



Compassion and Skillful Means: Cultural Adaptation, Psychological Science, and Creative Responsiveness

Paul Condon¹ · John Makransky²

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Abstract

This article addresses two distinct but interrelated aspects of “skillful means” that can inform compassion training: (1) the historical precedent and need for adapting meditation practices to meet new cultural contexts, and (2) the need to express compassion flexibly in ways that creatively meet the specific contexts, mentalities, and needs of particular persons and situations. We first discuss ways that the doctrine of skillful means was employed by Buddhists to rationalize the repeated adaptation of Buddhist teachings to meet the culturally situated mentalities and needs of diverse Asian peoples. Then, in continuity with that history of Buddhist adaptation, we explore how theories from modern psychological science, such as attachment theory, can be newly drawn upon to support adaptation of relational frameworks operative in traditional Buddhist cultures of compassion training for modern contexts. Finally, we draw on theories from cognitive science, namely situated conceptualization, that provide a tractable framework for understanding skillful compassion as embodied emptiness—involving the relaxation of pattern completion mechanisms, which helps open up greater discernment and presence to others, so that care and compassion can be more unrestricted, creative, and directly responsive to the person and situation at hand.

Keywords Compassion · Meditation · Emptiness · Non-dual · Buddhism · Prediction

A challenge in modern times is to learn how to access and cultivate unconditional powers of compassion, discernment, and creative responsiveness, recognizing the deep dignity and positive capacities of all peoples in a secularized world that often rejects or forgets traditional religious ways of doing so. Transformative practices from Buddhism are now being adapted to empower this possibility in religious and secular contexts alike. Indeed, thousands of years of Asian Buddhist history have prepared Buddhism to help meet this challenge. Throughout the history of Buddhism, Buddhist ways of teaching and practicing have adapted to new cultural patterns of understanding and need. For Indian Buddhist teachings to be experienced as transformative by people of different Asian cultures, the teachings were adapted to the concerns and ways of knowing indigenous to those cultures. Thus, new ways of formulating Buddhist teachings

and practices repeatedly emerged, which were justified by the Buddhist doctrine of skillful means.

The Historical Precedent to Adapt Meditation Practices to Meet New Cultural Contexts

In Mahāyāna scriptures, such as the *Prajñāpāramitā*, *Avatamsaka*, and *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa sūtras*, skillful means includes the unlimited scope of activities and methods through which Buddhas and bodhisattvas manifest and communicate the dharma in the precise ways appropriate to the capacities of all sentient beings (Makransky 2000, 2008). Skillful means, in such texts, are a vast mystery, for the methods that Buddhas and bodhisattvas employ to reach beings are as diverse as beings themselves with all their distinctive mentalities, and are operative through all space and time (Bendall & Rouse, 1971; Cleary 1993; Thurman 1976). Some *Avatamsaka* quotes can serve here as example:

Just as the great clouds rain water of one flavor, yet there are innumerable differences according to where it rains, in the same way Buddha appearing in the world

✉ Paul Condon
condonp@sou.edu

¹ Department of Psychology, Southern Oregon University, 1250 Siskiyou Blvd, Ashland, OR 97520, USA

² Department of Theology, Boston College, 140 Commonwealth Ave, Chestnut Hill, Boston, MA 02467, USA

rains water of teaching of one flavor of great compassion, yet his teachings are infinitely variegated according to the needs of the situation (Cleary 1993, p. 976). Just as the ocean water flows under the continents and islands, so that all who drill for water find it, yet the ocean does not form any notion of itself giving out water, in the same way the water of Buddha's ocean of knowledge flows into the minds of all sentient beings, so that if they examine things and practice ways of entering truth, they will find knowledge, pure and clear, with lucid understanding — yet the knowledge of Buddha is equal, nondual, without discrimination; but according to the differences in sentient beings' mental patterns, the knowledge they obtain is not the same (Cleary 1993, p. 999).

In this world there are four quadrillion such names to express the four noble truths, in accord with the mentalities of beings, to cause them all to be harmonized and pacified. ... [And] just as in this world ... there are four quadrillion names to express the four noble truths, so in all the worlds to the east—hundreds of thousands of billions, countless, innumerable, boundlessly, incomparably, incalculably, unspeakably, inconceivably, immeasurably, inexplicably many worlds, in each there are an equal number of names to express the four noble truths, to cause all the sentient beings there to be harmonized and pacified in accordance with their mentalities. And just as this is so of the worlds to the east, so it is with all the infinite worlds in the ten directions (Cleary 1993, pp. 276–281).

