**Opening comments:**

Because selflessness is a prerequisite for Buddhist compassion to arise we will spend the first night attempting to get a taste of selflessness. The second night we will spend much more time defining Buddhist compassion itself and the important differences between “Sympathy, Empathy and Buddhist Compassion using modern psychology, neuroscience and biology.

* Compassion arises naturally when obstructions to it are taken away.

Jay Michaelson.

* If there is no you, there is no other.

Lisa Cairns.

The key dynamic for compassion to arise is the ability to perceive others without seeing them through the filter of your individual egoic desires and needs.

* To study Buddhism is to study the self.

To study the self is to forget the self.

To forget the self is to be one with others.

Dogen

But what does it mean to “forget the self”? First, we must study the self in order to see beyond (*forget*) the self.

* Only one koan matters, you.

Ikkyu Sojun.

Studying the self, a guided meditation:

Hold up your right thumb in front of your face.

Spend a few moments studying the way it looks.

Try and commit this image to memory as well as possible.

Now, close your eyes and place the image of your thumb in your mind. With your eyes still closed and the image still present, ask yourself, what are the dimensions of this image, height, width and depth?

How much does this image weigh?

Where *exactly* in my head does this image reside?

Now ask yourself; are there two right thumbs of mine existing in this room? Or only one *real* thumb and one **representation** of that thumb?

The thumb on your hand can act upon other things in the world. Its reality can be tested and verified by others.

If you then answer there is only one real thumb then what does it mean for the thumb in your mind to **not** be *real* and yet ***occurs*** as a thumb representation in your mind?

The thumb representation in your mind *occurs*, phenomenologically speaking, but is it *real*?

While keeping your eyes closed.

Now, press your right thumb against your right index finger. You can feel this pressure in your fingers due to the parts of your brain that register stimuli from the nerves in your thumb and index finger. This is due to part of your somatosensory system. The *sensation* of pressure *seems* to be located in your thumb and index finger. But if you suffer nerve damage in those fingers would you still be able to *feel* the pressure? No. So in addition to your real thumb and the visual representation of a thumb in your mind you also have a representation of a thumb in the somatosensory areas of your brain.

**Now open your eyes** but continue to press your thumb and index finger together while looking at those fingers for a moment.

**Now again close your eyes** while continuing to press your thumb and index finger together and picture those fingers in your mind. In essence you now have THREE right thumbs occurring in this room. One real thumb. One visual representation of a thumb and index finger and one physical nerve/brain based representation of a thumb and index finger.

**While keeping your eyes closed** Relax your fingers but, Imagine that you have been preparing garlic for a pasta sauce and then put your thumb in your mouth for some reason. Your thumb would taste like garlic wouldn’t it? Now pretend you are preparing a pie crust for desert later. If you put your thumb in your mouth after that it might taste like butter and graham crackers. So, do thumbs taste like garlic or graham crackers intrinsically or permanently? Of course not, only occasionally and due to different contexts and interactions.

This body isn't yours I say to myself  
wherever I am I'm there.

Ikkyu

By now you might be realizing real topic of this meditation not only about fingers, but how we know the self, it self.

**Open your eyes**

**Cognition, the Embodied self, The Embedded self, and the representational self (ego).** Dr. Lisa Aziz Zadeh, Neuroscientist.

**Cognition:** is an all-encompassing process that is much larger than just thinking and conscious perceiving. According to a recent study, 99.44% of all mental processing occurs at the unconscious level. Awareness or the ability of the body to register stimulus and respond is mostly unconscious and determined by our ***embedded*** and ***embodied*** cognitive structure.

**Embodied Cognition:** The entire body influences cognition. “The Five Aggregates” Body, Feelings, Perceptions, Mental formations, consciousness*.* There are actually neurons throughout our bodies, in our muscles and in our stomachs. Our nerves, neurons and endocrine system are in constant back and forth communication with our brains.

*“We do not see the world as it is, we see the world as we are”* Anais Nin.

**Embedded cognition:** The dynamics of the entire universe and the world we inhabit both create and influences our morphology and cognitive structure. Or in Buddhist terms: “Dependent Origination”.

**\*Morphology** is a branch of biology dealing with the study of the form and structure of organisms and their specific structural features. Wikipedia.

**Embodied Self**:

So, where is the self? You have a body to be sure. But without a nervous system you could never ***feel* its presence** in your subconscious and conscious mind. Without the minds ability to represent your thumbs image, the worlds image and your body in this mind created representative world you would not even “***know***” that you were a body in a world. ***What you “know” of a “you” in a world is all representation based on interaction****.* The representation in-itself is insubstantial, “*like foam bubbles riding on the water on the river Ganges”*. The representation of a self is a ***multivariant*** transitory occurrence based on sense contact between a world, a body and a cognitive mind/body structure. But representations are not real in of themselves! All we *consciously* “know” of our body and world is not *real.* It is based on a real bodies senses and nervous systems interaction with a real world to be sure. The very act of “Knowing” anything is essentially an act of ***Biased*** and ***limited*** representation. But the ***knowing*** of a ***“self”*** is not the body in its entirety nor the total influencing context which the body inhabits.

