Objectless Compassion and the Limits of Empiricism

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Abstract

Although the Buddhist practice of *anālaṃbana-karunā* or "objectless compassion" has been the subject of influential research on the neurobiology of compassion, these studies are unclear about what such compassion is. This unclarity turns out to reflect deep philosophical tensions within Tibetan Buddhism over what constitutes objectless compassion. Specifically, is it an objectless experience or the compassion that flows from such an experience? Since this question was at the center of Tibetan scholastic debates, I focus on these debates to shed light on the philosophical issues at stake in accounts of objectless compassion. What I show is that Tibetan views of objectless compassion hinged on a particular Buddhist epistemological puzzle. In my conclusion, after pointing out how attention to these conceptual issues is critical for clarifying what the science of compassion is investigating, I reflect on these debates to raise further questions about the limitations of such empirical inquiry.

Introduction

The belief that compassion is an aspect of Buddhist traditions that can be removed from a Buddhist conceptual framework and investigated empirically has been the impetus for edited volumes, conferences, even entire research programs (Davidson and Harrington 2001; Lutz et al. 2004;

Davidson 2012; Siegel and Germer 2012).[1] Although *anālaṃbana-karunā* or "objectless compassion" has been the focus of much of this empirical work, particularly the neuroscientific research on the brains of advanced Tibetan meditators, in this literature it is not clear what such compassion is (Lutz et al. 2004; Lutz, Dunne, and Davidson 2007; Lutz et al. 2008).

As it turns out, this unclarity in the empirical research reflects deep philosophical tensions within Tibetan Buddhism over what constitutes objectless compassion. Specifically, whether it is an objectless or non-reifying (*anālaṃbana*) experience or the compassion that flows from such an experience. It is important to understand these philosophical issues surrounding objectless compassion if we are to clarify what it is that we are investigating, and if we are to distinguish divergent accounts. While these issues are undertheorized in the practice manuals that probably most directly influenced the Tibetan meditators who were studied, the question of whether objectless compassion is an "objectless" experience of emptiness or an affective experience of compassion was at the center of Tibetan scholastic debates over method (*upāya*) and wisdom (*prajñā*) (Lutz, Dunne, and Davidson 2007, 518).

For this reason, in this paper, I focus on these scholastic debates in order to shed light on the philosophical issues at stake in Tibetan accounts of objectless compassion. What I will show is that Tibetan accounts of objectless compassion hinged on a particular Buddhist epistemological puzzle. In addition to clarifying the conceptual issues involved in Tibetan accounts of objectless compassion, in my conclusion, I reflect on how these debates raise questions about the limitations of empirically investigating objectless compassion and other experiential states described in Buddhist texts.

[1] For more general reflections on the neuroscientific research of Buddhist meditators see Lopez 2008; Arnold 2012; Faure 2017; Thompson 2017; McMahan and Braun 2017; Thompson 2020.

Attention to these questions is critical since just what it is that we were supposed to be empirically investigating matters for the sort of hypotheses that are made and the conclusions that are drawn. If it turns out that the objectless compassion subjects report that they are meditating on during EEG and fMRI scans is a non-referential objectless experience with little to no obvious connection to what psychologists usually consider compassion, this raises important questions for how the results of these studies should be interpreted (Lutz et al. 2004, 16369; 2008, 8). All the more so since this research is often taken to support more general theorizing about the neurobiology of compassion (Davidson 2012, 116).

A consequence of the failure of compassion research to distinguish different accounts of objectless compassion is that in the studies of advanced objectless compassion meditation some of the Tibetan subjects were meditating on compassion and wisdom in alternation whereas others were meditating on a state in which compassion and wisdom were fused into a single objectless experience—precisely the alternatives that were at stake in the scholastic debates I shall be discussing (Lutz et al. 2004; 2008).[2] Given that these meditators where performing altogether different cognitive tasks, it seems probable that they were inducing experiential states that were different in kind. In light of this, while it is not clear what we should make of the neurological changes that distinguished the advanced practitioners from the control groups, it is clear that, so far, researchers have not successfully operationalized objectless compassion—they have yet to specify a "predictable and distinctive state" whose occurrence is clearly indicated by certain phenomenological features (Lutz, Dunne, and Davidson 2007, 502).

