

# Interviews with Trappist Monks as a Contribution to Research Methodology in the Investigation of Compassionate Love

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## BACKGROUND

Many ethical and religious traditions cite love as an important feature. The principle of “loving one’s neighbor as oneself” is often deemed central to living life well. Recently there has been a growing interest in the scientific study of altruism and self-giving love as it appears in both religious and non-religious contexts (Post, Underwood, Schloss and Hurlbut, 2000). This paper makes a contribution to that body of work.

Motivation is an important defining characteristic of loving action. Contemplative religious traditions, such as the Buddhist and Christian monastic traditions as well as various streams of Muslim and Hindu 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 (de Wit, 1991). By giving insight into the processes involved in expressing compassionate love, the contemplative traditions can increase the quality of awareness of motives for the individual. They can enable one to sift effectively through motives and more effectively choose actions. They can also illuminate the motives and sources of compassion that are most likely to lead to personal and spiritual growth (van Kaam, 1986). Besides leading to more loving, compassionate behavior, insights from this approach can provide the basis for experimental and observational studies, and the development of better self-report tools and measures for use in the social sciences (e.g., Paulhus, 1991).

As noted above, there has been a recent growth of interest in the empirical study of compassionate love, building on work by scholars like Sorokin (1954) and Sober and Wilson (1998). The work described in this paper helped to set the stage for subsequent work in the area of compassionate love by developing definitions and models and providing some common language for conversation across disciplines for research (Underwood, 2000). Further empirical work continues to build on this foundation. A conference in May of 2004 brought together 50-some

researchers pursuing projects involving the empirical study of compassionate love: anthropologists, psychologists, sociologists, economists, and neuroscientists (Underwood and Post, 2003).

The project reported in the present paper involved a series of structured interviews with Trappist monks, focusing on their understanding of and experience with making choices involving compassionate love. The project needed to begin with a working definition of the core concept, but still leave room for definitional refinement through the interviews. Two initial aspects of the working definition were: "giving of self for the good of the other" and "other-centered love."

Central to developing a working definition of compassionate love were the questions of motivation and discernment. It was my hope that the interviews with the monks would yield additional insight into the role motivation and discernment play in the process of expressing love. To explore some of this subjective complexity effectively, I chose to supplement the typical self-report methodology with an approach articulated in the field of contemplative psychology by Han de Wit (1987). 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. He states that 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 it can be cultivated, and trained in such a way that we are able to view our own mental domain clearly and to recognize patterns in it. On the basis of this we can also learn to identify more accurately 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, hopefully, 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, to compassion. These people include in particular monastics from Buddhist and Christian traditions as well as Muslims and Hindus. But his analysis also applies to those who have been inspired by these approaches in their individual religious and spiritual lives and cultivate these approaches in other ways.

There are a variety of ways to improve self-report to enable a specific question to better elicit the construct of interest. The issue of psychometric testing often gives inadequate attention to the actual connection of the responses to the real world, how to elicit responses with potential for practical information (see discussions of measuring psychosocial stress in Cohen et al., 1999). In a practical way,

measurement of the construct has implications for interventions that might be developed, and the better the answers to self-report questions touch the “real” the more they will be able to be used to institute interventions that might change behaviors and situations to address those issues (Cohen et al., 2000).

Motivation and attitudes are key drivers of action, and therefore can be predictive of behaviors and other outcomes such as quality of life. However our capacity as researchers to explore motive is limited. Social and cognitive science experiments can do this to some extent in artificial lab situations. Correlational studies can explore motives and attitude inductively. Brain scans can observe in laboratory settings various pathways of the brain that can give insight into mental pathways. But the subtlety of making wise decisions is not going to be addressed by these methods definitively in the short term. The method presented in this study explores how, through interviews with those trained in self-reflection who have particular interest in the motives and attitudes and actions under investigation, we can provide information that might have value in informing possible interventions and illuminating those attitudes that shape our actions.