**The Embedded Self**. Our bodies exist on a planet in a particular universe within a certain time epoch. This has resulted in our carbon based life forms that have very particular biological needs created in response to our specific environment. What we are or how we respond to the world we inhabit is completely determined by the physical forces present within this larger context. We have only a small range of possible responses to our context, most of which is determined subconsciously or without conscious awareness. ***I am not the author of me. The context of this universe is.***

**The Representational Self**. So the “Self” we are ***consciously*** aware of is a contextually derived multivariant representation in consciousness. Yet at this time in history no one really knows what conscious component itself is made of! Consciousness *occurs* yet it does not seem to *exist in any physical sense* we have as of yet discovered. This “self” is not “Real”, though phenomenologically speaking, it does occur. Consciousness and a self that arises in it are *like* a dream, but not exactly a dream as it does respond and correspond real objects *most of the time*.

***The lust-ridden shrouded in darkness, do not see this dhamma, which goes against the stream…*Buddha, under the Bodhi Tree**

So why do we normally experience and believe the “dream of a self”? Why do we not normally experience the Buddhist truth of “no-self” without specific training or fortunate happenstance? Because immediate survival is evolutionarily more important than long term happiness. We need only a narrow range of the representational functions of cognition to navigate a world of many dangers. We need to be able to represent a world, and a self in it, to ***know*** where *we* are and what is happening around us. We need a map of ***us*** in ***a world*** to plan for the future and learn from our experiential past. Through ***preorganized cognitive structures*** our minds will experience a conscious self verbally deliberating our circumstances and feeling the positive or negative valence of emotions that percolate from our bodies and it’s mostly subconscious homeostatic mandates. The neurological functioning of brain structures that create a conscious sense of self in a world is collectively called the “Default Mode Network”. Our personal cognition is primarily about us *as individuals*. ***As such the integrity of this self-image process is paramount to its mission of integrity of a body***. How the image and feelings are doing is the only gauge of how an **otherwise** **non-conscious body** is doing. The ego-self does not *want* to be seen as insubstantial. Dissolution of the ego dream is seen by the ego as death itself. Ego death or the “dark night of the soul” is often described as the only death you will ever “**know**” and be aware of.

So there is no permanent substantial “self” in awareness. Why does this matter? And what has it to do with compassion?

Once we experience the dissolution of ego and the unreality of the self-construct (in operational terms, the ***temporary*** collapse of the default mode network function) **our still functioning cognitive awareness opens to what is both before and beyond the construction of the ego self. Namely awareness itself**. ***An awareness shorn of its attachment to its’ ego demands, desires and aversions (Dukkha).*** One of the side effects of being released from the energetic demands of being an ego-self is a HUGE release of emotionally contracted energies manifest in the body. You feel wonderful and at peace with everything in your, now ***non-judgmental, perceptual field***. Gratitude for this release overflows from your mind and body. The awareness now not only sees and understands the ego dream as a dream but ***also immediately understands that all other sentient beings are needlessly suffering inside the same ego dream***. The aware **wisdom** (right seeing) now gained knows for sure that people are suffering due to ignorance of view and that there is an end to suffering and that there is a path to the end of suffering. An expansive Compassion automatically spills outward toward the welfare of others as there is no ego contrived separation between others and ourselves. There establishes a fervent desire for all others to no longer suffer and to share what is established here in this awake awareness.

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**Night 2**

**Sympathy, Empathy and Compassion from scientific perspectives**

**According to neuroscientist Dr. Lisa Aziz-Zedah;**

**Sympathy:** Only requires thinking and mentalizing an abstract understanding of feeling and intentions of the other person. Sociopaths have the ability to do this but not the ability to emotionally mirror nor be empathetic.

**Empathy**

Dr. Aziz-Zedah*.* Empathy is Actually ***feeling***what that other person feels facilitated through our ***Mirror Neuron*** system. Mirror Neurons use our **PRE-motor** neurons as they fire when we see others act and show emotions. Mirror neurons are the basis for *empathetic* response.

