, older age, family and peer environments, and the role of the media (P. Kaufmann, personal communication, September 1999). Being loved by others and by the divine can also foster and empower one’s capacity to express love to others.

Figure 1: A Model of Compassionate Love fully expressed



The person expresses himself or herself in actions and expressions (far right side of Figure 1). In the middle are motivations and discernment, the internal processes involved in making decisions concerning actions. Compassionate love fully expressed, shown by the arrow curving up, indicates flow resulting from a balance of appropriate motives and wisdom. These behaviors and words display varying degrees of emotional expression and can lead to varying perceptions by others. They can lead to concrete changes in the individual and the environment. Compassion can also be expressed by making space for others to give. Allowing others to give is frequently an undervalued way of being compassionate, but it can liberate compassion in the world very effectively and counterbalance feelings of indebtedness and powerlessness in the person helped. In an article on agape in a clinical setting, Alan Mermann, a physician at Yale, emphasized the importance of creating spaces for the other to give and emphasized that being open to receiving

does not diminish our gift of self (Mermann, 1993). An additional element emphasized in this model is that compassionate love, when driven by positive motivation and appropriate discernment, can have positive effects on the development of the person, contributing to moral and spiritual growth and additional insight and wisdom. Mermann also expressed well the dynamics of how love expressed in this way can “form and mold our psyches”: that by expressing agape we can actually encourage humility, appreciate the hollowness of praise, and obtain a more realistic perspective on life and self.

But when the motives for self outweigh those for other, or when there is an inappropriate action given the various factors to be considered, another set of circumstances results (see the downward-curving arrows in Figure 1). On the one hand, this situation can lead to no action or to action that is inappropriate for the circumstances, resulting in negative or neutral effects on the person. On the other hand, it can result in positive action, someone doing good things for the wrong reason. Major ill effects of this kind of action are often on the person acting. The details depend on the particular mixture of motives. An example would be someone doing a positive act from a motive of self-aggrandizement or in order to be loved in return. This kind of action can lead to positive feedback for the selfish motive, encouraging more of such behavior. Inner discernment could alert the person to the negative motive, however, and guide future motivation of behavior. Alternatively, inappropriate discernment could lead to inadequate care of self, inadequate balance of needs of self and other, and this could lead to exhaustion and burnout (Carmel & Glick, 1996).

This process of action, internal feedback, inner correction, and action is important to the process of expressing love and of growing in the capacity to love. We are not always able to articulate this process because much of it happens implicitly. This process, acknowledged or not, makes up much of compassionate love, from the inside-out perspective.

### ***Empirical Studies***

To illuminate this model from the perspective of the subjective experience of the person attempting to express compassionate love is challenging, particularly to do so as a scientist attempting to investigate this territory scientifically. I present some results from studies currently in various stages of completion that can help us see how individuals map this territory in daily life. The studies focus on the subjective experience, the view from the inside out. The following studies build on self-report methodologies of varying types. Despite their limitations, self-reports can give subtle illumination of motivations and other internal conditions that are key to the expression or inhibition of compassionate love. These reports give this illumination in ways that can contribute substantially to our understanding. As indicators of the inner experience during the giving of compassionate love, these reports help us assess what is happening.

Self-reports are limited in a variety of ways and should not be relied on alone to determine whether a person is feeling and expressing compassionate love. It is also necessary to assess the objective features of words and actions designed to be compassionate. Such features would include perceptions by others, especially the recipients, as well as other outcomes of such

expressions—both effects on the intended recipient and internal effects on the person giving, such as spiritual and moral growth. Biological measures, such as neural imaging and heart rate variability, could also be helpful. Acknowledging their limitations, self-reports can give subtle illumination of motivations and other internal conditions that are key to the expression or inhibition of compassionate love in ways that can contribute substantially to understanding.