This vastly inclusive concept of skillful means expresses the unlimited potential of Buddhist thought and practice to take new expression in innumerable times and places. From this perspective, skillful means proclaimed in such texts refers not just to the work of one enlightened person of fifth century BCE India, i.e., Buddha Śākyamuni, but to the unlimited potential for the Buddha's teachings to take new forms in cultures over centuries, partly through the ongoing emergence of sacred Buddhist texts: Mahāyāna sūtras, tantras, commentaries, and indigenous Buddhist literatures in India and throughout Asia (Davidson 1990). An implicit meaning of skillful means, then, is the ability of accomplished Buddhist teachers that emerged in the various Asian cultures to transmit the Buddha dharma effectively in writing or in person throughout history. Indeed, it is because many figures in diverse cultures have been a principal source of skillful means that skillful means have *been* so skillful—speaking the dharma directly from the hearts and minds of Central Asians, Chinese, Koreans, Tibetans, Japanese, Nepalis, Mongolians, etc., to the hearts and minds of their people in the culturally specific ways needed for effective praxis. This vast collection of Buddhist developments and

cultural adaptations provided a great resource for ongoing development of Buddhist systems of thought and practice in each culture, such as the Ch'an, Pure Land, Huayan, and Tiantai traditions of East Asia, and the Nyingma, Kagyu, Sakya, and Gelug traditions of Tibetan Buddhism (Beyer 1978; Ch'en 1964; Matsunaga and Matsunaga 1974; Samuel 1993; Wright 1990; Zurcher 1972).

From that perspective, the Buddhist doctrine of skillful means gave developing Buddhist traditions the rationale needed to meet two essential needs for making qualities of cultivation, like unconditional love and compassion, effectively available in new contexts: (1) the need to conserve foundational Buddhist principles of awakening such as the four noble truths mentioned in the Avatamsaka quote above, and (2) the need to reformulate those principles in fresh ways that have effectively met the hearts and minds of people of new times and places. As in the past, both such needs are operative now as Buddhist theory and practice continue to be drawn upon to make new contributions to current cultures.

Adapting the Relational Orientation of Buddhist Practice for Contemporary Compassion Training

Several secular programs have emerged in recent years that have adapted forms of meditation training from Buddhist traditions for people to learn to cultivate more unconditional, inclusive, discerning, and sustainable qualities of loving care and compassion to empower their relationships, service, and action (Lavelle 2016, 2017). Such qualities of love and compassion are associated with practices of awakening in Asian Buddhist cultures. But the contemplative cultivation of such qualities in those cultures is supported by a relational sense of self that differs from the atomistic, individualized sense of self that is entrenched in modern Western cultures (Condon and Makransky 2020a; McMahan 2008).

In traditional Asian cultures, the identity of a person has meaning within many kinds of relationships in which the person is embedded: relationships with one's family, one's familial and spiritual ancestors, and one's clans and larger communities; with the landscape; with various indigenous spirits and powers that inhabit the landscape; and with the cosmos at large. In such cultures, an individual's concern for her own benefit and progress is automatically linked to concern for the many kinds of community in which that individual is embedded. When people in traditional Asian Buddhist cultures take up Buddhist practices of refuge, spiritual aspiration, generosity, ethics, cultivation of mindfulness, love, compassion, tranquility, insight, and so forth, they are learning to participate in a communal field of care in which the individual has been held by countless others across space and time. That communal field of interconnection includes

spiritual ancestors, lineage teachers, Buddhas, bodhisattvas, arhats, and other accomplished members of the Buddhist sangha across generations and lifetimes, who, as embodiments of the practices that the individual engages, hold that person and her world in unconditional care, compassion, wisdom, and blessing. To participate in Buddhist ethical, ritual, and meditative practices, therefore, is to learn how to become part of a vast community of compassion and wisdom that embraces one's whole world, including all previous and future generations (Arai 2011; Condon and Makransky 2020a; McMahan 2008; Walters 2003).

In contrast, often in modern Western cultures and urbanized societies, the human person is understood as an independent being, an autonomous entity that pre-exists relations to others. Practices adapted from Buddhism for current secular programs in mindfulness, lovingkindness, self-compassion, and so forth are therefore often understood by participants as self-help techniques, whose purpose is to provide the autonomous self with the means to improve itself in various ways (McMahan 2008).

Even when practices of lovingkindness and compassion are adapted from Buddhism into secular contexts, the modern sense of autonomous self that pre-consciously frames such practices can exacerbate inner obstacles to the fuller accomplishment of their goals. The modern notion of persons as autonomous agents who would meditate to increase their own capacities of compassion through their own efforts can ironically reinforce what Asian Buddhists have sought to overcome: the notion of a separate self that exists apart from others (Condon and Makransky 2020a). The motivation to do meditation as a self-help project reinforces the self-clinging frame of mind that impedes fuller access to a more expansive compassion that would transcend such a narrow orientation. This can exacerbate psychological barriers to the underlying human capacity for more inclusive and unconditional compassion. Such psychological barriers to compassion include the lack of a sufficiently secure base in one's own experience of love and compassion to be able to relax one's self-clinging and extend those same qualities more freely to others, the fear of exposure to suffering that prevents compassion for suffering beings, and reductive perceptions of self and others that hide their fuller dignity and worthiness for love and compassion (Condon & Makransky 2020a, 2020b; Makransky 2012).