There are also insights to be drawn from some of the research on “expert” knowledge. In this research, there is the challenge of extracting the implicit knowledge of the expert, making it explicit, and of use to the non-expert. Experts’ knowledge consists of a well-integrated body of formal, practical, and self-regulative knowledge. The development of expertise is a long process during which the different elements of expert knowledge are integrated into a coherent whole. This integration can be enhanced by metacognitive tasks such as journaling and reflection (Tynjaelae, 1999). Experts frequently cannot articulate how or why they do what they do. Talking about the implicit knowledge of experts, Vokey (1999) talks of latent knowledge as “hidden” or “unappreciated” and the key feature of this knowledge being that it is somehow out of direct control. The monastics interviewed in this project have insights and knowledge about living the compassionate life and their own motives and decisions. This is similar to the ways experts in other areas hold knowledge that aids decision-making and action, drawing it into their control. But in addition to this, there seems to be increased access to this implicit knowledge, in the form of meta-cognition.

But in addition to concepts of expert knowledge, this research builds on the theory that there is something in the contemplative life, as lived by those devoting time to prayer, meditation, recitation and dwelling on religious writings and on transcendent aspects of life, and intentionally aiming in a compassionate direction, that may increase access to and understanding of the inner mental processes, especially those affecting moral actions of particular interest. This way of life and focus can provide an effective way to integrate the cognitive and emotional for effective moral choice and discernment. This project explores that possibility in order to examine the kinds of actions, attitudes and practices that might inhibit or enhance the giving of compassionate love to others, and to increase understanding of attitudes and decision-making regarding this aspect of life.

## METHODS

## Population and context

This analysis of contemplative psychology formed the inspiration for a series of structured interviews with Trappist Monks. Trappist Monks (also known as Cistercians) are Christians who follow a branch of the Benedictine tradition adhering to the Rule of St. Benedict in a particularly rigorous way (Fry, 1980; King, 1999). Their order has been ongoing since the Middle Ages. They live a moderately isolated life that aims to integrate the life of the spirit with their daily work lives. The monks I interviewed run a mail order fruitcake, fudge and cheese business in the abbey to support themselves, but their primary daily structure centers around seven 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 dialog 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 lift up pitfalls to be aware of. The monks also accept the core value of expressing compassionate love, and hold each other up to that standard within community more than many groups do, so the refining element of community also plays a part. Some have excellent inner equipment for discernment of motives; in others, these skills are rusty or minimal. Most make efforts to keep the detection equipment in good shape, practicing and refining their discernment skills.

This is not an empirical study measuring altruistic actions of the monks, but some context of their behaviors may be useful. Some examples of the ways monks express compassionate love through external behaviors may help better understand the results of this study. This is not to say that the monks are always lovely, peaceful and kind, but to give examples of what that kindness looks like in action when expressed. One of the reasons many people like going to the monastery to visit is that the caring and respectful attitude of the monks provides a great environment for renewal. They express this for the many people that come on retreat, currently about 30–50 a week, each week, in two blocks. Occasional optional lectures/orientation are provided by the monks, food is made and served, counseling is available. No charge is made for any of this. The open hospitality seems magnanimous. It is not a proselytizing environment, but provision of a welcome space—silence is the only requirement. As an example, when I first arrived at the monastery, twelve years ago, to be involved as an advisor for another research project underway, I arrived after a long cab ride out into the country, and a long plane journey with travel delays. It was eleven at night—the guest master who was frail and about 70, walked with me and my suitcase about half a mile across the road in the dark to find the place I was staying, after

patiently calling around to determine where the meeting was being held. During this, he asked about my family, and my travel, and listened with care and attentiveness. Coming in the midst of a whirlwind administrative life it was a balm. He has continued to remember details of my life when I have returned over the years. It was as if my concerns became his concerns.

Those living nearby are also often the beneficiaries of the care of the monks. The rural community in which they are situated benefits from involvement of some of the monks in the practical details of their lives, helping various people in the community financially and with counseling for various practical problems such as housing and healthcare. And as is seen in the results of the interviews, one of the qualities of compassionate love is valuing the other: fundamental human respect. This basic attitude comes across in the majority of interactions with each other as I have seen them and perceived them, and toward visitors and members of the neighboring community, and usually in the way they answer the phone. Further descriptions can be found in the writings of Thomas Merton, a Trappist monk, whose journals describe monastery life (Merton, 1999). One of the things that emerges in his writings is that this is not a group of paragons, but people with flaws and problems and failings.