### *Spiritual Contributions to Quality of Life: WHO*

In a project with the World Health Organization (WHO; Lofty, 1998), a group of people from various cultures and from the major traditions (Buddhist, Hindu, Muslim, Christian, Jewish, indigenous, agnostic, atheist) gathered to develop an

instrument to measure spiritual contributions to quality of life. Work in focus groups in various countries is following this initial work. The working group determined that one of the important features of quality of life across all traditions was giving other-centered love and compassion, and they identified questions that might draw out the degree and importance of this in people's lives. In subsequent interviews, the mean importance rating of the relative contributions of the degree and importance of self-giving love and compassion to quality of life was 3.88. (The importance items that were given to focus groups were rated on a five-point Likert scale, ranging from 1, *not important*, to 5, *extremely important*.) This factor was well endorsed by both religious and nonreligious groups.

Some of the questions which addressed the giving of other-centered love and compassion included:

- How much do you find that putting others' needs before your own desires gives you happiness?
- To what extent do you take pleasure in the success of others?
- To what extent does feeling caring and compassion toward others without expecting or hoping for anything in return enhance your quality of life and well-being?
- To what extent do you feel good when you help others?
- How much does sacrificing your own interests for those of others improve the quality of your life?

Testing in eighteen individual countries across religious traditions is the next stage in identifying the best questions to elicit the qualities of loving-kindness, selflessness, and acceptance of others as contributors to quality of life. These and other questions are undergoing focus group evaluation. Translation and back-translation issues are of crucial importance for this instrument, as it is designed to be used in many languages and with many religious and ethnic groups.

The importance of an emotional component varied across religious groups. One of the reasons I chose *compassionate love* as the phrase to use in this chapter had to do with work from the contemplative interviews that I discuss later, together with discussions in Geneva with members of the working group across religious traditions. For many, *love* was too inclusive of a variety of other concepts, such as romance, but *compassion* alone left out some of the emotional and

transcendent components which the word *love* brings in. *It points up the importance of picking a number of features and focusing on those features, which make up the key concept, and not putting too much weight on a single word or phrase.* A paragraph describing these features was designed to help the focus groups come to some clarity about the basic concept.

Other factors on the quality-of-life survey may be relevant to the present work. There was a factor that addressed Acceptance of Others, which is taken to play a role in one's capacity to value the other. (This was given an importance rating of 3.85.) In some of the preliminary results from the focus groups, not surprisingly, receiving love and acceptance from others may also significantly contribute to quality of life.

One of the important preliminary findings of this project is that qualities that are not obviously oriented toward self-interest can be important in improving satisfaction with life for people in their everyday lives throughout the world. Quality of life is not only determined by physical health, mental health, and economic status but also by some other-oriented features. Giving of self for the other has been rated as important to the quality of one's life, in a variety of settings and cultural contexts, to people throughout the world. Specific questions that draw out this feature most effectively, as identified in this project cross-culturally, will help future work in this area.

#### *The Daily Spiritual Experience Scale*

In another set of studies, the object was to assess daily spiritual experiences (DSE), the day-to-day inner experiences that accompany ordinary spiritual life, to see how they relate to physical and mental health outcomes. The Fetzer Institute formed a working group with the National Institute on Aging to develop a multidomain measure of religiousness/spirituality for use in health studies. In the context of this project I developed a 16-item scale of daily spiritual experiences (Underwood, 1999).

This scale included the item "I feel a selfless caring for others," designed to measure feelings of compassion. In a U.S. study that made use of this scale, the average score was "most days." Thirteen percent responded, "many times a day," whereas 15% said "never or almost never" or "once in a while" (Figure 2a). This item shows significant variation across the sample. People do not just automatically give a positive response, and some people rarely experience this feeling. Structured interviews across varied socioeconomic and cultural groups, to assess the construct validity of this item, confirmed that it accesses some of the experience of giving compassionate love. The general interpretation of the item in these interviews confirmed that although the word *selfless* was used, the meaning conveyed was that of a primary other-centeredness rather than of a total abnegation of self. Using *selfless* as an adjective enables this item to measure a type of caring that has giving to the other, rather than total denial of self, as its primary motivation.