In contrast, a relational orientation for training in Buddhist practices, including the cultivation of unconditional love and compassion, has been assumed across many Buddhist cultures and traditions. In many Pali scriptures, the Buddha directs his disciples to cultivate unconditional attitudes of loving care, compassion, empathetic joy, and equanimity that literally encompass all sentient beings (Majjhima Nikāya Sutta 7.13–7.14; see also Suttas 8, 21, 31, 40, 48, 50, 52, 55, 62; Nanamoli & Bodhi, 1995). Such texts express

a kind of practice that has been done by many generations of Buddhist practitioners since the time of the Buddha, and from an emic perspective, also across countless lifetimes (Rotman 2008, 2017; Walters 2017). Asian Buddhists who hear such a discourse in ongoing communal contexts of such practice understand themselves (and cosmologically their world) to be encompassed in a field of all-embracing love and compassion by all who have engendered those attitudes through the ages, through lifetimes, and into the present. To take up such a practice of immeasurable love and compassion, then, has not been traditionally understood as the work of an individualistic self who learns on one's own to generate love for all as a do-it-yourself project. Instead, practitioners who cultivate such attitudes in Buddhist cultures have understood them as a way to participate in, and gradually become an extension of, the all-inclusive field of loving care that already supports them and all others. This has given previous generations of trainees the assurance that they, like others before them, can gradually accomplish such a practice of literally all-inclusive and unconditional love and compassion, despite the kinds of inner barriers to compassion that were noted above. This kind of relational orientation to the Buddha and to the community of accomplished sangha who have accomplished such practices over lifetimes has been an important foundation for all practices in Buddhist cultures. This is formalized in the concept of refuge, in which the Buddha and accomplished sangha are experienced as embodiments of all-encompassing powers of compassion and wisdom that inspire and empower many others to cultivate the same qualities.

Individual discipline is also an important part of traditional forms of Buddhism. But individual discipline in Asian Buddhist cultures is inscribed within a fuller relational worldview which is always assumed. Even when a practitioner is physically alone in a solitary retreat setting, in their ritual and meditation practice, they call to mind and are supported by the enlightened powers of the Buddha(s) and accomplished sangha, including the all-pervasive powers of the Buddhas' knowledges, blessings, and manifestations, the powers of the arhats' virtues and of the vows, aspirations, and dedicated merit of the bodhisattvas, etc. We have adopted the phrase "relational orientation to practice" to highlight the relational Asian Buddhist cosmologies and worldviews in which such practices are commonly done. A similar pattern of connection to fields of spiritual ancestors and divine or natural powers is also foundational to the ritual and contemplative practices of many other religious traditions and cultures.

A related practice theme is the experience of being seen as deeply worthy of compassion and profoundly capable of generating it also for others, an experience evoked, in part, through practices that bring the Buddha and realized sangha vividly to mind (*buddha-* and *sangha-anusmrti*). In the fifth

century scholar Buddhaghosa's description, meditators focus their attention on the Buddha's enlightened qualities, which include his all-pervasive, unconditional compassion and wisdom that encompass the meditator and his or her whole world (Buddhaghosa 1975). Such practices are further developed in Indian Mahāyāna texts, in which fields of Buddhas and bodhisattvas are envisioned in front, gazing into the deep dignity and capacity of the meditator's enlightened potential and into the destructive patterns of thought and reaction that obscure it (e.g., *The Tathāgatagarbha sūtra*, Grosnick 1995; Harrison 1992; Makransky 2012; McMahan 2002, pp. 149–174; Śāntideva 1997, pp. 51–86; Williams 2009). The experience of being deeply seen while encompassed in enlightened qualities of compassion and wisdom also informs the concept of empowerment in Vajrayāna (tantric) traditions of South Asia and Tibet. The Vajrayāna teacher's perception of the students' deep enlightened capacity is expressed through ritual means that empower that capacity in the students, so they may begin to transcend their limited perceptions of themselves and others by joining in the deeper seeing by which they are seen (*dag snang*, pure perception, J. Kongtrul 1996; B. Rinpoche 1991).

This deeply supportive framework—a communal field of awakened power from beyond oneself that supports the possibility of awakening within oneself—which is so prominent in diverse Asian Buddhist traditions, was not incorporated into many modern meditation programs. Because such traditionally communal dimensions of blessing and empowerment are inscribed within pre-modern ritualized cosmologies, modern program developers often deemed them an unnecessary remnant of “primitive cultures,” which could be dropped in order to “modernize” meditation praxis for secular applications. However, these profoundly supportive practices from traditional Buddhist cultures serve a valuable function that maps directly onto attachment theory.

Attachment theory states that the care a child receives in infancy can affect them through the lifespan. Infants that receive sensitive and responsive care have the support needed to develop a self that they feel is worthy of love. In turn, this supports their curiosity to explore the world and their ability to relate to others similarly as worthy of love because they trust that a source of security and support is available as needed. Sporadic or unreliable care, on the other hand, fosters insecurity, lack of trust in support from others, and less courage to explore the world and be lovingly present to others (Cassidy 2016).

