"Empathy on Trial: Is Empathy Inherently Biased?"

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ABSTRACT

Yale psychologist Paul Bloom is making a case against empathy when it comes to ethical deliberation and action. According to Bloom, emotional empathy has a dark side because it causes an in-group bias that leads to parochialism and racism. Our helping behavior is selectively aimed at those like us and, as a result, blinds us to the suffering in distant global settings. In arriving at his position, Bloom provides support from Buddhist philosophy and practice that make his argument even more relevant to multicultural and global dialogue. This paper offers response to Bloom's criticisms by unveiling the limits of cognitive approach that he recommends. Evidence from studies in neuroscience demonstrates that cognition and emotions are inseparable, and both could lead to bias. Furthermore, Bloom's interpretation of Buddhist thought and practice is questioned. Likewise, his suspicion of emotions while relying on impartiality of cognitive processes is found problematic due to the dualistic nature of his argument that elevates rationality over emotions. Instead, this paper proposes an alternative interpretation of Buddhist philosophy and meditation that might provide valuable resources for less biased prosocial action. Based on recent findings, it is argued that Buddhist-derived, secular forms of mindfulness and compassion meditations might offer helpful strategies in countering racial and in-group bias when helping others as well as lessen exhaustion and burnout in prosocial work.

KEYWORDS: empathy, compassion, bias, prejudice, mindfulness, Buddhism, prosocial work, burnout

In a series of recent articles, Yale psychologist Paul Bloom makes a case against empathy when it comes to ethical deliberation and action.[1] His definition of empathy involves "putting yourself in other people's shoes, feeling what you think they are feeling."[2] Emotional empathy, claims Bloom, has a dark side because it pushes us, at best, to burnout and exhaustion and, at worst, to parochialism and racism.[3] Instead of relying on emotion-ridden empathy, Bloom proposes a rationally based alternative, a utilitarian cost–benefit approach of cognitive empathy (a skill of understanding the thoughts and feelings of others). Given that major world religions speak of the importance of empathy and compassion for moral development, this discussion

concerning the dangers of empathy has a clear significance for religious studies scholars. In what follows, I will examine Bloom's concerns about empathy and its limitations. While Bloom presents important data considering our partiality when helping others, his suspicion of emotions while relying on impartiality of cognitive processes is problematic due to the dualistic nature of his argument that elevates rationality over emotions. In contrast, an emerging body of research has shown that emotion and cognition are tightly interconnected even if separable conceptually.[4] Finally, I will reject Bloom's interpretation of Buddhist teachings and meditative practices, which he sees as supportive of his cognitive empathy approach. On the contrary, I will argue that the value of Buddhist teachings and meditative strategies comes from regulating both mind and body, with the end result of promoting individual as well as socially beneficial goals.

EMPATHY AS FLAWED

Bloom provides several examples that illustrate the empathic flaws. One of the problems that he lists has to do with "the identifiable victim effect" where empathy clashes with fairness. In a classic experiment, people were shown the name and picture of a girl who needs a life-saving medication. They offered more money to this girl than to eight other children who needed the same medication but whose pictures were not disclosed. In addition, subjects in this experiment were told that the girl was low on the waiting list for a treatment to relieve pain and were given an option of moving her to the front of the list knowing that a more deserving child might not be getting medical attention. A majority of the subjects initially refused to do so, but after an empathy prompt to feel what the girl was feeling, the majority complied to move her to the front of the list. In both cases, argues Bloom, the decisions reached were unethical due to emotional empathy. It is clearly wrong to give a priority for medical attention to this girl only because one is identifying with her suffering. One life is not worth more than eight.