Reflecting on the debate around objectless compassion within Tibetan Buddhism provides a much-needed conceptual framework for distinguishing the different ways in which Tibetan

[2] John Dunne, personal correspondence, December 13, 2021.

practitioners understand objectless compassion.[3] Without this sort of conceptual framework the concept of objectless compassion lacks the specificity and precision needed for it to be successfully operationalized (Lutz, Dunne, and Davidson 2007, 502). While successfully operationalizing objectless compassion would also require a descriptive taxonomy of the different ways in which the concept of objectless compassion is used in contemporary Tibetan practice communities, to even begin such a taxonomy requires further clarification of the conceptual issues involved in accounts of objectless compassion.

The Epistemological Puzzle

The question of whether objectless compassion was an affective state of compassion or an objectless experience of wisdom was philosophically controversial for Tibetan thinkers because it was tied to a knotty epistemological puzzle. To see these the conceptual issues at stake in divergent accounts of objectless compassion we need to understand that puzzle, even though this will take us into intricacies of Buddhist theories of cognition, many of which have yet to receive academic attention.[4] What makes objectless compassion puzzling is that it is supposed to be the union of seemingly incompatible cognitive states.[5] Whereas compassion is the desire for others to be free from suffering,[6] many Indian and Tibetan philosophers held that the cognition of emptiness is

[3] Although the conceptual framework that emerges from these debates is useful for us to understand the differences in how contemporary Tibetan practioners meditate on objectless compassion, this is not to suggest that the subjects of these studies thought about their practice in these terms. The conceptual distinctions we will be exploring come out of a highly theoretical context and do not reflect how most practitioners think about objectless compassion.
[4] The epistemological issues that create this puzzle are something of an "unexplored chapter" in Tibetan epistemology (Dreyfus 1996; 1997; 2007; 2011; Siderits 2004; Siderits, Tillemans, and Chakrabarti 2011; Siderits 2020; Dunne 2004; 2020; Stoltz 2006; 2013; 2021; Thompson and Dreyfus 2007; Coseru 2015). And, likewise, the fine-grained psychological questions this puzzle raises for how compassion and the cognition of emptiness overlap has not been treated in scholarly discussions of Buddhist theories of compassion (Dunne 1996; Williams 1998; Brassard 2000; Garfield 2010; Jenkins 2015; Priest, Garfield, and Jenkins 2015; Garfield 2019; Dunne 2019).
[5] For a more phenomenologically oriented discussion of these two aspects of objectless compassion see Lutz, Dunne, and Davidson's discussion (Lutz, Dunne, and Davidson 2007, 518).
[6] In the Indian Buddhist texts that these authors relied on, it was standard to define compassion as the desire for others to be free from suffering. The *Mahāyānasūtrālaṃkārabhāṣya*, for instance, pithily states: "*karuṇā*

aware of neither beings nor their suffering. For thinkers of this stripe, persons and pain are not part of the content of an experience of emptiness. For Tibetan scholastics, the question that any account of objectless compassion had to address, then, is whether compassion was distinct (*rdzas tha dad*)[7] from the experience of wisdom.[8]

While Tibetan philosophers reflected on this question both in terms of conceptual cognitions (*rtog pa*) of emptiness (GR, 18 and TS, 291), and non-conceptual "meditative equipoise" (*mnyam bzhag ye shes*) on emptiness (LRR, 179),[9] since their primary focus was on the former, to make things simpler, I am framing the puzzle in terms of how a conceptual cognition of emptiness is supposed to be joined with compassion.[10]

The puzzle then is created by the *prima facia* credibility of the following three claims:

> 1) *The Simultaneity Claim*: Objectless compassion is constituted by the simultaneous experience of wisdom and method.
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> 2) *Dharmakīrti's prohibition against multiple simultaneous conceptual cognitions*: A single person cannot entertain two thoughts at once.[11]

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duḥkhaviyogākāra" (MSAB 118), which is then unpacked more fully by later commentators, such as Kamalaśīla, in his middle *Bhāvanākrama* (BK 86). For an excellent discussion of divergent accounts of the object of compassion see Anālayo (2015, 24).