Secure and insecure attachment orientations are not fixed within childhood. Rather, feelings of security and insecurity accrue throughout the lifespan, across diverse relationships and social contexts, including with peers, mentors, romantic partners, employers, and so on (Mikulincer and Shaver 2017). Moreover, contemplative and religious practices can offer one route to experience feelings of security. Through

the lens of attachment theory, the ritual and devotional practices of traditional Buddhist cultures, which may be repeated numerous times in practice throughout a person's life, offer a powerful field of refuge and care in which practitioners experience themselves as recipients of unconditional love, compassion, and wisdom. This offers the potential to cultivate an unlimited inner secure base from which to extend unconditional and inclusive care and compassion to others. Though such practices might not fit well into the worldview or mindset of some modern practitioners, theories and frameworks in psychological science can contribute to the ongoing skillful adaptation of Buddhism by helping to provide new understanding and an embodied experience of such relational support for meditation.

Adult experiences of attachment demonstrate that experiences of security and insecurity can shift within a person and across relationships and situations. Most notably, research on attachment priming shows that feelings of security can be heightened. Across diverse methodological contexts, attachment priming procedures ask participants to visualize a caring figure, a trusted friend, or simply think of words like “love,” “safety,” or “care” for a brief moment (e.g., Mikulincer et al. 2005). Priming exercises temporarily increase feelings of security, safety, and courage (Mikulincer et al. 2005). As a result of heightened feelings of security, participants are more likely to help others, and exhibit less bias and dehumanization of outgroups. Attachment priming therefore offers a natural way to inform and recover the relational orientation of practice that is found in meditation traditions (Condon and Makransky 2020a).

In recent articles, we have described the need for a relational starting point of support for meditation, adapted from traditional Buddhist practices of spiritual support like those noted above. One such program is “sustainable compassion training” (SCT; Condon and Makransky 2020a, 2020b), which helps practitioners discover their own distinctive ways of establishing a relational starting point for meditation practice. A core practice within this program invites practitioners to recall and reinhabit a moment of caring connection from their own experience. By repeatedly reconnecting with a moment of caring connection, the practitioner can strengthen the experience of a secure base, while increasingly identifying with a secure sense of self. In line with attachment theory, the experience of security within oneself makes it more likely to relate to others with a sense of care and curiosity, seeing others in their worth and potential beyond reductive labels and extending care and compassion to them. We have referred to this as the receptive mode of practice (Condon and Makransky 2020a, 2020b, for a similar mode of practice, see also Jinpa 2015, pp. 143–146; D. Kongtrul 2018 p. 35).

People have different attachment histories and cultural backgrounds, so various options for the caring moment practice must be provided for different people effectively

to access a felt sense of care and compassion. For example, recalling a caring moment with a beloved mentor, relative, teacher, friend, a caring stranger, or a cherished animal. Or recalling an inspiring figure, or one's spiritual ancestors, or a deep source of spiritual refuge, or a special place in nature. In these ways, practitioners are invited to fill in the content of the meditation in the form most accessible to them, from within their own worldview, personal history, and social and cultural background, whether religious or not. With repetition, more moments of caring connection are often recalled, and a relational field of caring moments and figures can emerge analogous to what has been envisioned in traditional cultures of training. In Buddhist terms, that relational field of care can be understood as an outer refuge, which increasingly evokes an inner refuge—unconditional qualities of love and compassion from one's own basic awareness (on outer and inner dimensions of refuge, see, e.g., P. Rinpoche 1994; Tulku 1995). With familiarization through repetition, one thereby learns to experience all feelings, including suffering feelings of self and others, as encompassed in a spacious field of care and compassion that can heal and transform them, rather than as objects to push away or defend against.

The field of care that supports the practitioner in the receptive mode of meditation can then support her entry into the inclusive mode of practice. Held by the field of care and compassion operative in the receptive mode, the practitioner learns to extend the same unconditional attitude and energy of care in which she is held to others in expanding circles of inclusion. By repeatedly reconnecting with the field of care in which she is embraced and seen deeply, she is empowered likewise to see and uphold others in their dignity and potential, beyond superficial labels, analogous to the relational training in Buddhist traditions of origin.

Both of these meditation modes, the receptive and inclusive modes of care, empower and are empowered by the third deepening mode (Condon and Makransky 2020a, 2020b). Through the use of evocative language in guided meditation, the meditator learns to accept the felt qualities of love and compassion from the receptive and inclusive modes of practice into every part of his body and into all layers of thought and feeling. As his mind thereby learns to accept and trust those loving qualities, it becomes more willing to relax into the source of those qualities beyond self-clinging frameworks of mind. Increasingly, the mind learns to let everything be and to settle with the qualities into their source—the non-dual spaciousness, warmth, simplicity, and clarity of the mind's fundamental awareness (Makransky 2007; T. Rinpoche 2012; Thondup 1996; Varela 1999). With repetition, this can gradually empower his mind to let be more fully and release its habitual frameworks of reductive thought and reaction, with a felt sense of peace,

non-dual openness, and equanimity that is available in that basic awareness.