In developing quantitative self-report measures of subjective experience, wording of questions and their context is particularly important. The qualitative studies that preceded the development of this instrument revealed that the statement "I give to others without expecting anything in return" (which was not included in the final scale) hinted at a mildly cynical

approach or a martyred be- grudging for many respondents. It is crucial to do initial evaluations of the wording of self-report measures to confirm that the concept that the investigator is trying to find out about is very close to what the participants are actually hearing in the question and responding to.

Figure 2a: Distribution of question assessing the experiences of compassion

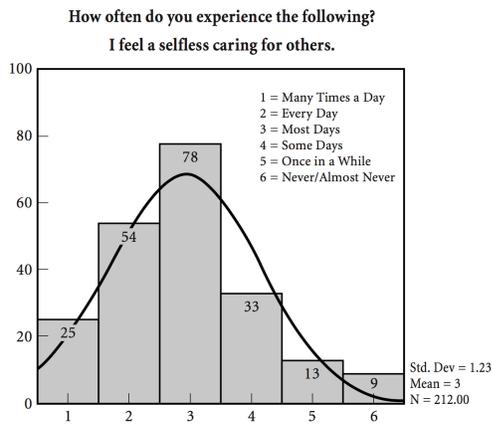
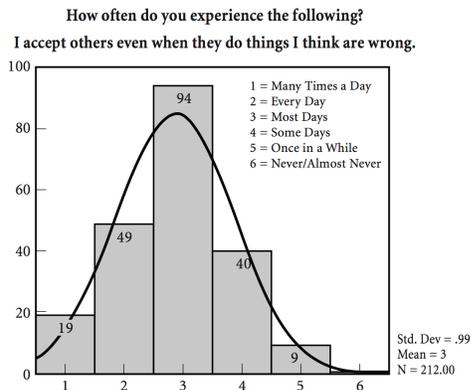


Figure 2b: Distribution of question assessing the experiences of mercy

One other question on the DSE scale that related to our current topic was “I accept others even when they do things I think are wrong.” This item was designed to measure the concept of mercy, an attitude toward the other that might facilitate a full expression of compassion. The responses on this item ranged from 20% reporting experiencing this feeling “many times a day” to 10% reporting this feeling “never,” “almost never,” or “once in a while” (Figure 2b).



Although the 16-item DSE overall psychometrically identifies a single factor in previous work, when correlated with different types of empathy, higher scores on the two questions isolated here were correlated differentially with a number of variables. Those who scored higher on the two compassion and mercy questions also scored higher on Emotional Empathy and Perspective Taking, the more positively oriented kinds of empathy. Their responses were also correlated with

greater other-forgiveness (Table 1; Zechmeister, 1999). In a study of test-retest reliability, scores on these items stayed consistent over a 2-week period, indicating that this is a relatively stable element in the short term. Long-term follow-up remains to be done. These items have been embedded in a large longitudinal study of health of women and in a study of the daily experience of pain. It will be interesting to note the future correlations of these items with healthy behaviors and outcomes.

An important issue in addressing self-reports of these experiences is the degree to which respondents are aware of their own motives and feelings and how critical an eye is applied to the assessment of their internal states. These considerations limit the conclusions one can make based on such assessments. Nevertheless, quantitative assessments such as these can provide useful information.

*Table 1: Correlations between DSES scores and trait measures*

<i>Trait Measure</i>	<i>Compassion/Mercy Items</i>	<i>Total DSE (16 items)</i>
Positive Affect <sup>a</sup>	-.08	-.29**
Negative Affect <sup>a</sup>	.08	.16
Trait Anger <sup>b</sup>	.07	.06
Fantasy <sup>c</sup>	-.11	.03
Emotional Empathy <sup>c</sup>	-.11	.03
Perspective Taking <sup>c</sup>	-.38**	-.27**
Personal Distress <sup>c</sup>	.01	.06
Total Empathy <sup>c</sup>	-.34**	-.13
Forgive Self <sup>d</sup>	-.01	-.14
Forgive Other <sup>d</sup>	-.32**	-.12
Total Forgive <sup>d</sup>	-.21*	-.17

Source: Adapted from Zechmeister (1999).