Furthermore, he argues that empathy is influenced by an in-group bias so that the American public pays more attention to an eighteen-year-old American student who is missing on vacation in Aruba than to the genocide in Darfur. In Bloom's own words, one important factor is likely

> ... the force of empathy, which renders the suffering of an attractive white American and her family more salient to white Americans than the suffering of many thousands of faraway strangers. In the domain of charitable giving, our choices are often driven by images of adorable, identifiable victims and lovable animals like polar bears and pandas and not based on the actual impact that our money can have.[5]

Bloom makes important points here. Our empathy for others seems to be biased with a preference given to the attractive, identifiable victim or a victim with whom one shares ethnic or national background. The narrowness of empathy is particularly troubling when empathy appears insensitive to the climate crisis because there is no

directly identifiable victims and only future costs. Likewise, the linking of empathy to recognizable victims makes it vulnerable to bias when dealing with a large number of people or when statistical concerns are a matter of "barely perceptible increase in preventable deaths" (such as when preventing deaths by vaccinating children).[6] Overlooking the statistical information regarding actual victims, emotional empathy makes us care more about the one than the mass as long as we have personal information about the one.[7] Emotional empathy is also of little help to others because feeling the pain of others is overwhelming, which could lead to empathetic distress or lead to a burnout over the long haul. In either case, a distressed or a burnout person is in no shape to assist others. This is not to say that emotional empathy cannot motivate kindness, but such empathy cannot guarantee kindness. Instead, there is evidence that misdirected empathy could result in "cruel and irrational actions, including atrocities and war."[8]

What should be then our approach according to Bloom? He argues that we need to get rid of emotional empathy altogether. When we do so,

> Our policies are improved when we appreciate that a hundred deaths are worse than one, even if we know the name of the one, and when we acknowledge that the life of someone in a faraway county is worth as much as the life [sic] a neighbor, even if our emotions pull us in a different direction. Without empathy, we are better able to grasp the importance of vaccinating children and responding to climate change. ... We can rethink humanitarian aid and the criminal justice system, choosing to draw on a reasoned, even counter-empathetic, analysis of moral obligation and likely consequences.[9]

To sum up, emotional empathy is the source of bias and tribalism in helping behavior. Given this, we need to employ a counter-empathetic approach that replaces emotional responses with carefully reasoned moral obligations. That is, we need to embrace cognitive compassion (freed of bias) rather than (bias-ridden) emotional empathy. According to Bloom, cognitive compassion is appreciating other people and their well-being without necessarily feeling their pain. It has all the positives that come from empathy and few of the negatives.[10]

EMOTIONAL EMPATHY VERSUS COGNITIVE COMPASSION

Although Bloom insists on the dangers of empathy, it is not clear how the two states, emotional empathy and cognitive compassion, are separable in day-to-day life or in laboratory studies. His definition of emotional empathy as "putting yourself in other people's shoes, feeling what you think they are feeling" does not necessarily suggest a clear separation of emotion and cognition. In fact, this definition implies cognition at work in assessing another person's feelings. More importantly, studies by neurologists Christov-Moore and Iacoboni, demonstrate that it might be impossible to suppress the emotive so that the cognitive element can take over. Their body of research suggests that neural systems for affective and cognitive empathy are intensely interdependent and heavily influence each other in neural and cognitive processes involved in

prosocial ethical choices.[11] In other words, cognitive compassion, to employ Bloom's term, is inseparable and always influenced by emotions. Other scholars point out that emotions are an integral part of cognition so that speaking of the opposition between the two does not make sense given their data.[12] For example, Tranel and colleagues examined the effects of brain damage to emotional centers of the brain in young children and discovered that their moral and social reasoning was negatively impacted. Likewise, on the basis of neural studies, Richard Davidson maintains that the affect is already constitutive of reasoning as there is no clear distinction between cognitive and emotional processes. Instead, his work shows that there is an overlap in brain circuitry of cognition and emotion.[13]

While Bloom employs neurological studies by Singer and Klimecki to support his argument for separation of empathy (emotion) and compassion (cognition) into two processes that are linked to different parts of the brain, their studies suggest otherwise.[14] He is correct that Singer and Klimecki trace empathy and compassion to activations of different parts of the brain. However, their definitions of empathy and compassion are noticeably different from Bloom's. For Singer and Klimecki, empathy and compassion are both emotional states, and both are reactions of empathetic response to suffering.[15] However, empathy or, rather, emphatic distress (which is the focus of their study) is a self-oriented emotion of personal distress resulting from sharing the suffering with another. Consequently, this form of empathy often results in burnout, desire to withdraw from a distressful situation due to the presence of excessive negative feelings. In contrast, compassion is "a feeling of concern for another person's suffering which is accompanied by the motivation to help."[16] Compassion in this case stands for emotion and prosocial motivation to assist the other. This compassionate orientation to the suffering is accompanied by positive, other-oriented feelings, which are correlated with prosocial motivation and action.[17] In light of this, Bloom is right to cite Singer and Klimecki's study to present evidence for different responses to the suffering of others, but he is wrong in presenting their findings as consistent with his distinction between rational compassion and emotional empathy. Rather, these studies present emotions of emphatic distress and compassion that lead to two different behavioral outcomes, withdrawal and prosocial action, respectively.