The three modes of practice, together, can help practitioners gradually overcome the barriers to compassion noted earlier: the lack of a sufficiently secure base in one's own experience of love and compassion to be able to extend those qualities freely to others, fear of exposure to suffering, and reductive perceptions of beings that hide their worthiness for care and compassion (Condon & Makransky 2020a). SCT, then, exemplifies one way of establishing a relational starting point for compassion training that can help overcome barriers to compassion that are exacerbated by the non-relational sense of self prominent in many modern settings. SCT does this by drawing both on relational frameworks of compassion training from pre-modern Buddhist cultures and on current theories of developmental and social psychology. Other programs that have sought to adapt robust relational paradigms from Buddhist traditions for compassion training in dialog with modern psychology include compassion-focused therapy (Gilbert 2010), compassion cultivation training (Jinpa 2015), the compassion initiative of Naropa University (Naropa University, n.d.), and cognitive-based compassion training (Ash et al. 2019). Such programs exemplify the historical necessity, rationalized by the Buddhist teaching of skillful means, to draw deeply from prior traditions of practice experience while also striving to adapt their practices to effectively meet the hearts and minds of people formed in very different cultures.

Skillful Means as the Embodiment of Creative, Flexible, Compassionate Responsiveness

Maximally effective compassion requires establishing a space of freedom from which to bring forward creative, context-sensitive responses. This corresponds to a second meaning of skillful means: creative compassionate responsiveness as an expression of wisdom. Any encounter with another being occurs within a complex context of histories, identities, relationships, cultures, and so on. No prescribed set of rules for compassionate responding will be adequate for every situation. In various contexts, the same kind of situation might require diverse expressions of compassionate responding. For example, when a student cheats on an exam, a professor might respond compassionately in different ways depending on the background of the student or based on the history of interactions between the student and the professor.

In the *Prajñāpāramitā sūtras* (Perfection of Wisdom scriptures) foundational for Mahāyāna Buddhism, skillful means refers both to effective practices for becoming fully awakened oneself and to effective ways of communicating awakening to others—making it experientially accessible to

them. Both of those senses of skillful means understand it as a compassionate expression of the perfection of wisdom (*prajñāpāramitā*)—the realization of emptiness (Conze 1973, 1975; Harvey 2013; Pye 2003). By realizing emptiness, the Buddhas and bodhisattvas attain the deep inner freedom and wise compassion needed to help others find similar freedom in their own best ways. For many Mahāyāna traditions, then, maximally effective compassion is the embodied expression of emptiness.

The embodiment of emptiness refers to a form of non-dual awareness, devoid of a subject-object structure, that is a participatory, performative, and dramatically embodied way of being that cannot be described with propositional knowledge (Duckworth 2019, p. 125). In other words, emptiness does not mean just an ontological denial of the existence of self, but also an indeterminate, lived modality that connotes freedom and positive potential for creatively engaging others in profoundly beneficial ways, i.e., skillful means (Duckworth 2019, p. 146). Similarly, while drawing on Mahāyāna non-dual traditions, Francisco Varela described embodied emptiness as a positively conceived state that includes a natural warmth, freedom, and readiness to respond with care for others. Varela (1999) used the term *ethical know-how* to describe a spontaneous capacity which is compassionately responsive to the situation at hand, in contrast with strict adherence to moral imperatives or rote principles, i.e., *ethical know-what*. In this way, the compassionate embodiment of emptiness can take whatever form is needed to express care in ways effective and appropriate to the situation in the moment.

A popular Buddhist teaching tale from eighteenth century Japan nicely illustrates these qualities of embodied emptiness as skillful means. A proud samurai came to the Zen master Hakuin to ask about the Buddhist teaching of rebirth in realms of existence as results of karma, including heavens (“paradises”) and hells (Reps & Senzaki 1957):

A soldier named Nobushige came to master Hakuin and asked: “Is there really a paradise and a hell?” “Who are you?” inquired Hakuin. “I am a samurai,” the warrior replied. “You, a soldier?!” exclaimed Hakuin. “What kind of ruler would have you as his guard? Your face looks like that of a beggar.” Nobushige became so angry that he began to draw his sword, but Hakuin continued: “So you have a sword! Your weapon is probably much too dull to cut off my head.” As Nobushige drew his sword Hakuin remarked: “Here open the gates of hell.” At these words the samurai, perceiving the master’s discipline, sheathed his sword and bowed. “Here open the gates of paradise,” said Hakuin.

Hakuin’s response to the samurai was spontaneous and precisely targeted to provoke the proud soldier’s anger,

and then to demonstrate to the samurai how his own reified tendencies of anger are what generate an experience of hell for him. The moment the samurai recognized the emptiness of his own mentally constructed experience in that way, his mind was freed to recognize the deep wisdom and compassion from which Hakuin’s response had come, causing the soldier to bow to the master. In that moment, liberated momentarily from his usual identification with reified, self-centered states of mind, the soldier was free to express qualities of his deeper nature (Buddha nature): reverence, appreciation, gratitude. The story beautifully illustrates the Zen master’s embodiment of the unity of emptiness and compassion, expressed as skillful means to meet the specific mentality, need, and background of the samurai. Indeed, Hakuin did answer the soldier’s question—in a most direct, precise, and deeply experiential way. This understanding of compassion as embodied emptiness has largely eluded scientific discourse.