Within the monastery itself, the monks are a very diverse group of men, many of whom have strong characters, opinions, and habits that might easily drive members of a family to irritation and anger. Compassionate love is expressed in this context in many of the same ways that it can be expressed in a family or community. Although the ordered structure and authority of the monastic life help smooth the wheels of human interaction, the same problems of: "Who does the dishes today?" "Why is he being chosen rather than me for an interesting job?" or "His political views are offensive to me," cause difficulties in interacting. People snore and are unfairly promoted and want things they cannot have. Life in the monastery has similarities to family life, or a close community such as a small town. It takes work to be kind, to sacrifice one's interests and desires for the good of a brother, whom one may not personally like that much. When you are hungry after a long day's labor stirring vats of fruitcake mixture, do you nudge ahead in line, or allow the infirm old monk with a walker to slowly move through the food line ahead of you? When you see someone behaving in a way you feel is stupid, do you subtly put him down, or take the more difficult constructive criticism route? Do you make the case that a younger, brighter monk, should have the plum of a job that you really wanted yourself?

The description above is to provide a context in which to view and interpret the results of the interviews. This study is not primarily addressing external actions, but motivation. It is much easier to help the other if one is young and healthy. It is harder to act helpfully if one is shy. The basics of physical, mental, and cultural make-up are often critical to whether or not one behaves in ways that appear altruistic to others. So altruistic actions are not the final arbiter of compassionate love. When we think of times when we felt truly loved, motivation

and inner impulse of the giver probably had a critical affect on the impact of that love. Did it cost the person something or did we perceive them to be acting in enlightened self-interest? This paper will be examining a method to discover more about the motives for action and the process of working through inner impulses and sorting desires and obligations, rather than measuring specific acts.

The work reported here began with structured, in-depth interviews with thirteen 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. They were selected by the Prior, who knew the monks well, and who asked various monks whether they might be interested in such a study. This group was not selected to be representative of all of those in the monastery.

Trappist monks were selected for this work, not because they were assumed to be more compassionate than an average population sample, but because they were thought to be generally more aware of the process one goes through as compassionate decisions and actions were taken.

### Interview method

The following questions were part of the structured interview. The interview was framed to focus on individual daily experience rather than to lead to intellectual assessment or abstract answers:

- What is the best word or phrase to describe giving of self for the good of the other, other-centered love, the kind of love that a part of your spiritual life as you interact with others? Choose from the following or contribute your own words: Agape, Unconditional Love, Love, Compassionate Love, Altruism, Altruistic Love, and Compassion.
- What are the key defining features/essential components of compassionate love, agape, unconditional love, and self-giving love?
- 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?

Each interview took approximately one hour, and the interviews were conducted over a three-day period. My attitude as an interviewer was very important. A respectful open attitude, inviting and drawing out those who were more quiet or shy or less articulate was important, as was drawing more voluble characters back to the questions. Genuine interest in the person himself, rather than viewing him as a tool to elicit data, actually ended up eliciting data very effectively. It was important that they trusted my confidentiality as a scientist, and that they saw the potential usefulness of the results of the interviews. It was also important that they trusted what I might do with the data. The fact that I had been doing retreats at the monastery for years, had been doing thoughtful published research on spiritual issues, and came well recommended by monks who had worked with me on previous projects helped me to be trusted, and to be granted the interviews by the abbot and the respective monks.

In some ways the interviews reminded me of spiritual directors who ask questions in a non-judgmental way to draw out the reality of one's inner state and outer challenges in a way that helps to inform future actions and attitudes. A number of the monks said that it was helpful to have someone asking these questions specifically, as it focused their thinking on one or the other issue. I was not someone with whom they had to interact with on a daily basis, and I think that also encouraged freedom of expression. Most of them seemed to enjoy the interviews. I have subsequently returned to get feedback on this work, and to interview them on the development of a daily spiritual experiences scale, and the same monks have been willing to be interviewed again.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

One overarching finding 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. The same exact phrase was seldom used more than once.