Furthermore, some scholars argue that emphatic distress results not from emotions going wrong, but from cognitive errors that follow when one is empathizing with someone else's pain. For example, O'Connor and Berry found in their research that people who are depressed suffer from a disorder of "concern for others." While such people have normal or elevated levels of empathy, their depression is often caused by erroneous interpretations of suffering in others, which results in nonconscious blame that they assign to themselves.[18] This is not to suggest that one should primarily focus on cognitive errors at the exclusion of emotional errors, but rather to point out the basic problem with Bloom's argument when he assigns all the blame to emotional processing. At the very least one needs to recognize that both emotional and cognitive processes can err.

By suggesting that cognition needs to be elevated above emotion, Bloom seems to fall into a trap of philosophical dualism that has embedded the Western tradition that originated in the ancient Greek philosophy. Greek philosophy saw the self-sufficiency

of reason as a panacea for all ills, whether personal or societal while emotions associated with the body were the sources of weakness, lack of control, and animal-like actions.[19] Martha Nussbaum, a philosopher who specializes in ancient Greek philosophy, aptly criticizes this overvalorization of reason at the expense of emotion. Instead of avoiding emotions, she calls for reconsidering the important role they play in our ethical judgments: "Instead of viewing morality as a system of principles to be grasped by the detached intellect, and emotions as motivations that either support of subvert our choice to act according to principle, we will have to consider emotions as part and parcel of the system of ethical reasoning."[20] Nussbaum is in agreement with the research coming from neuroscience that rejects the dualism of thought and emotion. She too advocates for importance of cognitive content in emotional states because rationality and emotions are never completely separate and because emotions carry valuable ethical judgments.

In addition to the crucial role of emotions in ethical reasoning, other philosophers are pointing out that our rational perceptions are never naked; instead they arealways filtered through a conceptual grid. For example, racist biases against others are a result of the socializing mechanism of what Charles Mills calls "white ignorance." This happens

> . . . when the individual cognizing agent is perceiving, he [sic] is doing so with eyes and ears that have been socialized. Perception is also in part conception, the viewing of the world through a particular conceptual grid. . . . At all levels, interests may shape cognition, influencing what and how we see, what we and society choose to remember, whose testimony is solicited and whose is not, and which facts and frameworks are sought out and accepted.[21]

Our perceptions are never free from social influences. Rather they are shaped by the biases of the ruling group so that the incoming data are interpreted selectively, and the disconcerting or problematic perceptions are filtered out or marginalized.[22] Consequently, one can validate white racial superiority based on a false belief as well as the absence of true belief.[23] In other words, the white social lens distorts reality by refusing to acknowledge systemic discrimination, conveniently maintaining amnesia about the racial injustice in the past and present, and by nurturing hostility toward the black testimony to the contrary.[24]

Philosopher Elizabeth Spelman argues that this ignorance is a deeply entrenched epistemic resistance to know. She stresses that racial ignorance is not a matter of simple neglect, self-deception, passivity, or accidental lack of knowledge. Rather, it is an ignorance that is actively created and managed by a system of social institutions, conventions as well as personal habits and attitudes. As she puts it, "managing to create and preserve it [white ignorance] can take grotesquely prodigious effort."[25] The result of white ignorance is what Mills calls "racialized moral psychology," which allows whites to act in racist ways while considering themselves moral agents.[26] As a result, actively maintained racial ignorance will produce authentic cognitive difficulties in identifying certain behavior patterns as racist.