The Science of Concepts as a Framework to Understand Emptiness

Theories from cognitive science (i.e., situated conceptualization and predictive processing) help cast the unity of emptiness and compassion in a new light: becoming aware of emptiness involves the relaxation of pattern completion mechanisms. We hypothesize that relaxing pattern completions can help open up greater discernment and presence to others, so that expressions of care and compassion can become more flexible, creative, and directly responsive to the person and situation at hand. In closing, we will discuss how the embodiment of emptiness cannot be fully captured through specific moral imperatives and rules, and therefore must be learned relationally, by scaffolding on those who have stabilized in and embody such a way of being.

Of particular importance to the present article, concepts guide behavior by organizing information to support predictions for the best course of action in a given situation. Here, we draw on an account called the “theory of situated conceptualization,” which provides further psychological specification of the role concepts play in supporting predictions and action (for a succinct review, see Barsalou 2016). This theory states that the brain processes and stores conceptual knowledge according to three key principles: grounded cognition, situated conceptualization, and pattern completion inferences (Barsalou 2016). First, grounded cognition suggests that mental states are grounded in multiple systems of the brain (e.g., visual, tactile, olfactory, motor systems), in bodily states, and in situated action. Behavioral and neural evidence supports this view across domains of psychological function, including perception, memory, language, knowledge, social cognition, and development (Barsalou 2008).

For example, studies show that imagining the feeling of holding a hammer versus a grape activates the appropriate corresponding brain activity in motor systems that support the correct behavior (Barsalou 2008).

Second, regarding situated conceptualization: as a person perceives, cognizes, and acts in the current situation (e.g., while sitting on an airplane), multiple neural systems simulate different situational elements simultaneously, including an experience of the current setting, of objects, of other agents, and of self-concepts, physical action, and mental state attributions, affective states, and interoceptive responses to the situation. These streams of information are integrated into a coherent situated conceptualization, e.g., the perceptual experience of sitting in an airplane: the conceptual interpretation of traveling (Barsalou 2016). As a situated conceptualization is constructed, a trace of it is stored in long-term memory. In Buddhist terms, the intentions and actions that are encompassed within a situated conceptualization affect the mindstream, similar to a karmic impression or predisposition (*vasana*, bag chags).

The third principle, pattern completion inferences, centers on predictions. As a situated conceptualization in long-term memory becomes activated, it produces inferences about what is likely to occur in the present moment (Barsalou 2016). These inferences are forms of pattern completion. The activated situated conceptualization includes content that has not yet been perceived in the present moment, but is inferred as likely to occur. On seeing a new airplane, for example, a situated conceptualization for “airplane” might produce inferences that the airplane contains magazines, digital entertainment, snacks, friendly flight attendants, uncomfortable seats, rude passengers, that people will be talking, etc. These conceptual inferences are implemented by reenacting brain states previously experienced for perceiving those features and actions. The situated conceptualization can also include inferences about anticipated emotions that might be experienced when boarding the plane, such as stress, fear, and worrying about what your neighbor will be like, which are also implemented by reenacting multi-modal brain states associated with experiencing those qualities previously. Moreover, simply by thinking about the experience of riding on the plane, those affective states or emotions can be felt without actually getting onto the plane. The brain and body simulate the experience through situated conceptualizations. Typically, all such inferences occur involuntarily and outside conscious awareness, but may occur consciously. From a Buddhist perspective, these pattern completion inferences are the activation of karmic predispositions in the present moment.

A fourth additional point related to the theory of situated conceptualization is that concepts are constructed in accord with their corresponding goals. The category *vehicle*, for example, includes a variety of objects that all fulfill a similar

goal, and the best examples of the category are the ones that maximally achieve that goal (Barsalou 1985). A car is a better example of a vehicle than a horse or a pogo stick because it more efficiently achieves the goal of transportation. A child might think of the same objects as toys, with the goal of maximally achieving play or fun. In this case, a pogo stick is a better example of the category *toy* than a car. Goals are therefore the lynchpin that holds conceptual categories together. Over time, categorizations are repeated, yielding a self that automatically employs concepts that are associated with its familiar goals.

The example of categorizing various objects as vehicles and toys illustrates how concepts can serve both as useful means to engage aspects of reality and also as filters that can hide much of the reality, respectively supporting skillful compassionate responses or reinforcing barriers to compassion. In the example above, conceptualizing the objects as vehicles is functional in that it supports appropriate action in the world (choosing the correct object for transportation). At the same time, the conceptualization reduces an object to one way of seeing (the object as just a vehicle that occludes alternative ways of seeing the object as, e.g., a toy or a work of art) (Dunne 2011a). By extension, conceptualization is necessary to understand others’ emotional states and possible actions to address their needs. And yet, conceptualization of others can occlude one’s capacity more fully to know others and it can restrict care to habitual forms of responding (Condon and Makransky 2020a).