[7] Tibetan scholars of this era almost invariably though about difference in terms of conceptual difference (*ldog pa tha dad*) and substantial difference (*rdzas tha dad*). Since the fact that compassion can be at least conceptually or linguistically distinguished from the wisdom realizing emptiness was obvious and uncontroversial, the question revolved entirely around whether the two were substantially distinct. This is seen, for instance, in Panchen Sonam Drakpa's discussion of distinct mental states in his commentary to the *Pramāṇavārttika* (TK *kha*, 156).

[8] It is unclear to me whether there was an Indian Buddhist version of this problem. While John Dunne has shown how Dharmakīrti and his early commentators wrestled with the related problem of how a compassionate Buddha's freedom from ignorance could be reconciled with the claim that ignorance is needed for the conception of other beings, for these later Tibetan scholastics the psychological question of how these seemingly incompatible experiences can be unified in the adept's experience was more pressing (Dunne 1996, 539).

[9] Like many of the more technical epistemological issues I discuss, these distinctions around conceptual and non-conceptual experiences are often not carried over into meditation manuals or contemporary practical instructions for how to meditate on objectless compassion. These distinctions are largely the stuff of scholastic reflection and debate.

[10] The reason for their focus on the conceptual cognition of emptiness is that most scholastic reflection on objectless compassion was in the context of interpreting the homage to the three types of compassion in the *Madhyamakāvatāra* (MĀ 1.4), where, at least according to many commentators, the cognition of emptiness in question was the beginning bodhisattva's conceptual understanding (GR 19). Although even here it should be noted, however, that Gorampa, among others, argued that a non-conceptual experience of emptiness was equally relevant (TS 292 but also BP 237).

[11] See PV 3.178. Note that this is 2.178 in Miyasaka's edition (Yūsho Miyasaka, ed., *Pramāṇavārttika-Kārikā* (Narita: Naritasan Shinshoji, 1970).

> 3) *The Content Claim*: A single cognition cannot have radically different content (*'dzin stang gyi rnam pa mi mthun pa*).

This final claim about content requires a bit more explanation.[12] The idea is that just as a single mental state is not both angry at politicians and calculating the area of a circle ($A = \pi r^2$), a single mental state is not both experiencing compassion for others and realizing emptiness. The reason that it is counterintuitive to think our anger knows $A = \pi r^2$, or that compassion knows emptiness, is that these intentional states involve utterly different ways of relating to (*'dzin stang*), or thinking about, their objects.[13]

As will become clearer in the following, giving a philosophically coherent account of objectless compassion requires letting one of these claims go. Thus, for instance, if the first two claims are true, then, since claim one states that the experience of compassion and the cognition of emptiness are simultaneous, and claim two that it is impossible to have two separate thoughts at once, the third claim, that compassion and the cognition of emptiness are separate, must be false.

What is important to see for my larger point is that Tibetan thinkers developed their positions on whether objectless compassion was a distinct experiential state based on their solutions to this puzzle. To show just how this epistemological puzzle shaped their accounts of objectless

[12] Here, by content, I mean *phenomenal content* as opposed to representational or intentional content. Susan Siegel nicely disambiguates what we mean by "content" by pointing to the way in which, when we speak of the contents of a newspaper, we mean what it conveys, whereas when we speak of the content of a bucket, we mean what is in the bucket (Susanna Siegel 2016, 3). Applied to mental content, one sense of content refers what the mental state conveys to the subject, whereas the other refers to what is 'in the mind.' I use "phenomenal content" to capture the latter sense. It should be noted that this point is also found in the Tibetan distinction between *snang yul* and *'jug yul (Dreyfus 1997, 300)*.

[13] As this example suggests, the difficulty in imagining that our anger does math cannot be hashed out purely in terms of intentionality or *intentional content*. In general, there is nothing troubling about a single cognition being about radically different things. I can, for instance, think about politicians calculating $A = \pi r^2$, even though people and numbers are very different. The problem with anger doing math is that anger involves a way of thinking (*'dzin stang*) about something that sets it apart from the way of thinking involved in mathematical calculations.

compassion, I will walk us through the way in which, in order to account for objectless compassion, the extraordinarily influential Tsongkhapa (1357–1419) rejected the first claim, his later commentator, Panchen Sonam Drakpa (1478-1554), rejected the second claim, and Shakya Chokden (1428-1507), a prolific and innovative Sakya scholar, rejected the third claim.