In light of arguments from science and philosophy, neither reason nor emotion possesses an absolute authority of determining what is right as both reason and emotion are affected by human fragility. Given this state of affairs, instead of finding protection in safety of rationality, we need to think of solutions that address the frailty of emotion and reason alike. The process of sifting through the ever-changing emotions and complex cognitive states might be messy, just as life itself. Bloom's elevation of cognitive empathy needs to be rejected not only because of its problematic dualism it proposes but also because his approach provides no guarantee for its success. In fact, by placing more value in cognitive empathy, Bloom might be unknowingly supporting the very biases he wants to eliminate. This is so because cognitive empathy is already sifted through the conceptual grid of our socializing mechanism. While it is true that emotions can mislead, why would this not be the case with cognition? What measures can ever guarantee that cognitive empathy does not result in a negative bias or harmful, unethical action? Bloom never addresses these critical questions.

BUDDHIST COMPASSION AND MEDITATION

In support of his rejection of emotional empathy as a reliable compass for moral action, Bloom cites the work of a Buddhist philosopher, Charles Goodman. Specifically, Bloom relates Goodman's in-depth study of Buddhist compassion where he makes a distinction between two types of compassion, "sentimental compassion" and "great compassion." On Bloom's reading, the first corresponds to emotional empathy, which is discarded by the enlightened bodhisattva because it leads to exhaustion. In contrast, "great compassion" corresponds to cognitive compassion as it "involves love for others without empathetic attachment or distress."[27] Only "great compassion" is endorsed by the bodhisattva because it can be maintained indefinitely as it is a more distanced and reserved form of compassion. However, a closer reading of Goodman's work shows that Bloom misinterprets Goodman's account of compassion.

Goodman opens his discussion of compassion by defining Buddhist understanding of compassion in terms of "forms of thought and feeling quite different from what ordinary people are capable of, even in their best moments."[28] It is clear then that the Buddhist sense of compassion incorporates thoughts and feelings regardless of the type of compassion involved. To be sure, Goodman recognizes that "sentimental compassion" needs to be transcended since it is exhausting. The "great compassion," on the other hand, is the ideal compassion inhabited by the bodhisattva who works tirelessly on behalf of others not just in this life but in the lives to come. When discussing this ideal compassion, Goodman asserts that whatever characteristics might make such caring orientation of the bodhisattva possible, such qualities "must go well beyond the emotion that is normally referred to as compassion."[29] The fact that such qualities should go well beyond the ordinary emotion as described in "sentimental compassion" is not surprising provided the unlimited character of the bodhisattva's care. At the same time, there is no indication that "great compassion" excludes emotion. On the contrary, excluding emotion from this ideal form of compassion would contradict Goodman's definition of Buddhist compassion. When Goodman examines

"great compassion" more thoroughly, it is clear that this form of compassion entails emotions. He describes the enlightened bodhisattva as enacting intuitively and spontaneously "emotions of loving-kindness, compassion, and equanimity."[30] If most people require working on emotions and thoughts so that they align with wishing well-being to all, bodhisattvas in the enlightened state are doing so without any conscious deliberation. The bodhisattvas internalized compassion so thoroughly that they are enacting it spontaneously.

Bloom is correct to relate a number of findings indicating the positive impact of various meditations on willingness to help others. Specifically, research shows beneficial effect of mindfulness meditation and compassion meditation, which originated in Buddhism. When accounting for this effect, Bloom cites Buddhist scholar Thupten Jinpa, "meditation-based training enables practitioners to move quickly from feeling the distress of others to acting with compassion to alleviate it."[31] However, moving from the feeling of the distress of others might involve a more flexible form of emotional states that enables acting with compassion. In other words, a question at hand is whether meditative practices work on emotions alone, as Bloom would have it,[32] or affect our reasoning as well. A group of neuroscientists who are studying mindfulness meditation entered a dialogue with Buddhist practitioners to address this very question. Paul Ekman and his colleagues point out that Buddhist texts (whether in Pali, Sanskrit, and Tibetan languages) do not have a word for "emotion" *per se*.[33] That is, Buddhists see emotion as interwoven with other mental processes. This way of perceiving emotion is consistent with the contemporary scientific research according to which "Every region in the brain that has been identified with some aspect of emotion has also been identified with aspects of cognition. The circuitry that supports affect and the circuitry that supports cognition are completely intertwined—an anatomical arrangement consistent with the Buddhist view that these processes cannot be separated."[34] Therefore, it is not surprising that mindfulness has been shown to decrease emotionally reactive behaviors and lead to partial "deautomatization" of the mental processes.[35] Furthermore, mindfulness was shown to buffer the ruminative thoughts and negative emotions in the context of injustice and therefore reduce retaliation.[36] The mechanism of mindfulness operative in these cases had to do with reduction of self-serving and automatic negative emotional reactions to injustice and with the inhibition of transgression-focused rumination. To sum up, both scientific accounts and Buddhist tradition testify to the fact that emotions and cognition are deeply interwoven. This means that both our emotions and our cognition can be misdirected, biased, and prejudicial. The solution to the problems with tribalism in our ethical choices does not come from the superiority of cognitive judgments. Rather, by recognizing limitations and vulnerability of both reasoning and emotions, we need to find practices that help in fostering less prejudicial states knowing that complete elimination of such biases might be unachievable.