The emphasis on goals within the theory of situated conceptualization is of special interest for the present concern to embody emptiness because the letting go of goals is a crucial step in non-dual contemplative traditions. Dzogchen and Mahamudra texts express the non-dual state in ways designed to help evoke it or confirm the experience of it with expressions like self-cognizant, cognizance recognizing its empty nature non-dually, unity of space and awareness, transparent, like a crystal, like the sky, etc. Practice instructions make use of phrases such as “not doing,” “not trying to cultivate anything,” “letting everything be,” and “not meditating” to help practitioners release the conceptual processing that maintains a subject-object structure. As the subject-object structure releases, various aspects of conceptualization are understood to dissipate, including projection of a self into the future and past (i.e., reduced mental time travel), reification of thoughts as objective reality, and effortful construction of experience (Dunne 2011b).

As practitioners familiarize with non-dual, non-conceptual levels of awareness, their tendency to reify and identify with conceptually constructed phenomena is relaxed, so their experience of things in the world in the post-meditation state is often described as like an illusion or a dream—things can continue to appear in dualistic ways, but without grasping to them as such (Dunne 2006; Makransky 1997, pp. 97–100;

Thompson 2020). That is, the practitioner still experiences reliable appearances of an external world, which supports functional action. Yet the practitioner, without effort, also senses the appearances as constructed, fleeting, and lacking intrinsic reality, hence empty. A practitioner can thus act in the world from a stance of greater freedom and flexibility—one that perceives appearances of the relative world without getting caught up in them, aware of their empty nature even as they appear—the non-duality of emptiness and appearance (Longchenpa 2017, pp. 115–136; Namgyal 2001, pp. 55–59; T. U. Rinpoche 2000, pp. 69–74). In the story above, because Hakuin embodied this sort of non-dual awareness of emptiness and appearance, he could respond to the samurai in ways that drew the soldier, at least momentarily, into a similar mode of awareness—suddenly recognizing “hell” as the empty construct of his own self-clinging patterns of mind. (For a similar analysis on predictive models of the brain and the Buddhist concept of emptiness, see Sheehy 2021.)

We hypothesize that practices of letting be, as in the deepening mode of sustainable compassion training described above (Condon & Makransky 2020b), loosen identification with a particular goal. “Letting be” of mental frameworks can release clinging to goals, which can help dualistic conceptual structures to relax, so that concepts and senses of self are not reified and experienced as objective realities, but rather as transient, fleeting appearances, like in a mirage or a dream. Our hypothesis parallels the growing theoretical perspective that forms of meditation that move toward non-dual awareness reduce inferences into the future and bring a practitioner more into the present moment, characterized by less abstract processing (Laukkonen & Slagter 2021). Importantly, such forms of meditation appear to enhance present-moment, non-conceptual awareness by reducing temporal abstractions that occur with conceptualization.

Several areas of research in contemplative science suggest that such forms of meditation help reduce automatic, habitual associations—an initial sign of the relaxation of pattern completion inferences and an early stage toward the embodiment of emptiness (for reviews, see Laukkonen & Slagter 2021; Lutz et al. 2019; Pagnoni 2019). Experimental research has demonstrated that advanced practitioners from non-dual Nyingma and Kagyu Tibetan traditions were less likely to demonstrate the kind of brain state that typically occurs in novices in response to a mismatched auditory cue (i.e., an auditory stimulus that deviated from a previously established pattern). In other words, advanced practitioners made less perceptual inferences when engaged in non-dual practice, compared with meditation that focuses attention on a particular object, e.g., the breath (Fucci et al. 2018). Similarly, another study demonstrated that advanced practitioners from the same non-dual traditions exhibited reduced habituation to a startle-reflex paradigm, compared with moderate

and novice practitioners, suggesting de-automatization of a low-level process resulting from intensive non-dual practice (Antonova et al. 2015).

In a separate line of research, a different methodological strategy revealed a similar effect, not with advanced practitioners for non-dual Tibetan traditions, but with novice practitioners. Here, the hypothesized reduction in temporal abstraction noted above gains support from research showing that a simple mindfulness manipulation among the general population led to less abstract descriptions of others’ behavior (Tincher et al. 2016). In that study, simple instructions to observe mental states as fleeting events led participants to rely less on character inferences (e.g., “he is hostile”) when judging the behavior of outgroups, in favor of more concrete, non-interpretive language (e.g., “he tried to hit the other person”). This result indicates a reduction in pattern completions that ordinarily arise from negative biases toward an outgroup. Overall, diverse meditation practices appear to reduce predictive associations, which can extend to reduced assumptions about others based on past experience.

