

STUDY GUIDE

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MEDICINE & COMPASSION

Chokyi Nyima Rinpoche and David R Shlim



OVERVIEW

MEDICINE AND COMPASSION is a celebration of the great qualities of compassion. Due to the inevitability of suffering, dedicating oneself to trying to increase compassion for others is a noble pursuit. The book, however, goes far beyond just encouraging people to be more compassionate, exploring the origin of compassion and the insights that can allow one to increase one's capacity for compassion. These insights explore the basic nature of our consciousness and its relationship to our outer environment, and this subtle interplay between our perception and what we perceive can seem quite profound and difficult to understand at first. The purpose of this study guide is to help the reader follow the track of the main insights in the book.

THE STUDY GUIDE can also serve as a basis for groups of people who wish to study *Medicine and Compassion*, and meet to discuss what they have learned. Although the insights that Chokyi Nyima Rinpoche presents are based on the teachings of the Buddha twenty-five hundred years ago, it's not necessary to become a Buddhist in order to benefit from what is being taught. In fact, the Buddha himself did not encourage his own followers to simply adopt what he was saying, but to question it, and try to prove to themselves whether it was valid or not. As we study the book, we should try to maintain an open mind, and instead of just saying, "*This doesn't make any sense to me,*" to adopt the attitude, "*I wonder if this could be true or not?*" If it seems true, then one can implement the recommendations with confidence. If it doesn't seem true, then what would be the benefit of trying to practice something that didn't seem to be true?

CHAPTER 1: HUMAN NATURE

Chokyi Nyima Rinpoche comes from a country that experienced almost no technological development prior to having been invaded by the Chinese. There were no cars, no telephones, no electricity, no airplanes. People lived mainly as they had for over a thousand years. The inventions of the modern world would seem like magic to someone from that older culture, seeing human beings fly through the air, zoom along the ground in automobiles, or communicate instantly across vast distances.

Rinpoche points this out as an example of the capacity of the human mind to invent technological solutions. However, this inventiveness has gone both ways—the world benefits immensely from an easier way of life, but also faces damage from pollution, and from the destructiveness of war. The human mind has been behind both of these tendencies. Good and evil tendencies co-exist in our consciousness, and he feels that it is worth exploring our basic nature, to see whether the good qualities can be expanded, and the negative qualities could be purified.

Rinpoche's point of view is that the actual nature of our mind is an intrinsic goodness that is often obscured by our habits of thinking. Some of us have the habit of being selfish, or aggressive, and some of us are kind and caring. The issue of our basic nature—whether basically flawed, as in some traditions, or basically pure and compassionate as in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition—has been an age-old question for philosophers and theologians. Why does a good God allow evil to happen? Do human beings naturally compete for resources and power? From where does compassion and altruistic behavior arise?

In Buddhist philosophy, we are said to have a core nature of compassion, something that is inseparable from our basic consciousness. He points out that every human being, and even aggressive animals have some seed of compassion. This seed of compassion is an inextricable part of our consciousness, and can't be separated, just as we can't separate water from the quality of feeling wet. If this postulation

is true, then increasing our capacity for compassion is not a matter of instilling more compassion, but stripping away the habits of thinking that prevent us from accessing our inner compassion.

If we would like to improve our capacity for compassion, there are few institutions in the West that can provide that kind of training. As Rinpoche points out, “there are a lot of facilities where younger human beings can go to develop their intelligence,” but “there are fewer facilities set up to promote human compassion.” We don't even know what to picture when we try to picture an institution set up to promote compassion. Rinpoche may be thinking of the more than 6,000 Tibetan Buddhist monasteries that thrived in Tibet for 1000 years, prior to the Chinese takeover of that country in 1950. The main purpose of the training provided in Tibetan monasteries was the cultivation of compassion and wisdom, to an extraordinary degree.