\*Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

\*\*Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

<sup>a</sup>Positive and Negative Affect were assessed using Watson and Clark's Positive and Negative Affect Scale (PANAS). For this sample, Cronbach's alpha for the 10-item Positive Affect scale was .79, and .86 for the 10-item Negative Affect Scale.

<sup>b</sup>Trait Anger was assessed using Spielberger's 10-item measure. Cronbach's alpha for this sample was .87.

<sup>c</sup>The four types of empathy were assessed using the Davis Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI); Total Empathy is the sum of each 7-item subscale. Cronbach's alphas for the scales were as follows: Fantasy = .74; Emotional Empathy = .81; Perspective Taking = .77; Personal Distress = .73; Total Empathy = .81.

<sup>d</sup>Self-forgiveness and Other-forgiveness are two 5-item measures that assess dispositional tendencies to forgive developed by Zechmeister (1999); Total Forgive is the sum of these two subscales. Cronbach's alpha for each was .74, .69, and .71, respectively.

Contemplative traditions have developed methods to help people in their religious development and discernment, methods that can aid in exploring and defining motives and thus help in discerning loving, compassionate action. By giving insight into the processes involved in expressing compassionate love, the contemplative tradition can increase for the individual the quality of awareness of motives. It can enable one to sift through motives and more effectively choose actions. It can also illuminate the motives and sources of compassion that are most likely to lead to personal and spiritual growth. Besides leading to more loving, compassionate behavior, insights from this approach can inspire further experimental and observational studies and development of better self-report measures.

As the basic model (Figure 1) indicates, motives and discernment can be crucial to whether the act has power in the world and whether it transforms and builds up the person who does it. In addition to motivational issues, we traverse other complex inner terrain as we make choices to speak and act with compassionate love in particular situations. Figure 3 elaborates on this process. Even assuming the situation is driven by the motivation of good for the other, we still have a variety of other issues. There is a general attitude of heart with which life is approached, and each situation is addressed in that context. In addition, various issues need to be balanced. One needs to balance the interests and claims of the self versus those of others. The claims of justice need to be qualified by mercy. Related to "self versus others" but not exactly the same is the issue of receiving versus giving. We need to balance giving to others with an openness to receive, thus enabling the other to give. Appropriate tradeoffs between long-term and short-term

benefits must be made. Likewise, a balance must be found between those we are close to and strangers.

To explore some of this subjective complexity effectively, I chose to supplement the typical self-report methodology with an approach articulated by Han de Wit (1991). De Wit describes compassion as “contemplative action” and thinks that it has experiential value on the spiritual journey, that it awakens a particular experience of reality, one that is characterized by the fruits of mercy and insight. According to many religious traditions, human beings possess a mental discernment (discriminating awareness) that allows them to clarify their experience, a capacity to distinguish between illusion and reality, self-deception and truth. It is his conclusion that, as a rule, this discriminating awareness does not function adequately but that it can be cultivated and trained in such a way that we are able to view our own mental domain clearly and to recognize our own mental patterns. On the basis of this, we can also learn to identify the causal connections between what we think, say, and do. Internally we go through a process of weighing our motives consciously and intuitively assessing the situation, drawing on empathy and notions of justice and fairness and determining the appropriate action. That action in turn shapes our own moral and spiritual development, as well as, it is hoped, having good effects on the world around us. De Wit talks about people who have developed a particularly acute sense of this process and who devote a good portion of their lives to the inner cultivation of spiritual life that predisposes to mercy and insight, to contemplative action, and to compassion. These people include in particular monastics from Buddhist and Christian traditions, as well as those from a variety of other traditions, such as Sufi Muslims. But his analysis also applies to those who have been inspired by these approaches in their individual religious and spiritual lives and who cultivate these approaches in other ways.

This analysis of contemplative psychology formed the inspiration for a series of structured interviews with Trappist monks. Trappist monks are Christians who follow the Benedictine Rule. Their order has been ongoing since the Middle Ages. They are moderately isolated in a path that aims to integrate the life of the spirit with their daily work lives. The monks I interviewed run a mail-order food business in the abbey to support themselves, but their primary daily structure centers around six set times of community prayer, chanting psalms, and reading Scripture. Time is also set aside during the day for silent meditative prayer. This abbey has had ongoing dialogue with Buddhist monks, and they have found common ground in their approaches, despite differences in beliefs. Silence is an important part of life in the monastery, and meals are taken in silence.