Wikipedia: “*A****mirror neuron****is a neuron that fires both when an animal acts and when the animal observes the same action performed by another*. Thus, the neuron "mirrors" the behavior of the other, as though the observer were itself acting. In humans, brain activity consistent with that of mirror neurons has been found in the premotor cortex, the supplementary motor area, the primary somatosensory cortex, and the inferior parietal cortex”. In other words, ***there are specific brain structures that create empathy.***

Dr. Paul Bloom, Professor of psychology at Yale wrote a book called:

[Against Empathy: The Case for Rational Compassion - Bing video](https://www.bing.com/videos/search?q=paul+bloom+empathy+article&docid=608018772392936446&mid=71F479D7CE877275E05871F479D7CE877275E058&view=detail&FORM=VIRE)

Dr Bloom states: *“Empathy is like a spot light, it zooms you in on particular people. It is subject to personal bias and myopia and it is insensitive to numbers.* \*you cannot mirror the death pain of a thousand people.

*Empathy has an extreme personal bias* (Ex: white, male, good looking…etc).

*The higher empathy you feel for victims the more aggressive you act against perpetrators of those crimes because YOU feel the victims pain so intensely and* ***personally****.*

*Empathy exhausts you through expression of negative emotions, compassion charges you up through* ***boundary-less*** *Joy”.*

So, empathy is dependent the personal autobiographical details resonant to the body that is feeling it as well as the concurrent limited ego self-representation of that body. In short, **empathy is personal! Compassion is impersonal.**

Empathy is influenced by personal judgement that is always part of the ego structures’ homeostatic imperatives of aversion and desire. Compassion has no judgmental component to it and is open to all without consideration of number or ***type*** of sentient beings.

Now consider the narrowness of empathetic response to people outside our perceived group, culture, or similar physical appearances. If others are not “**like**” us they are not included in our empathetic responses. Further if someone from *outside* our perceived group hurts someone *inside* the group our fear and anger response is aroused. ***We will seek a retributive form of “justice” against these offenders without awareness of nor compassion for their ultimately “embedded existence”.***

**Compassion**

Neuroscientist Dr. Lisa Aziz-Zedah says: “*Compassion is**A feeling of warmth for the other person that results in proactive behavior where you actually want to do something to help them*”**.**

Dr. James R. Doty, clinical professor in the Department of Neurosurgery at Stanford University, and the Director of the Centre for Compassion and Altruism Research and Education says: “*That fundamentally being compassionate or caring for others is actually our default mode. We are wired to care for others*”. Further Dr. Doty states that: “***In this place you don’t feel any need to be more than you are, or*** ***to create a projection of yourself***. *Your faults and mistakes don’t matter and you are then resourced to share this feeling with others. When someone acts with compassionate intention, it takes them out of the threat mode and puts them into the rest and digest mode. What happens when that occurs is it changes how they respond to events. Instead of a quick response, oftentimes based on fear or anxiety, it allows for a much more deliberative or discerning response which typically is much more effective, and more creative because it’s allowing your executive control area of your brain (prefrontal Cortex…) to function at its best”*. Studies at Emory University have demonstrated that a regular compassion meditation practice reduces negative neuroendocrine, inflammatory and behavioural responses to psychosocial stress (This allows you to switch to your parasympathetic nervous system as the driver, as opposed to your fear response, which is your sympathetic nervous system). And Dr. Doty cites research by Stephanie Brown, a professor at SUNY Stony Brook University has shown that the act of being compassionate also inspires others to be compassionate, affecting their wellbeing and creating a positive feedback loop.

In summation, compassion is using different neural connectomes than either sympathy or empathy. *\*A connectome is a functional group of neurons*

**Ways to practice!**

The Old Pond - Matsuo Basho

The old pond

A frog leaps in

Plop

Why is this poem so popular? It is selfless! There is no perspective of a judging self stated. There is ***only what is*** ***seen*** without judgmental embellishment.

Bahiya said to the Blessed One “Teach me the Dhamma, O Blessed One!

"Then, Bahiya, you should train yourself thus: In reference to the seen, there will be ***only*** the seen. In reference to the heard, only the heard. In reference to the sensed, only the sensed. In reference to the cognized, only the cognized. That is how your should train yourself. When for you there will be only the seen in reference to the seen, only the heard in reference to the heard, only the sensed in reference to the sensed, only the cognized in reference to the cognized, then, Bahiya, ***there is no you*** in terms of that. When there is no you in terms of that, there is no you there. When there is no you there, you are neither here nor yonder nor between the two. This, just this, is the end of stress."

**Daily practice**

Every time you have an emotional feeling and related thoughts there-of, a grasping at or aversion to, what is being perceived you are *engaging*your “default mode network” and a reified sense of a narrative ego self. The more you do this the more neurons create strengthened connectomes of this function.

When you ***feel*** this desire or aversion of the self-ing function, try to shift to an open awareness stance with an air of ***curiosity*** ***about*** these feelings and thoughts. Pay attention to ***how*** these feelings and thoughts exist rather than getting caught up in ***what*** feelings and thoughts exist. What has this mental content come in response to? When was the exact onset? How long does this aversion or desire last? What homeostatic purpose is ***underlying*** these feelings and thoughts? Gaming these feelings and thoughts out into the future, ask “are the outcomes of these feelings and thoughts skillful or detrimental relatives to the Buddhist eightfold path”?