Tsongkhapa

Tsongkhapa accepted the *content claim* described above—wishing others to be free from suffering and seeing that they are empty cannot both be the *phenomenal content* of a single cognition. It makes no more sense for the feeling of compassion to cognize emptiness than it does for our desire for a snack to contemplate theoretical physics. And, therefore, objectless compassion is a mental state substantially distinct (*rdzas tha dad*) from the cognition of emptiness. As Tsongkhapa chose to put it, compassion cannot cognize emptiness because a single cognition could not have two incompatible ways of apprehending (*'dzin stang kyi rnam pa*) (GR, 29).

Tsongkhapa's rationale here is that two different ways of apprehending would constitute two different cognitions since what distinguishes one cognition from another is how it apprehends its object. This claim is perhaps more intuitive in the case of distinguishing one thought from another. We say that the thought that the oak is big is different from the thought that it is small precisely because of the difference in how the two thoughts apprehend the oak. Likewise, the logic goes, since wishing others to be free of suffering is different from thinking they are empty, the two must be separate mental events. For Tsongkhapa, this is sufficient to establish that the two thoughts are different, or, more technically, substantially distinct (*rdzas tha dad*).[14] In other words, for

[14] Note that there are also other reasons for why a single conceptual cognition cannot have radically different sorts of content having do with the way in which concepts create their objects (*don spyi*) through a process of exclusion. Since this line of reasoning would take us deeply into *apoha* theory, I do not develop that point here. See Siderits 1991; Dreyfus 1997; J. D. Dunne 2004; Siderits, Tillemans, and Chakrabarti 2011; J. Dunne 2011; Dreyfus 2011; McCrea and Patil 2010; Stoltz 2021.

Tsongkhapa, the *content claim* establishes that objectless compassion must be constituted by two separate conceptual cognitions, one of compassion and one of emptiness.

Tsongkhapa also accepted Dharmakīrti's prohibition against multiple conceptual cognitions, the second claim of the puzzle. With the exception of Panchen Sonam Drakpa and some other later followers of Tsongkhapa, whose views I shall discuss shortly, Tibetan scholars almost universally held that two conceptual cognitions could not be experienced simultaneously.[15] Their discussions of this point invariably return to Dharmakīrti's claim that two conceptual thoughts (*vikalpa, rtog pa*) cannot occur simultaneously (PV 3.178). Whereas Dharmakīrti's point was directed against the Nyāya and Mīmāṃsā view that perception was conceptual (*savikalpaka*)—if perception is conceptual, and we also conceptualize our perceptual experience, then, impossibly, we would simultaneously have a conceptual cognition of the perceptual objects and of the perceptual experience—by Tsongkhapa's time this point had become enshrined as a psychological principle (PV 3.177-178, Taber 2005, 7).

Therefore, according to Tsongkhapa, due to *Dharmakīrti's prohibition*, we cannot entertain two thoughts at once. And, since he's already accepted that compassion and the cognition of emptiness are separate thoughts, per the *content claim*, he concludes that the experience of compassion and the cognition of emptiness do not occur simultaneously. For Tsongkhapa, the only way that remained to get out of the puzzle was to reject the *simultaneity claim*—the proposition that objectless compassion entails that the experience of compassion is simultaneous with the cognition of emptiness.

[15] This holds true for both scholars outside of the Gelugpa tradition and for the earlier formative figures within the tradition. See for instance Gyaltshab's remarks on this point (TLS vol.2, 126).

Tsongkhapa's rejection of the *simultaneity claim* combined with his acceptance of the *content claim* and the *prohibition* left him with the following account:[16] Objectless compassion is constituted by two separate cognitions, one which is compassion, the other of emptiness. And, these two separate cognitions occur sequentially—practitioners develop objectless compassion after cognizing emptiness. In other words, first, the practitioner understands that beings are empty, and, then, seeing how they fail to recognize their own emptiness gives rise to a powerful experience of compassion.

While Tsongkhapa's rejection of the notion that compassion and emptiness are experienced simultaneously diffuses the puzzle, his account of objectless compassion raises further questions. Particularly, since Tsongkhapa held that objectless compassion was a mental state that followed after, and was distinct from, the experience of emptiness, he needed to explain how the former cognition influenced the latter. If the cognition of emptiness is no longer present, how is this compassion different from ordinary compassion? Or, put differently, when we experience compassion, if we are no longer experiencing emptiness, what makes objectless compassion special?