The teachings the monks draw from emphasize issues such as how to discern right motive and how to sort through right action and attitude. They point out pitfalls to be aware of, such as those discussed earlier relating to motives that detract from compassionate love. The monks also accept the core value of expressing compassionate love and hold each other up to that standard within the community more than many groups do, so the refining element of community also plays a part. For some people, the inner equipment for detecting motives and the process they go through in discernment are excellent; for others, these skills are rusty or minimal. The monastics make efforts to keep the detection equipment in good shape, and they practice and refine their skills in using it.

My initial studies consisted of structured, in-depth interviews with 13 monastics. Among those interviewed were the abbot, the treasurer, a cook, and a tailor. Ages ranged from 35 to 75. Educational backgrounds varied, although the majority of those interviewed were college educated. This group was selected not because they were assumed to be more compassionate than an average population sample but because they were thought to be more aware of the process one goes through as compassionate decisions and actions are taken.

The following questions give an idea of some of what was included in the structured interview. It was framed to focus on individual experience rather than to lead to intellectual assessment or abstract answers:

- What are the key defining features/essential components of compassionate love, agape, unconditional love, and self-giving love? What is the best phrase to describe this concept?
- Describe the internal process by which you make choices when confronted with a daily event calling for decision between self and other and calling for words or actions.
- Describe the internal process by which you make choices when confronted with a daily event calling for a decision between balancing mercy and justice.
- What motives detract from the expression of compassionate love?
- How do you envision self and other when in the process of daily interactions? Do self and other always feel distinct?
- What role does empathy, mentally identifying with the other, play in compassionate love? Is it necessary?
- What practices help you to more appropriately express compassionate love in your life?

One of the key findings was the degree of individual difference. The language used and approaches taken varied enormously, a particularly interesting result given the selection bias of the sample in terms of common belief system, common environment, and common lifestyle. Each person, although valuing compassionate love highly, had his own unique approach to the incorporation of compassionate love into daily life.

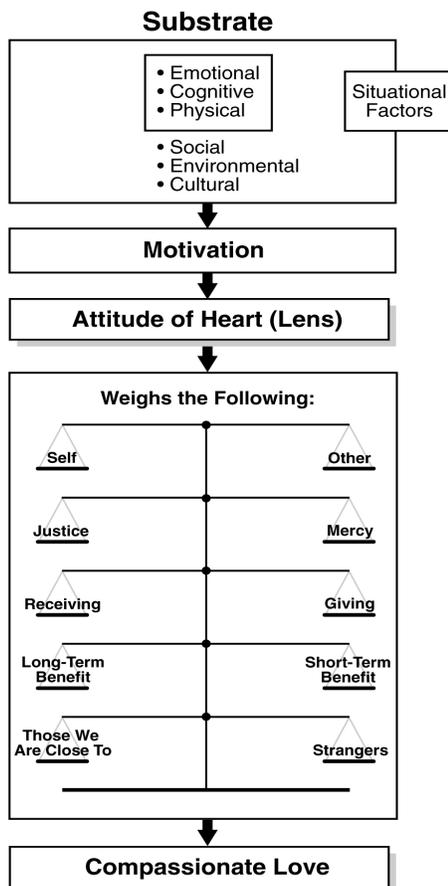
## KEY DEFINING FEATURES

There were, however, some common factors. Central features of compassionate love that they cited included humility, trust, respect, unselfishness, receptivity, openness, and detachment. A few of the other main features that were mentioned as essential features of compassionate love were as follows: "To set aside one's own agenda for the sake of, to strengthen, or to give life to the other." "To experience, be present, to the situation of the other." "To have a mature view of reality." "To accept self in order to accept others To really listen to the other." "To deny self for something greater." "To suffer with another." "To help another become fully themselves." Each of these features merits further exploration than space allows here. One interesting fact to note is the practical concreteness of the features and the relative absence of obvious religion-specific language.