Another interesting observation was the lack of explicitly religious or theological language in most of the answers. Although it was obvious that the answers were nested in a religious understanding of life, the language and specifics used were not specifically religious. This enables the results of this project to be useful to those who are not Catholic, and beyond that, not Christian. It also suggested directness of the response, rather than trotting out pat answers. It confirmed the hope that the research would be gathering "bottom-up" experiences rather than "top-down" theory. What was for many of them a very theologically laden concept was described primarily in non-theological language. The way the questions were structured and the context of the interview encouraged this.

Another key issue was the general level of honesty of response. Social science research is often impeded by the concept of “social desirability.” In self-report assessments, people’s answers are often shaped by how they want to be perceived, rather than what truly is the case (Paulhus, 1991). So not only is self-deception a problem, but it is overlaid with the desire to look good in others’ eyes. The responses of the monks revealed both an honesty in examining unattractive traits of their own, and also a self-reflective willingness to see the positive in a fresh light. An “Oh yes, I really *do* do that in this situation—that is interesting.”

#### KEY WORD OR PHRASE TO DESCRIBE THE CONCEPT

The words picked most often by the group to describe the concept were “compassionate love.” The second picked was just “love” alone. For the monks the phrase stretched beyond an attitude that was only there when others were suffering, but extended also to supporting others in their joy. For some, the word “love” was enough, but that was because of its use in Christian religious context of scripture and liturgy. To speak to those outside that context, most saw the need to give some sort of descriptor for the word love. It was obvious in the interviews that there was something essentially ineffable and powerful in the reality which the words “agape,” “compassion,” “unconditional love,” and “self-giving love” are trying to describe, and ultimately words fall short. The word “altruism” in particular does not capture the fullness of the construct. It is nested within the wider concept, but compassionate love captures an investment of self deeper than “altruism” suggests, a dimension that cannot be fully assessed through external evaluations of actions. For the monks, “agape,” a word I expected them to choose, was something that was beyond our grasp, and more descriptive of God’s love than our human love for one another.

It was interesting that their choice of the wording of “compassionate love” fit with the conclusions of a World Health Organization working group on the role of spirituality in quality of life at a meeting in Geneva. In a multi-religious group of health professionals, including Buddhists, Muslims, Christians, Jews, Agnostics, Atheists and others, the compromise phrase for this concept, to be elaborated in that study combined compassion with love (Saxena, O’Connell and Underwood, 2002).

#### KEY FEATURES

Central features of compassionate love mentioned 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 stated in the following ways.



“*To set aside one’s own agenda for the sake of, to strengthen, or to give life to the other.*” This comment came from a monk who had much experience guiding and leading others, working as counselor and leader. This definition helped to fill in the concept of compassionate love beyond just the relief of “suffering” defined narrowly. This phrase has been used subsequently as a definitional one for the concept for scientists and others, and the phrase has had power to elicit the subtleties involved in this complex phenomenon.

“*To experience, be present, to the situation of the other.*” This phrase is a summary of the notion of listening to the situation fully, and allowing an action or attitude to emerge, rather than settling on a solution to the problem immediately. It allows action to unfold in the context of complexity and/or grace. “*To have a mature view of reality,*” was considered important. This was important particularly for discernment of the most loving thing to do. The emphasis was on having a clear picture of reality that is shaped by experience and insight over time. This picture enabled one to place actions and words effectively in a way that gave them power. It also enabled one to have an appropriate view of one’s own place in life as a whole.

“*To accept yourself in order to accept others,*” was considered important. It was interesting to hear the monks’ approach to humility—a realistic appraisal of themselves. Their acceptance of themselves began with an acute awareness of their flaws, but in the context of their life and awareness that their flaws did not prevent them from accepting themselves, and also accepting others. Another feature that came up as key was *being aware of one’s own emotions*, which enables one to act rather than react.

*Really 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 of another and their needs, to value the other as they are. There was an awareness of something greater than one’s self, that was worth sacrificing one’s own satisfaction for, and that shaped behaviors. “*To suffer with another,*” was one characteristic of compassionate love in certain circumstances.