There is a growing body of evidence that mindfulness and compassion meditation might be valuable strategies in counteracting our biases. Mindfulness meditation originated in the Buddhist tradition, but its practice has received plenty of attention in contemporary psychology, outside of its original cultural and religious context.

Since the late 1970s, Western clinicians have incorporated the mindfulness practice into various mental health treatment programs, from treating anxiety, stress, depression, and pain to assisting those with eating disorders and alcoholism.[37] More importantly, recent studies have shown that mindfulness meditation reduces prejudice against the elderly, the handicapped, as well as ethnic and racial minorities.[38] Given that Bloom's concern is to eliminate empathic in-group bias, it is essential to examine carefully this effect of mindfulness practice. The mechanism of diminishing prejudicial attitudes has to do with the fact that mindfulness fosters a present-centered awareness that returns its attention to breath. The goal of meditation is to arrive at a nonattached, yet fully engaged state of mind. This is achieved by reversing our customary ways of thinking (automatic associations), of constant evaluating, and constant drifting into our past or future.[39] The nonjudgmental attitude leads, in turn, to forming an open-minded, flexible state of mind that is receptive to "what is." Specifically, when applied to prejudicial attitudes, participants of one study were encouraged to mindfully become aware of one's prejudicial thoughts and feelings without attempting to change them.[40] This exercise of simply observing emotions and thoughts without any judgment elicits a nonreactive state of mind and, therefore, reduces the impact of the prejudicial cognitive content. This might seem to bring about the opposite of the desired effect as those who exercise bias against the racial "other" are encouraged to accept one's prejudicial feelings and ideas. While the aim of mindfulness is to cultivate a nonjudgmental mind toward one's own thoughts and emotions (prejudiced or not), it does not end there. Rather, one develops the nonjudgmental, accepting awareness of one's own thoughts and emotions in order to cultivate a less judgmental and more compassionate stance toward others.[41] It is when we do not feel overwhelmed by the pull of our own biased emotions and thoughts that we can be more aware of the mechanism of our automatic social evaluations. Thus, mindfulness offers a possibility of opening a conscious space that allows for reduction in automatic racist associations.

Beyond becoming aware of our automatic associations, mindfulness appears to decrease an implicit bias among its practitioners. In one study, even a brief (ten-minute long) mindfulness meditation caused a decrease in an implicit bias against blacks and elderly people while another study showed a reduction of clinician implicit bias on patients.[42] This is a significant finding since explicit, self-reported measures of prejudice are not reliable because people often alter their explicit expressions to appear less biased.[43] Furthermore, an automatic, implicit form of prejudice is difficult to change once formed even in the face of new or contradictory evidence.[44] It is well established that an implicit (automatic) bias against an out-group can fuel discrimination even if individuals are consciously attempting to affirm egalitarianism toward all.[45] Thus, mindfulness meditation seems to offer an important technique in reducing an implicit bias toward discriminated groups. Meditative techniques help with existing biases effectively because they address both the emotive and the rational aspects of our mental processes.

