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# “Buddhism and Compassion”

## A Talk by Julia Stenzel at McGill University

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On April 5<sup>th</sup>, 2018, Ph.D. candidate Julia Stenzel from McGill’s School of Religious Studies (SRS) delivered a talk on “Buddhism and Compassion.” Currently working on the role and function of compassion in Buddhism, Stenzel explored how recent scientific findings have transformed compassion from a religious moral imperative to a natural, psychological aspect of human nature. Through her study of the Center for Compassion and Altruism Research Education (CCARE), offering secular compassion training at Stanford University, she demonstrated the important parallels between this new conception of compassion and early Mahāyāna explanations of *kāruṇa*. Stenzel’s presentation is part of the “Buddha and the Other” lecture series organized by McGill’s Centre for Research on Religion (CREOR), SRS, and the Department of East Asian Studies (EAS).

Stenzel started her talk by contrasting different understandings of compassion between the English-speaking Western context and the traditional Buddhist context. In recent years, compassion, which was usually understood as a simple act of suffering with others, has been re-defined as a natural and central element of human life. This change was due, in part, to new scientific experiments that measured various effects of compassion on human body. Through these studies, compassion be-

came quantifiable and thus suitable to be discussed and integrated within scientific theories. Neuroscientists, biologists, and psychologists have defined compassion as something both cognitive and natural. From the mere act of suffering with another, compassion became a natural tendency to suffer with others and to wish for the alleviation of their sufferings.

When looking at CCARE's secular compassion training, Stenzel explains that compassion is understood to have four main elements. There is a cognitive/empathetic element—an awareness of suffering in others, an affective element—a sympathetic concern for others, an intentional element—a wish to see a relief of others' suffering, and a motivational or behavioral element—a responsiveness or readiness to help relieve others' sufferings. Whereas the first three elements could be considered as natural from a scientific or Buddhist point of view, there seems to be various interferences that stop one's natural potential to transform into the fourth element, the readiness to help others.

In his TED talk, "Why aren't we more compassionate?" Daniel Goleman argues that the only thing required to be more compassionate is an enhanced awareness of others. As compassion is natural, if one simply notices the suffering of others, one's behaviour would automatically be more compassionate. Based on Buddhist teachings and CCARE program, Stenzel argued for an alternative conception of compassion as something natural but also requiring disciplined training. Thus, various compassion-training techniques in Buddhist traditions and secular programs are a way to remove the interferences and transform one's compassionate intention into actual behaviour.

Stenzel pointed out three main elements present in most traditional Buddhist compassion training by basing her research on Asanga's *Mahāyānasūtralamkāra*—a foundational text for early Mahāyāna Buddhism. This training may include a cognitive or analytical element, such

as a reflection on the qualities of compassion, a constructive element—the recollection and enhancement of feelings of love and care extended to all beings, and a deconstructive element—a deconstruction of the dualistic structure of self-other and self-cherishing. As these practices are always linked to *bodhicitta*—the wish to achieve awakening for the sake of all beings, using them in a secular context requires a few changes.

At the start of the CCARE's 8-week program, participants are told to generate a feeling of love and care for a loved one, for oneself, for a neutral person, for a difficult person and finally for all of humanity. This practice is strongly inspired by a Tibetan technique named *tonglen*—a technique where one takes the suffering of others, from a loved one to all of humanity, when inhaling, and sends one's merit and happiness to others when exhaling. By purging any Buddhist philosophical concepts, such as karma, the emptiness of the self, and so on, the CCARE program has secularized *tonglen*.

As Stenzel explained, secular, however, does not mean value-neutral. This secularism is based on the Dalai Lama's secular ethics, which promotes the ideas that all humans wish to be happy and avoid suffering, and that in a globalized world all humans depend on one another. The goal of this secularism is to embrace all religious and non-religious people but is clearly influenced by Buddhist values, particularly the idea that there is no substantial difference between self and others. Reflecting on that, Stenzel asked the audience whether the Dalai Lama's secular ethics could truly be embraced by all. Are his ethics truly secular, or simply an attempt to spread Buddhist ideas in the secular world? Whereas the audience seemed to be quite divided, it is clear to me that Stenzel's research on the Buddhist roots of secular compassion training will help to identify potentially problematic ideas and concepts that may obstruct to the spread of compassion training in the West. Just like compassion, secularity is a constantly evolving term and, if secular compas-

sion training programs want to truly be universal, they also need to constantly analyze and update the values on which they are based.