“*To help another become fully themselves,*” was an interesting way of describing compassionate love that I have found myself subsequently reflecting on in specific situations. It is an interesting criterion for love that moves beyond the relief of suffering and helps one to decide on appropriate actions, and sets the tone of the attitude towards another. All of these features merit further exploration and elaboration. One interesting fact to note is the practical concreteness of the features, and relative absence of obvious religion-specific language.

The monks’ articulation of these various features of compassionate love helped, when combined with data from empirical studies and theological writings, to identify a set of key definitional features to set the stage for scientific research in this area. In the end the following key issues were used as definitional for the concept for further research:

- 1) Free choice for the other
- 2) Cognitive understanding of the situation
- 3) Understanding of self, knowing ourselves and our agendas

- 4) Valuing the other at a fundamental level
- 5) Openness and receptivity
- 6) Response of the heart

PROCESSES IN MOTIVATION AND DISCERNMENT LEADING TO  
THE EXPRESSION OF LOVE

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 the quality of awareness of motives. It can enable one to sift effectively 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. It is particularly in the area of illuminating motives and processes that drive action that the monastic insights can be especially helpful. Motives and discernment can be crucial for whether the act has power in the world and whether it transforms and builds up the person who does it.

*Two basic approaches* emerged for balancing issues and sifting motives, as decisions were made on how best to express compassionate love in situations. Some monks were more analytic, using a decision-making process relevant to specific situations. Others were more intuitive, depending on a “way of life” or a “lens” to base individual decisions. While some monks were more analytic and some more intuitive, most used a combination of the two approaches. Overall, the analytic approach was the more dominant, but a few of the monks used the analytic approach very little.

The following responses describe the *analytic* approach. There was much overlap among the individual people, but there were 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 towards the other?” A conscious awareness of the competing demands of self and other, and a desire and willingness to shift the balance towards the other emerged here. Another, in dealing with that same issue said, “I quiet myself down, to get myself out of the way,” using a conscious technique to enable choice for the good of the other to be manifest. It was considered important to let go of “grasping” feelings. By being aware of those feelings, that particular monk was better able to make decisions that gave compassionately to the other rather than defending himself and his interests. One monk said that it was important to make sure that what others would say was not driving his actions. Reflection on what was “driving the bus” (my words) of action was useful here, and awareness that what others would say or think of him was not a reliable motivator for expressing compassionate love.

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.” An example of this was that it is a lot easier to help nicer people than ones who are unattractive and unpleasant. Being aware of that helps one to see where extra energy might need to be applied in the case of being compassionate towards people who are not as nice.

The description of “weighing” values came up often. One monk described the process of weighing values, noting that he gave some weight to the needs of his own self, but gave it less weight than he gave to the needs of others. It was also 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. The importance of clear perception, and also utilizing intuition was expressed. One signal that the decision-making process was going in an appropriate direction was a sense of deep inner freedom or a peaceful content. There was much overlap among the individual people, but also distinctive styles and tools that reflected many individual characters.

The second approach given to the process of expressing compassionate love was the “*way of life*” lens. A number of the monks said things like “compassion is a way of life.” Or they stated a certain attitude that under-girded their actions. Given that attitude, they just then acted in a way that gave of self for the good of the other, without really thinking consciously about it. There were specific basic underlying attitudes of heart that shape decisions of compassionate love.

One of these underlying attitudes was valuing the other. If one considers the other to be of significant value, it is easier to give time and energy in service of his or her wellbeing. Beginning with the attitude of extending oneself or “willingness” was another basic attitude that was mentioned. One monk mentioned that he had no awareness of the details of whether he was acting compassionately or not until afterwards, and then looking back on it, or feedback from others, enabled him to see his actions or words in that light.

One last underlying fundamental attitude came in a number of the interviews, both with those with a predominately way of life lens, but particularly in those with a predominantly analytical approach. This was that it was very important not to be depending on others for one’s own identity. If one depended on others for identity, then it was harder to be freely compassionate. The importance of this came up repeatedly, and this may be a key attitude to explore as we look to encourage the expression of compassionate love in the world.

#### 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 can 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 my self (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

These detracting motives and others have been articulated well by a variety of authors. C.S. Lewis (1960) describes “need loves” as a baseline of different feelings on which more “other-regarding” love is built, but which can also detract from compassionate love being fully expressed. Jean Vanier (1998) says that “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.” Adrian van Kaam (1964) 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.”