## APPROACHES TO CHOICE AND ACTION

Two basic approaches emerged for balancing issues and sifting motives as decisions were made about how best to express compassionate love in situations. Some monks were more analytical, using a decision-making process relevant to specific situations. Others were more intuitive, depending on a “way of life” or a “lens” on which to base individual decisions. These approaches are both captured to some extent in Figure 3. Although some monks were more analytic and some more intuitive, most used a combination of the two approaches.

*Figure 3: Complementary ways to approach loving action: Attitude of heart and conscious decisions*



Descriptions of the way-of-life lens included the following: valuing the other, feeling of willingness, no awareness of the details of whether one was acting compassionately or not until afterward, “not depending on others for identity.” A number of the monks said things such as “compassion is a way of life.” There were specific basic underlying attitudes that shaped compassionate decisions. For example, if one depended on others for identity, then it was harder to be freely compassionate.

On the other hand, the following responses describe the approach of those taking the more analytical approach. There was much overlap among the individuals but also distinctive styles

and tools that reflected many individual characters. “I ask in each decision situation, how much of me is in this? If there is too much of me, then how can I shift toward the other?” “I quiet myself down, to get myself out of the way.” It was considered important to let go of “grasping” feelings. One monk said that it was important to make sure that what others would say was not driving his actions. The following quote is particularly illuminating with respect to process: “In some cases the natural pull is easier than in others. So in some cases the pull of nature can facilitate compassion. But sometimes it doesn’t. So one’s actions cannot be determined by natural pulls.”

It was pointed out that ultra-conscientiousness can be a danger—the motivation of claiming the “higher moral ground” is not a solid foundation for expressions of compassionate love. One monk described the process of weighing values, noting that he gave some weight to his own needs but gave them less weight than he gave to the needs of others. The importance of clear perception and also of utilizing intuition was expressed. Another monk described how, early on in his time in the monastery, he made a decision to do good because it was good, not for the approval of others; to correct for his own inclinations, he made sure that he spent a lot of effort doing good that was unseen.

**SELF AND OTHER** Following are some reflections on how people view self and other in the process of daily interactions. The majority, seven of those interviewed, saw self and other as distinct. For these, although there was a link between self and the other, the distinction was also there. On the other hand, some articulated it as a blurred distinction. One comment in this regard was, “the distinction dissolves when in a compassionate moment.” Those who found the distinction blurred also talked about levels of engagement: “we unite at a deeper level of the self” or “we are all one at a deep level.” One raised the point that when we can help others we might actually hurt the self, and the realization of that distinguishes self and other; but the act is carried out nevertheless. In the answers to the questions on empathy, it emerged that although most felt it was important or helpful to be able to identify with the other, only two felt it was essential to do so in order to express compassionate love. Because the substrate components of capacity for empathy and empathic accuracy can vary across individuals, this finding suggests that those who may not be empathically gifted still have the opportunity to express compassionate love.

**PRACTICES** Another important purpose of these interviews was to try to find out which practices might encourage and sustain the expression of compassionate love. Here was a crucial question, as one of the main goals of this research is to look at how one might encourage compassionate love to be more fully expressed. In the interviews, individual practices and practices within the community were both emphasized as being helpful.

As an individual, it was considered important to develop a strong identity and awareness of who one is, an identity that does not depend on other people. Spending quiet time and time alone was one way to foster that identity and awareness and was felt to support the compassionate life generally. This practice helps one to be able to be at ease with oneself. Prayer was frequently cited as a key element that supported compassionate love—connecting with a common “ground of being” was how one monk expressed it. Spiritual reading was important to ground one-self in

writings of wisdom. The doing of compassionate things in and of itself can encourage one to do more.

Community and relationships are seen as important, too. It is helpful to live in a community that supports the value of love, as well as the value of cultivating awareness of motives, and that encourages both. The critique of an aware community is very helpful, too. In the monastic community, for example, “do-gooders bug people.” This attitude helps to keep people from falling into inappropriate motives for helping others. Living a generally unselfish lifestyle helps one to make particular unselfish decisions. Also, to live a life balanced between respect for self and respect for others can support the expression of compassion. Listening to others was considered a key feature for the majority of monks—to know when an action would be really compassionate, to understand the pain and the needs of another, and to value others as they are. Learning about people and how the world functions was important in making correct decisions. It was mentioned that it was easier in the monastery to avoid aggression and violence, and this was helpful in creating an atmosphere conducive to compassion.