In addition, studies that aimed specifically at testing compassionate responses to suffering show that mindfulness enhances compassionate stances. In one study, those who participated in eight-week mindfulness meditation offered their seats to sufferers

on crutches more frequently than the controlled group.[46] In another study, those who were trained in eight-week mindfulness meditation displayed a prosocial response including compassion even five months after the training.[47] Margaret Kemeny and her teammates conclude that secular forms of Buddhist meditation might benefit those outside of Buddhist tradition. This is so because Buddhist meditation is "capable of reducing 'destructive' emotions and emotional behaviors, and the cognitive processes that provoke such responses, as well as increasing positive states of mind, such as positive affect, and prosocial responses, such as compassion."[48] In particular, they highlight the importance of mindfulness for counteracting overidentification with negative emotions and ruminating thoughts, which leads to greater awareness of mental experience.[49]

Another form of meditation linked to reducing bias as well as to increasing prosocial benefits is compassion meditation (also named loving-kindness meditation). Compassion meditation comes out of loving-kindness meditation, a Buddhist form of meditation in which one wishes the following blessing: "May I be peaceful, happy, and light in body and spirit./ May he/she be peaceful, happy, and light in body and spirit./ May they be peaceful, happy, and light in body and spirit."[50] This meditation is first directed to oneself with an aim to bring healing and reconciliation within ourselves. Only then the practitioner applies this meditation to others, starting with a friend, then with somebody neutral to us (strangers), somebody with whom we experience difficulties interpersonally (so called enemies), and finally extending it to all the sentient beings in the world. This meditation presumes one's interdependence with others so that greater inner harmony within oneself radiates throughout the web of relations, starting with those closest to one and ending with those most distant to one. According to this view, reality is not built of separate entities, but rather each being is inextricably linked to all other beings.[51] Every part of the universe is affecting every other part.

Since loving-kindness meditation extends compassion to all beings, even those whom we find difficult to embrace, it is not surprising that this form of meditation resulted in reductions of an implicit bias against black people.[52] The reduction of bias was accomplished during the six-week loving-kindness meditation even though the practice of meditation has not explicitly addressed specific social groups as the target of compassion.[53] This finding is supported by many other studies that have demonstrated positive results of loving-kindness meditation on interpersonal relationships and social connectedness.[54] More importantly, data indicate that the reduction in racial implicit bias is mediated by other-regarding positive emotions.[55] That is, the positive emotions about racial groups resulting from compassion mediation led to reduction in automatic processing of cognition.[56]

This close link between emotions and cognition was evident in other studies that focused on the effects of compassion meditation on people who experience emphatic distress.[57] Klimecki and her colleagues have found that compassion training activates regions of the brain associated with reward, love, and other-oriented feelings. Specifically, when the subjects were exposed to empathy training (resonating with suffering) alone and then exposed to suffering of others, the subjects generated distressful emotions and activated parts of the brain that are associated with empathy

for pain. However, subsequent compassion training counteracted this outcome by increasing positive affect and returning negative affect to baseline levels.[58] In light of their findings, researchers concluded that compassion meditation provides a unique emotion regulation strategy by strengthening positive emotions without ignoring the presence of negative experience of others. Such an awareness of the suffering of others while at the same time maintaining the feelings of care and warmth toward others might be a crucial prerequisite to helping behavior. The mechanism of this positive effect comes from altering neural structures and their expressions as well as from altering emotional and cognitive states, which has been corroborated by several studies.[59]

In addition, numerous studies link compassion meditation to prosocial behavior. For example, Suzanne Leiberg and teammates created a computer game examining prosocial behavior of the virtual participants.[60] In this study, the researches defined "compassion" as "an emotional as well as a motivational state, characterized by feelings of warmth, love, and concern for the other as well as the desire to help and promote the other's welfare."[61] The stated goal of the game was navigating through a maze as quickly as possible in order to reach a treasure. Helping coplayers was not mentioned within the instructions about the game as helping behavior placed the player at a clear disadvantage. Those who received compassion training significantly increased their prosocial behavior when compared to a control group who participated in memory training. Such helping behavior is noteworthy given that the players who met within the virtual reality were complete strangers, and the prosocial actions were exhibited even in high-cost situations.[62]

Similar results were reported by Helen Weng and colleagues who investigated whether two-week-long compassion training would improve altruistic behavior toward a complete stranger.[63] When experiencing an unfair social interaction, individuals who underwent compassion training gave twice as much on average to the victims of injustice than did subjects in the control group.[64] Weng and her collaborators conclude that compassion meditation increased altruistic behavior by "enhancing neural mechanisms that support the understanding of other's states, greater fronto-parietal executive control, and upregulations of positive emotion systems."[65] This work confirms the findings from other studies that the prosocial form of compassion is a complex system of cognitive and emotive faculties that are reflected in neural changes and expressions.