Skillful Compassionate Responsiveness via Relaxed Pattern Completions

The preceding analysis has several implications for a scientific account of skillful compassion. First, the relaxation of pattern completions may be one avenue through which compassion becomes more creative and responsive to the needs of an immediate situation. Upon encountering another being, ordinary conceptual processing will compare the encounter to a prior or imagined encounter with a different being, i.e., “this suffering is like prior suffering,” which will then inform action. Indeed, some research suggests that attempts to empathize can interfere with understanding another through projections of one’s own view onto another’s experience (Eyal et al. 2018). By loosening conceptual predictions, not being so fully identified with them, we hypothesize that compassion can become more open, discerning, and therefore more specifically responsive, flexible, and creative. Through nondual practices, even when concepts occur, there is more openness and freedom in the mind to be aware of other aspects, possibilities, and relevant concepts. We predict this will allow more possibilities to respond to a particular situation in novel ways that are more discerning of what is needed, like Hakuin’s response to the samurai.

Other forms of contemplative practice noted above, like the practice of outer and inner refuge in the SCT field of care meditations, can also help relax pattern completion mechanisms by loosening up the conceptual habit of mistaking oneself and others for one’s own reductive thoughts of them. In the experience of a caring moment, the practitioner experiences herself as worthy of care, which provides the secure

base from which to sense others also as worthy of care, to sense a fuller being of unconditional worth beyond reductive thoughts and labels for them (Condon and Makransky 2020b). This type of practice could help overcome the developmental biases and rigid thinking that humans are subject to, including the tendency to assume biological essences underlie socially constructed categories such as race and gender (Christy et al. 2019; Mandalaywala et al. 2018; Wellman and Gelman 1992; Zmigrod et al. 2019).

Our emphasis on relaxing pattern completions as a route to compassion also suggests that embodied presence itself can be an effective form of compassionate responsiveness to another being. On this view, we hypothesize that caring presence prior to any physical action can benefit others' emotional states. Some research support this view. In a threat-activation paradigm, the mere presence of a supportive relationship partner is sufficient to attenuate low-level responses to threat cues (Coan et al. 2006). Elsewhere, research has shown that very brief moments of care (e.g., 30–40 s) embodied by a health care provider can have positive downstream effects on a patient in medical settings (Fogarty et al. 1999; Trzeciak & Mazzarelli 2019). Importantly, actions that benefited patients included the mere presence of the provider, e.g., through listening and eye contact—not necessarily effortful action. Similar results have been uncovered in educational contexts, where a teacher's embodiment of care fosters students' need for autonomy, competence, and relatedness, which then predicted students' ability to extend care to others (Colaianne et al. 2020). Research has also demonstrated that one effect of compassion-based contemplative practice includes the ability to be more fully present in a caring and discerning way to another's suffering, for example, by not avoiding another's distress (Rosenberg et al. 2015; Weng et al. 2018). To the extent these forms of non-action are grounded in non-dual awareness, caring presence, and a lack of predictive judgments, we predict they would have positive effects on all parties within social encounters.

In closing, Buddhist teachings have been adapted throughout history to meet the culturally situated mentalities and needs of diverse Asian peoples. In continuity with that history of adaptation, modern psychological science can be newly drawn upon to support adaptation of relational frameworks of Buddhist compassion training for modern contexts. Attachment theory and the theory of situated conceptualization offer a framework for understanding skillful compassion as embodied emptiness, so that care and compassion can be more unrestricted, creative, spontaneous, and directly responsive to the person and situation at hand.

In light of these understandings of skillful means, compassion training should not focus only on prescribed ways of being compassionate that are learned intellectually (like a playbook). Rather, compassion in its ideal form is an embodied presence that dynamically responds to the situation at hand without a

prescribed way of being (i.e., in some circumstances, it may even require one to violate or creatively deviate from the playbook, as with Hakuin's seemingly outrageous way of first speaking to the samurai). In our view, this skill must be learned relationally, by scaffolding on others who embody care, love, and wisdom. Humans learn how compassion feels and is expressed through moments of care that they have received. And from those moments of care (as outer refuge), they learn how to embody their own innate capacities for care and creative responsiveness (as inner refuge) in relation to others (Condon and Makransky 2020a, 2020b). Similarly, the ability to settle into deepening states of non-dual awareness and engage the world flexibly and creatively from that perspective is learned by scaffolding on others who embody and teach that way of being. Scaffolding on those who embody compassion and wisdom is thus foundational for others to learn to embody such qualities. This does not require that those who embody such qualities must be Buddhist, or exclusively a member of any particular tradition; just that they have learned, in whatever ways have been effective for them, to embody such qualities. That can happen in various ways, which is another implication of the teaching of skillful means—diverse means through which people catch on to, become embodiments of, and communicate wisdom and compassion (for an example of different Buddhist and Christian ways of promoting de-reified ways of perceiving things, see Makransky 2019). As Varela (1999) stated, ethical know-how is cultivated not through rote learning of moral principles, but rather through participating in communities that embody such wise expressions of care. Similarly, as the philosopher John Doris has stated (Doris 2018; Doris and Nichols 2012), virtues are not necessarily a sign of inherent character, but rather they are better understood as qualities that are collaboratively generated and sustained.

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Declarations

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