To reflect fully on the results of these interviews would take us beyond the length of this chapter, but a few comments are possible. It was obvious that the integration of feelings and cognitions was crucial to making free choice for the other, as was an understanding of self and the situation. Openness and receptivity were important, and the need to really listen—to people and to life—came up time and again. A balanced view of the importance of self and other was also important. A spiritually grounded perspective on oneself and one’s identity can counterbalance tendencies to define oneself and others in terms of what one has or how one fits functionally in the world, a perspective that may have important implications for appropriate expression of compassionate love (Underwood, 1995). The levels of individual differences give insight into the many strategies and attitudes that people can use to express compassionate love fully in their lives.

The degree of self-awareness of internal processes that arises from a contemplative lifestyle can provide a magnifying lens for examining the process of expressing compassionate love. Results of structured interviews with monastics have explored the usefulness of this method. Insights from this approach can inspire further experimental and observational studies and can lead both to better self-reports and to more loving, compassionate behavior.

The quality of compassionate love that is present in an act has to do with the motives and ways of expression. Actions that flow from those motives and ways of expression feed back into the spiritual and moral life of the person. The motives affect whether and how the action contributes to the person’s growth and the contribution it can make to the flourishing of others.

### ***Conclusions***

One major goal of research on compassionate love is ultimately to give additional insight into how compassionate love might be fostered in individuals and societies. In order to do this well, it is important to understand the key features of compassionate love, the substrate of conditions that influence freedom of expression, and the motives that detract from the quality of loving compassion. Clarification of additional issues, such as the concept of self and its boundaries, and

balancing of priorities are important for the effectiveness of such a model. Various methods, such as external assessment of outcomes, self-report, and experimental models, can all support our understanding of the topic. Scientific research methods in this area can benefit from methods that utilize tools for clear discernment and awareness of internal processes.

## REFERENCES

- Carmel, S., & Glick, S. (1996). Compassionate-empathic physicians. *Social Science and Medicine*, 43(8), 1253–1261.
- Damasio, A. R. (1994). *Descartes' error*. New York: Putnam.
- de Wit, H. F. (1991). *Contemplative psychology*. Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press.
- Lewis, C. S. (1991). *The four loves*. Orlando: Harcourt Brace. (Original work published 1960)
- Lofty, M. (1998). WHO and spirituality, religiousness, and personal beliefs (SRPB): Report on WHO consultation, June 22–24, 1998. Unpublished report. Washington: World Health Organization, Division of Mental Health and Prevention of Substance Abuse.
- Mermann, A. C. (1993). Love in the clinical setting. *Humane Medicine*, 9(4), 268–273.
- Nouwen, H. J. M. (1972). *With open hands*. Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press.
- Sulmasy, D. P. (1997). *The healer's calling*. Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press.
- Underhill, E. (1976). In L. Barkway & L. Menzies (Eds.), *An anthology of the love of God*. London: Mowbray.
- Underwood, L. G. (1995). A working model of health: Spirituality and religiousness as resources: Applications for persons with disability. *Journal of Religion, Disability and Health*, 3(3), 51–71.
- Underwood, L. G. (1999). Daily Spiritual Experience. In Fetzer NIA Multidimensional Measurement of Religiousness/Spirituality for use in health research (pp. 11–17). Kalamazoo, MI: Fetzer Institute.
- Vanier, J. (1998). *Becoming human*. Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press.
- van Kaam, A. (1964). *Religion and personality*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.
- Zahn-Wexler, C., & Redke-Yarrow, M. (1979). Child rearing and children's prosocial intentions toward victims of distress. *Child Development*, 50, 319–330.
- Zechmeister, J. S. (1999). *Daily Spiritual Experience: Descriptive statistics for each item*. Unpublished manuscript.