To account for this, Tsongkhapa draws on the notion of "cognitive penetration" (*zin pa*), according to which cognitions can influence subsequent cognitions in important and definable ways. He claims that the cognition of emptiness influences the subsequent compassion in ways that distinguish it from ordinary compassion (GR 29). When we see the true nature of things, and we see how others fail to see their own true nature, this induces an experience of compassion that is phenomenologically different from the compassion we feel after contemplating the mundane

[16] Note that while this is the view of objectless compassion Tsongkhapa argues for in his mature works, in his earliest writings on the subject, he states that objectless compassion cognizes emptiness (SP 405). For a full discussion of the development of Tsongkhapa views see Thupten Jinpa (2019).

sorrows and sufferings of others. What is crucial for us to take from Tsongkhapa's theorizing is how his claim that objectless compassion is distinct from wisdom, firstly, comes out of a more general view about mental content, the *content claim*, and secondly, is in philosophical tension with the otherwise appealing *simultaneity claim*.

Before turning to how Tsongkhapa's later interpreter Panchen Sonam Drakpa modified his account, I want to briefly touch on the question of whether, on his view, there is any possibility that a non-conceptual experience of emptiness might be more closely unified with compassion. That is, granting that two conceptual cognitions can only be connected sequentially, what about a non-conceptual cognition? Tsongkhapa had both psychological and ontological reasons for legislating against this. Firstly, in addition to holding that concepts cannot occur simultaneously, at least in his early works, he also held the more controversial view that two mental consciousness (*yid shes*) could not occur simultaneously (SP 875).[17] Since compassion and the non-conceptual experience of emptiness were both mental consciousnesses, their co-occurrence was just as problematic as the simultaneous experience of two thoughts. As I show below when I turn to Shakya Chokden's view, even more significant is the fact that, for Tsongkhapa, were the experience of emptiness to cognize other beings or their suffering, this would entail that beings and suffering were ultimately real (GR, 260). Since a non-conceptual experience of emptiness sees things as they are, if it saw some thing, like other suffering people, that thing would be ultimately real.

[17] While the claim that concepts cannot be experienced simultaneously only appears to have been controversial for later Gelugpa thinkers, Gorampa (RTS 145) and Shakya Chokden (RJ 386), among others, both rejected the claim that two mental cognitions cannot be experienced simultaneously. The reason these scholars were inclined to think that we experience multiple mental consciousnesses simultaneously is that they thought every sense perception was followed by a mental perception (*mānasapratyakṣa*). Since we can hear and see at the same time, we seem to be able to sense through multiple modalities simultaneously. And, therefore, since it follows that each of these sense perceptions are followed by their own mental perception, we must be able to have multiple mental cognitions simultaneously (RTS 145).

Panchen Sonam Drakpa

Panchen Sonam Drakpa, one of Tsongkhapa's later commentators, parted ways with the master over the *simultaneity claim*—he argued that when we experience objectless compassion the compassion and the cognition of emptiness must be happening at the same time.[18] Whereas for Tsongkhapa the cognition of emptiness affected the experience of compassion by way of cognitive penetration (*zin pa*), Panchen adds that this cognitive penetration must be direct (*ngos su zin pa*), which, for him, involves two cognitions occurring simultaneously (YS, 130). Thus, the practitioner of objectless compassion is experiencing compassion while she is cognizing emptiness.

Like Tsongkhapa, however, Panchen was still committed to the *content claim*—it was absurd to imagine that a single mental event could be both the affective wish for others to be free from suffering and the cognition of emptiness. What this means is that even though someone meditating on objectless compassion simultaneously experiences compassion and emptiness, their experience of compassion and their cognition of emptiness are still two substantially distinct (*rdzas tha dad*) mental states. This is, as it were, the Mahāyāna meditator's version of walking and chewing gum.