Compassion can be defined as the desire to ease suffering in others. Right now our compassion is often unstable—sometimes we have it and sometimes we don't. When we do have it, we often limit it to people we know, or can relate to in some way. We find it very difficult to show compassion to people we don't care about, or who have actually tried to harm us. Although having this type of compassion could have great benefit, such compassion does not simply arise by thinking about it. Our habits are too deeply ingrained to go away by themselves without applying some effort.

The special training that we need involves coming to recognize that compassion is our basic nature, a quality that Rinpoche terms “emptiness suffused with compassion,” a seemingly enigmatic term that ends up having an extremely profound meaning. In the rest of the book, he will try to make clear what that term means.

In order to begin training in compassion, we need to bring to mind a conscious desire to benefit others, a feeling of benevolence towards others. With that important goal in mind we can pursue the step-by-step training that can make our compassion more stable, vast, and effortless.



TO CONTEMPLATE:

Is our basic nature compassionate or not?
Can it be modified by training?

CHAPTER 2: THE CAUSES OF SUFFERING

If compassion is the desire to relieve suffering in others, then it is important to try to understand the causes of suffering. In order to cure a disease, we need to know the cause, and apply a remedy that can get rid of whatever is causing the illness.

Some causes of suffering are built into our human existence. It is painful to pass through the birth canal; as we age we experience increasing aches, and pains, and more limited capabilities. Illness is a constant threat and can cause a great deal of suffering, and at some point we know that we must face our own death. These kinds of suffering are built into our lives.

In addition to this more overt type of suffering is a more subtle form of vague discontent that is almost always with us, a feeling that everything is not as good as it could be, that we hope things could be better. This is usually accompanied by the fear that something bad could happen at any moment. As a result of this undercurrent of hope and fear, we rarely feel completely content, which is a more subtle form of suffering.

At this point, Chokyi Nyima Rinpoche introduces the idea that this vague discontent—and indeed all our suffering—is based on ignorance. Although he doesn't explain it at this point, he is talking about the fact that we don't recognize the true nature of our mind, a quality that is not based on a concept, or a theory of how we can be, but the way in which our consciousness actually exists. "Ignorance," as used in this context does not refer to a lack of education, but to a deeper sense of "not knowing our true nature." We are ignorant of how our mind actually works, because no one has pointed it out to us before.

In this chapter Chokyi Nyima Rinpoche makes one of the most powerful assertions of the whole book, a theme he returns to over and over again: "With diseases, some can be cured and some not. However, feeling emotionally ill at ease can always be cured if we know the right methods and apply them intelligently."

It could be said that the entire book is about knowing the right methods and applying them intelligently. He lets us know that he has laid out the central theme of the book, and admits that it "may sound

funny to you." He states: "Ignorance is the root cause of physical disease and mental problems." Knowing that this may be difficult to accept, he gently accentuates it: "Actually it's a very profound statement."



TO CONTEMPLATE:

Think about what we don't know that could be the root cause of all of our suffering.

CHAPTER 3: WHAT PATIENTS ARE LOOKING FOR

When patients go to a doctor, they do so because they feel that the doctor is the person with the best chance to help them. They may be alternating between hope that the doctor will be able to cure them, and fear that nothing can be done. When the doctor demonstrates that they really care about the patient, it can immediately help put their mind at ease. Sick people are very sensitive to how the doctor might look or act, even a small gesture, such as a raised eyebrow, or a muttered, "huh." Because patients are so sensitive, it is not as effective to just "put on" a bedside manner to try to reassure the person. Therefore, trying to demonstrate a genuinely compassionate attitude will be very beneficial.

This difference between acting in a calm and kind way, and genuinely manifesting these feelings is again one of the key themes of the book. As we move through the book, try to reflect on the difference between acting compassionate, and expressing genuine compassion. Chokyi Nyima Rinpoche asserts that we can train to help strengthen a genuinely compassionate attitude. Thinking about how patients perceive the caregiver when they are ill or in pain will help us cultivate the motivation to make a lasting change in our manner when we are with patients.



TO CONTEMPLATE:

How does having a genuinely compassionate attitude differ from just acting compassionately?