In still another study, Cade McCall and colleagues examined the responses of long-term meditation practitioners to fairness violations.[66] These researchers defined compassion as "the cognitive and emotional experience of concern in response to others' suffering associated with a motivation to promote the well-being of others."[67] In line with their definition of compassion, they interpreted compassion meditation as directed at both cognition and emotions with the aim of fostering the well-being of others. In comparison to control groups, long-term meditators expressed greater concern to restore justice by distributing money to those who have been treated unfairly. Moreover, these practitioners were significantly less angry than controls after unfair treatment while maintaining their commitment to norms of justice. As a result, long-term meditators exhibited less punishing behavior motivated by retribution

and vengeance. This outcome was mediated by activation of brain regions engaged in positive affect.[68] McCall and collaborators conclude that the increased prosocial motivation and increased positive affect serve as a buffer against the anger that is generated in response to unfair situations. Therefore, compassion meditation seems to offer a practice that is more beneficial to victims of injustice as well as those who want to remedy fairness violations. Compassion training appears to regulate cognitive and emotional responses by encouraging less reactionary and counterproductive measures, which benefit all parties involved.

MEDITATION AS A REMEDY FOR BURNOUT AMONG HELPING PROFESSIONALS AND ACTIVISTS

As mentioned in the opening of this article, one of the dangers of emotional empathy discussed by Bloom is burnout and exhaustion. In fact, many helping professionals and social justice activists acknowledge that they are at a higher risk of burnout.[69] Paul Gorski states that activist burnout, which leads to abandonment of social justice work, is a substantial obstacle to the progress of social justice movements. This problem is compounded by the resistance within the culture of these movements to any form of self-care because it is seen as self-indulgence. This resistance to seeking ways to sustain oneself when under stress is placing activists at even higher risks of fatigue. Gorski refers to this resistance aptly as "martyr syndrome."[70] He points out that a proper perspective would recognize the need for activists to care for their well-being not out of selfishness, but out of commitment to their movements. His qualitative study of social activists who employed mindfulness mediation when dealing with burnout indicates that they found this practice critical to their effectiveness in social justice movements. Gorski concludes that mindfulness practice is helping activists to deal with burnout by "(1) helping them find balance between their activism and self-care without feeling guilty about doing so, (2) helping them slow down and see the 'big picture,' letting go of the pressure to eliminate injustice instantaneously, and (3) helping them more effectively manage the stress and anxiety of their activism."[71] What Gorski describes here is the mechanism through which mindfulness training allows for lessening emphatic distress discussed in so many other studies. By eliminating the pressure of overwhelming social responsibilities and handling their stress more effectively, the activists free themselves to actually perform the work to which they are dedicated. Furthermore, the participants of his study described that in addition to managing their burnout, they were also able to connect more deeply not just with the fellow activists, but also with people whose perspectives and actions they intended to thwart. That is, mindfulness meditation encourages a more compassionate stance to victims, other activists as well as perpetrators of harm.[72]

Other scholars employ mindfulness or compassion meditations to encourage self-care and lessening of empathic fatigue among social workers, genetic counselors, and midwives.[73] Clearly these studies address only a small fraction of all the helping professions and activists. What is important, however, is that all these studies demonstrate the dangers of empathic fatigue when one places the needs of others so far above one's

own that the needed self-care is neglected. Moreover, these studies show that various forms of meditations are important self-care strategies to prevent burnout.

To conclude, Bloom's attention to the dark side of empathy is valuable in a world where our ethical choices are often clouded with implicit and explicit biases. This mechanism, however, does not affect just our emotional empathy; all of our judgments whether rational or emotive are influenced by our social and cultural conditioning. This stark realization does not have to lead to pessimism regarding moral choices. Rather, awareness of such deep conditioning could become an important motivation toward finding practical ways that help in eliminating such biases. Based on studies discussed above, it seems that various forms of meditations promote individual as well as socially beneficial goals because they regulate both mind and body. From self-care strategies for burnout social activists, to meditations aiming at well-being of strangers and cultivating nonreactive states of minds, these practices offer a range of valuable, low-cost solutions that we desperately need.

NOTES

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