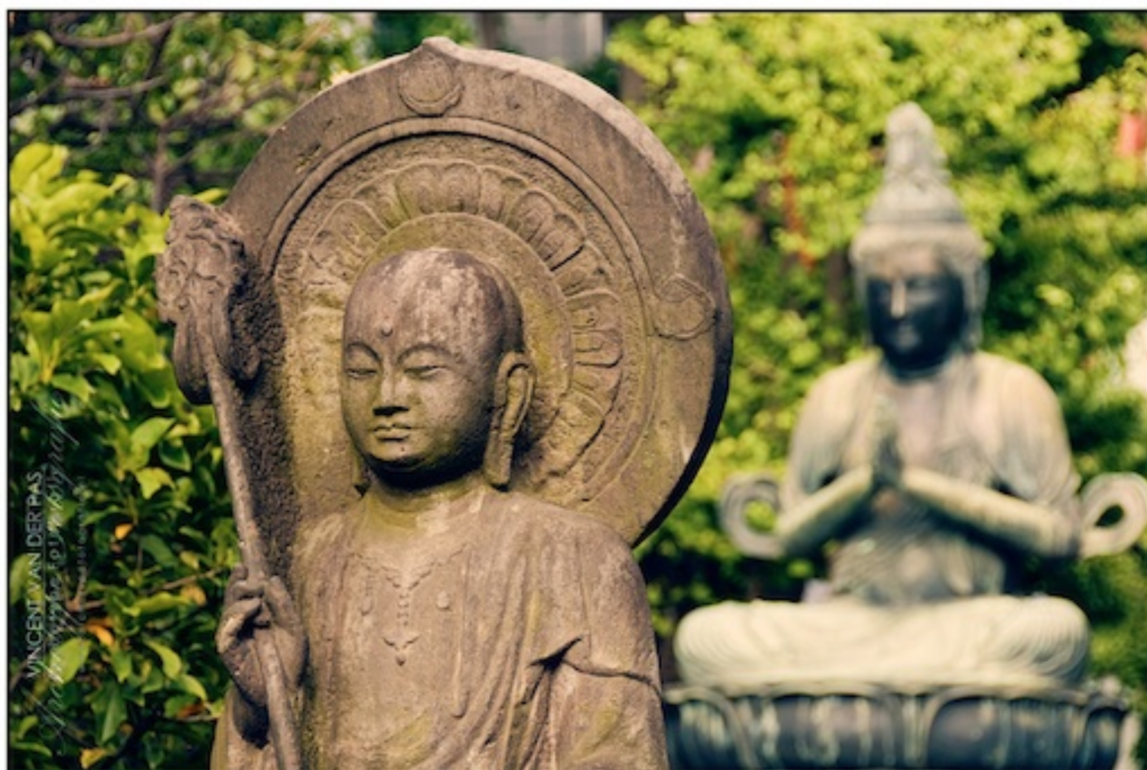
Sustainable Compassion

What compassion is and how we cultivate it

By Lama John Makransky and Brooke D. Lavelle



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Social service professionals are exhausted.

Forty- to fifty-percent of teachers quit their jobs within the first five years of teaching. Nurses, doctors, and other medical professionals report increasingly less satisfaction in their work. Suicide among social workers is on the rise; clergy suffer from depression and other medical issues.

Part of the problem is systemic—our social service providers are overworked and under-resourced. Yet another part of the problem is cultural, and stems from our beliefs about what compassion is and how we cultivate it.

Compassion is not a self-help technique

Many in social service are led to believe that exhaustion and burnout come with the job. Taking time for oneself can be seen as selfish, and requesting help from others can be interpreted as a sign of weakness.

But these assumptions are holding us back. Being cared for is what drives our ability to care for others. Without being open and vulnerable to receive care, our ability to care for our children, family, patients, students, and others is built on a fragile foundation.

Overcoming these obstacles requires that we recognise and challenge some of our deeply held beliefs. Learning new ways of conceptualising and cultivating compassion can help us gain the confidence and tools to work with and overcome these blocks.

We live in a highly individualistic culture that tends to view compassion and other contemplative trainings as techniques to make a person more kind and caring. This frame places the burden of healing and transformation solely on the individual's shoulders and misses the deep relational framework of Buddhist and other ancient spiritual traditions from which many of our modern contemplative programs are drawn.

In these traditions, loving care and compassion are not understood to emerge simply through one's own efforts—they emerge in relation to others. In Asian Buddhist traditions, practitioners first *feel what it is like* to be held in the love and compassion of others, including their spiritual and biological families. These loving qualities then become *real* in their experience. *Then* they learn to extend the same care and compassion to others through meditation. Within such cultures, this is an important part of the meaning of refuge in the Buddha and sangha.

Tapping into the relational dimension of loving care and compassion

We can replicate this kind of relational starting point, but it needs to begin from within our own experience. We can tap into this by recalling a moment of caring connection from any time in our lives—a moment in which someone was with you in a simple loving way, rooting for you, wishing you well, laughing with you, and happy you existed in that moment.

This image of care may be a memory of someone from childhood with whom you loved being with or a moment of genuine connection from any part of your life—a warm smile, a welcoming gaze—with someone such as a teacher, a friend, a mentor, or even a stranger.

We can relive that moment as if it were present right now and re-experience ourselves as seen and loved—beyond our familiar, self-critical, or reductive thoughts of ourselves, to whatever extent is possible.

Taking a few moments to recall such moments on a regular basis can help us remember many other instances of care during our lives. With repetition, a whole field of caring moments and figures can be revealed, and we can learn to accept the deep worth and potential in us that can inspire others.

By returning repeatedly to these moments of unconditional care, we can begin to extend care to others. This is done not as an isolated self, but as someone grounded in a field of care who learns to extend the same care and compassion to others in a way that is not subject to empathy fatigue or burnout.

Lama John Makransky , PhD, is associate professor of Buddhism and comparative theology at Boston College, co-founder of the Courage of Care Coalition and of the Foundation for Active Compassion, and senior faculty advisor and lecturer at the Centre for Buddhist Studies at Rangjung Yeshe.