An awareness of many of these motives that detract from love emerged in the interviews with the monks in various ways, and was dealt with often in the descriptive features of love, the way of life lens, and the practices adopted to encourage love’s full expression. They didn’t come up as much in the direct interview question of what gets in the way of love. As an answer to this specific question, the most common responses from the monks were selfishness, fear, and desire to be liked or to look well in other’s eyes.

#### ENVISIONING SELF AND OTHER

One of the main controversies in the social scientific study of altruistic actions hinges on the relationship between self and other. Sociobiologists and others have called into question whether altruism really exists at all. Richard Dawkin’s well-publicized book, *The Selfish Gene* (1976), argues that all actions are ultimately selfish. And E.O. Wilson and others see many altruistic acts that do not directly work towards saving one’s own life, as ultimately “preserving the gene pool,” by helping those of similar genetic stock (Wilson, 1975). They use this theory to

explain behaviors such as saving the life of a drowning child while sacrificing one's own. Some of these arguments ultimately pale when actions, such as the rescuing of Jews by non-Jews during WWII, are presented (Oliner and Oliner, 1988). The helping of someone from the genetic "out-group" has been held up as an example of extreme altruism, which defies selfish explanations. A number of scholars, trying to further destroy the concept of non-selfish motives, have come up with the concept that when expressing altruism to the other, the self and the other are envisioned as one and the same, and therefore the help for the other is really helping the enlarged or encompassing self (e.g., Monroe, 1996). This is different than the concept that someone very different is seen as *like* me, even though different in various characteristics.

The question of how the monks envisioned the self and the other when giving compassionate love was relevant to this issue. The majority of the monks saw self and other as distinct in the process of daily interactions. For these, although there was a link or connection between self and the other, the *distinction* was also there. One noted that we carry out actions that help another while realizing that they can actually hurt ourselves, and that this realization implies a subjective distinction between self and other. On the other hand, a minority articulated it as a blurred distinction. One comment in this regard was that "the distinction dissolves when in a compassionate moment." Reference to levels of engagement was also used by those who found the distinction blurred: "we unite at a deeper level of the self" or "we are all one at a deep level."

It is to be noted that there is a real distinction between acceptance of the other and a sense of being united with the other. The monks had that acceptance of the other but not necessarily a sense of self and other merging.

#### EMPATHY

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, all except two felt it was not essential to do so in order to express compassionate love. The substrate components of capacity for empathy and empathic accuracy (whether what we discern about the other is what they are truly feeling) can vary across individuals. The ability to express compassionate love without the experience of empathy would enable those who may not be empathically gifted to still have the opportunity to express compassionate love. This was an important issue to explore in the context of the research on altruism. Dan Batson, an exemplary altruism researcher, has an empathy-altruism hypothesis that says, among other things, that empathy is an essential component of true altruism (Batson, 1991). My results suggest otherwise. I find this of particular importance in the light of the Damasio's research on neural damage (Damasio, 1984). There are people who have damage to areas of the brain that keep them from feeling empathy, and there are people born with

less innate capacity for empathy. My findings indicate that it is still possible to express compassionate love in situations where empathic abilities are diminished.

#### PRACTICES

Another important part 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 with 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 community were both mentioned as being helpful.

As an individual, it was considered important to develop a strong identity and awareness of who one is, which doesn't depend on other people. Spending time in quiet and alone was one way to foster that identity and awareness and was felt to support the compassionate life generally. This helps one to be able to be more easily at ease with oneself. This was raised particularly well by the abbot, who had had much experience over time encouraging growth in love in other monks as well as himself. Prayer was frequently cited as a key element that supported compassionate love—connecting with a common “ground of being” was how one monk expressed that. For some it was expressed as a source of love for them. Spiritual reading was important to ground one in writings of wisdom. And 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 was 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, which the monastic rule helps to shape, 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. Learning about people and how the world functions was considered important in making correct decisions about the appropriate expression of love. It was mentioned that, although personal differences, irritations, and disagreements are present in the monastery, it was easier there to avoid aggression and violence, and this was helpful in creating an atmosphere conducive to compassion.