If you do not yet have the skill to shift to open awareness and to not get lost in in the details of your narrative self and its desires and aversions, then try out to a simple wider perspective and pay attention to ***how*** the **entire perceptual** field exist as opposed to ***what*** ***exactly*** exists within this field by remembering “**The 3 characteristics”** of the **“Right View”**. All phenomenon are impermanent, including the thoughts and feelings you are currently having. Wait them out and see if this is true. Desires rise and fall. Do they not? Aversions lose their energy over time and changing circumstance. Do they not? Continually ruminating these same thoughts adds energy to the suffering does it not? What remains when the desires and aversions ultimately pass? Big hint, Awareness itself!

These initially ***willful and conscious*** practices will change your perspective on phenomenon and engage different connectomes in in your cognitive machinery. The more you engage an open compassionate awareness and disengage ego-self functioning the more these connectomes strengthen and become a more baseline ***unconscious response*** to stimuli. ***Your become what you practice!***

**Some consequences of a selfless compassionate view:**

**Doership and the perspectival change. Body, awareness, ego and the search for the self.**

The conscious “You” (ego-self narrative) are not the doer of your actions. “You” is what is being done (by the embedded and embodied ***body*** and its sensory based representational system). This sensory representational system (or sensorium) consists of the non-conscious body and it’s physical sensory systems that create a ***conscious*** ***sensible*** **awareness** and the **contents contained in this awareness.** Contents are all the internal and external sense data and the posited narrative ego self in the representative created world of the mind. Without training, or lucky happenstance, most people will always have the tacit and unexamined perspective that the narrative ego self IS the body and the only identity that could ever be **known**. Once you ***fully*** examine this tacit assumption through **vipassana (insight) practices**, you will come to realize that the narrative ego-self only ***exists within*** a **silent felt present awareness** that is both imperturbable and always consciously accessible. Over time and growth of insight, our once tacit perspectival view of our world from narrative ego-self, shifts to a view of a wider pure awareness that **encompasses and sees the narrative ego-self as just part of the created sensorium that body and its sense network creates**. While this shift slowly occurs (sometimes swiftly!) you must be wary of the ego structure’s attempts to now expand the definition of itself by conflating “Awareness” and the “ego” as a permanent existing center. Ultimately “awareness” is also a construct of the bodies unconscious cognitive apparatus. The unconscious body and its impermanent embedded and embodied structure can never be **“Known”** as a thing unto itself. ***A representational function can never know the totality of the structure creating the representation*** (or the map is not the territory). *We can never know ourselves instantaneously and indivisibly as body, awareness and contents of awareness, \*including ego.* We can only **know** ourselves as ***subject*** (that which is aware) or ***object*** (ego self within the mentally created sensorium world). Or, stated differently, either the **knower** (awareness), or that which is **known** (ego self in a world). Both knower and that which is known is not *“Self”* in totality. There is no *“Self”* that can be *known* apart from consciousness. The unconscious cognitive body and the body that the actual universe, full of the transient causes and conditions that created the temporary body, cannot be ultimately and completely known.

As the famous Stoic Philospher; Popeye The Sailor Man always said “I am what I am and that’s all that I am”. Or there is only simply the sensorium and the mystery behind it!

**Not self, free will and compassionate justice.**

As we discussed on night one of this presentation we exist as a body embedded in a universe and a culture we ourselves did not create. We cannot ask to be born to particular set of parents in a particular time and place. Our physical senses are embodied in a particular body created by evolutionary forces not of our own personal creation. “**Will**” is a cognitive product of these embedded and embodied forces, mostly unconsciously derived, and only made conscious through the feelings and thoughts of the created ego self-image. Because of the *conscious illusion of self* we tend to believe the conscious experience of the world that occurs in our heads **as us deliberating and making decisions** “***free”*** of influences. **Influences that are outside of our conscious awareness in other words**. Through what is known as “theory of mind” we also surmise that others operate in this **completely conscious** way as they make decisions in response to the world. We there for tend to “blame” them for any perceived injustices carried out by their conscious deliberations. We assign guilt (the negative assessment of self-image), blame (enabled by the false theory of free agents) and punishment (to create suffering that can be cognized by the supposed free agent to deter bad behaviors). As you can tell from Buddhist practice those who are not “awake” to these illusory structures cannot ever claim to have a true and more complete awareness of the nature of what the self is and how it is influenced by myriad causes and conditions. Without a fully awake awareness can anyone be considered “guilty”? Shouldn’t criminal justice instead consist of segregating offenders to protect society at large and institute psychotherapies and spiritual disciplines to compassionately rehabilitate offenders? Why further punish the already cursed?