Some of the practices were particularly supported by the monastic lifestyle, but many translate to how one might structure life outside the monastery. For example, a monk described that 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 which was unseen. This was a practice that developed the capacity for other-centered actions in him.

## Feedback from the monks

After writing up the interviews, I returned six months later and talked with each monk, sending them a written piece ahead of time, and asking for feedback on the work in general and my conceptualization of compassionate love, and especially on how I had summed up the interviews and articulated themes. This gave them a chance to see the set of interviews combined, with each response nested within that and gave them feedback about how their ideas fit with those of others in their community. It also gave me some valuable feedback.

Generally the monks said that my written piece gave a good set of comments that reflected the kinds of ways of thinking and attitude present in the monastery. Some had interesting ideas regarding next steps in research, and were interested in external validation. One was interested in taking the contemplative psychology writings and working with me over time to see what in particular that approach had to contribute to developing the inner lives of the monks in that monastery. Another shared a text with me (Vacek, 1994) that I had not discovered in my research that has subsequently been an excellent resource. One monk is using the list of things that impeded the expression of compassionate love in a small group he holds for lay people once a month. This opportunity to discuss this with them afterwards was invaluable, and I would recommend it being included as part of the methodology for this kind of research.

## Comparison with student interviews

Recently I have had the opportunity to collect some student interviews using the same series of questions. As part of a class project, the students in my Lee Honors College course at Western Michigan University selected people whom they considered insightful, caring and able to reflect deeply on the concept of compassionate love, and they interviewed them. The students overall have said that compared to data from the monastics, the people they interviewed were not able to articulate issues with as much complexity and insight. Nevertheless interesting themes did emerge, and this data is currently being analyzed. Similar answers, for example, were given from a variety of interviewees indicating that empathy is not essential for the expression of compassionate love, and that self and other maintained distinctness in the process.

## CONCLUSION

One major goal of research on compassionate love is 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 motives that detract from the quality of love. Clarification of additional issues, such as the concept of self and its boundaries, and balancing of priorities, is important for the effectiveness of such a model. Various methods, such as external assessment of outcomes, self-report, physiological measures and experimental models, can all support our understanding of the topic. Scientific research methods in this area can benefit from methods such as those used in this study that utilize tools for clear discernment and awareness of internal processes. Utilization of interviews of monastics can yield good results in this regard, which might inform work examining motive in other areas.

There were a number of interesting findings using the methodology described here. For example, 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 life—came up time and again. A balanced view of the importance of self and other was also significant. A spiritually grounded perspective on the self 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, which may have important implications for appropriate expression of compassionate love. The degree of individual difference gives insight on the many strategies and attitudes that people can use to express compassionate love fully in their lives even among a group who would be considered to be like-minded by many.

Both the insights and the methods of this work can be informative. There are practices and insights provided in the interviews on the substance of daily life as one puts together the needs and desires of others and the needs and desires of oneself. The lives of the monks, although different from life outside the monastery, have many of same kinds of problems presented by family, community and work lives. The kinds of social and mental tactics and resources that they have illuminated can be helpful in informing compassionate love in friendships and local community life.

An important methodological issue in social science research is getting honest reflections of what drives individual actions. The issue of self-deception has been raised in memory research in particular (Schacter, 2001) but also in epidemiological research on health and health behaviors, and in research into racial and sexual stereotyping (Gaertner and Dovidio, 1986). For example, tests developed at Harvard to measure implicit and explicit prejudice using computer testing have shown that although we often say we are not prejudiced, and truly believe that we are not, when forced to respond quickly, prejudicial attitudes emerge (Nozick, Banaji and Greenwald, 2002). The monastics have cultivated ways to avoid self-deception that could be useful in encouraging others to be able to report accurately on internal attitudes, motives and desires. A kind of radical honesty about the self is present here that could provide an opportunity to understand how this operates, and help to decrease general discrepancy between implicit and explicit self-reports in other arenas.



The degree of self-awareness of internal processes arising from a contemplative life style 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, lead to better self-report which could inform ways to encourage more loving, compassionate behavior. The quality of compassionate love that is present in an act is inextricably connected to 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.

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