Therefore, since Panchen accepts that there are two conceptual thoughts at play, and that it is all happening simultaneously, to get out of the puzzle he rejects Dharmakīrti's prohibition against two conceptual cognitions occurring simultaneously. Or, more accurately, he radically revises the prohibition. To allow that meditators feel compassion while they think about emptiness, Panchen changes the prohibition to state instead that two concepts of the "same sort" (*rigs mthun pa*) cannot occur together—but, crucially, different sorts of thought can. Thus, since the feeling of compassion

[18] BD 21. For the sake brevity, I am not able to properly treat the question of why Panchen found Tsongkhapa's view unsatisfactory. The short version is that he wanted to preserve the distinction between the three types of compassion for practioners as they progressed along the path. If having compassion that was influenced (*zin pa*) by the understanding of emptiness was sufficient for objectless compassion, for someone with a realization of emptiness every experience of compassion would be objectless (BD 20).

and the conceptual cognition of emptiness are not of the same sort, there is nothing problematic about their co-occurrence.[19]

Although Panchen's response may initially seem ad hoc, it comes out of a keen phenomenological observation. With a little introspection, it seems obvious that we cannot simultaneously think of cooking dinner and of buying a plane ticket, for example. Entangled though our thoughts may be, it seems like thoughts about our culinary plans follow before or after our ruminations about planes. But, what about, for instance, planning dinner and feeling anxious? While the content of our anxiety may not have the crisp contours of a menu or a travel itinerary, nevertheless, since it is concepts that allow us to "mental time-travel," and, anxiety is certainly often future-oriented, presumably it is conceptual (Klein 2013).[20] Since claiming that we cannot think about dinner while feeling anxious seems counterintuitive, to say the least, in this light, Panchen's modification seems to make some sense. While it is true that there are some sorts of thoughts that we cannot entertain simultaneously, there are others, like anxiety and culinary speculation, and compassion and the cognition of emptiness, that we can.

Even supposing that this much is intuitive, however, for Panchen's response to be convincing requires an explanation of why compassion and the cognition of emptiness are not of the same sort. This, in turn, requires a generalizable criterion for two cognitions being different sorts (*rigs mi mthun pa*), which, as it turns out, proved to be extremely difficult. While limitations of space prevent me from discussing the issue in the detail it deserves, suffice it to say that the question of

[19] While this is clearly the view Panchen is advocating in his commentary to the *Madhyamakāvatāra* (BD 21) and that he explicitly develops in one of his commentaries to the *Abhisamayālaṃkāra* (YS 133), we should be cautious about generalizing about his view, since he rejects this position in his commentary to the *Pramāṇavārttika* in favor of the standard Dharmakīrtian prohibition against the occurrence of multiple simultaneous concepts (TK 157).
[20] For the purposes of this discussion, since I am staying with Panchen Sonam Drakpa's assumption that mental states invariably have an intentional structure, even anxiety is about something.

what made any two cognitions a different sort was highly controversial even among scholars within the same tradition who agreed on many other points.[21]

Shakya Chokden

In marked contrast to Tsongkhapa and his commentators, Shakya Chokden rejected the *content claim*.[22] Even though compassion and the cognition of emptiness have radically different content, objectless compassion is an experience of compassion that cognizes emptiness. In the technical terms of our commentators, objectless compassion is not substantially distinct (*rdzas tha dad*) from the experience of wisdom. Although historically this view of objectless compassion appears to be earlier, and, indeed, something along these lines seems to have been at work in the Indian theorizing about objectless compassion, it is only in reaction to Tsongkhapa that it is developed and defended by Shakya Chokden.[23]

Shakya Chokden's view that objectless compassion was a "mind having emptiness and compassion as its essence" (*stong nyid snying rje'i snying po can gyi blo*) comes out in his critique of Tsongkhapa's position (NT, 229):[24]

> [Tsongkhapa has said:] 'Also, since all three [types of compassion mentioned above] are similar in that their content (*rnam pa*) is the desire for beings to be free of suffering, this excludes their having either impermanence or the absence of inherent existence as their content.' This claim is a travesty insofar as it is now incumbent upon you to show how one can accept a mind that is the essence of emptiness and compassion (*stong nyid snying rje'i snying po can gyi blo*),

[21] Among many other authors, Khedrub, for instance, revisits this controversy in his epistemological work (MS 206).
[22] For an excellent overview of Shakya Chokden's philosophy and intellectual context see Komarovski (2011).
[23] In his own discussion of the subject, Tsongkhapa refers to "many Tibetan commentators" (*bod kyi tīk byed mang po*) who thought that objectless compassion cognized emptiness (GR 29). In the Indian literature, the *Mahāyānasūtrālaṃkārabhāṣya*, for instance, speaks as if objectless compassion has suchness (*tathatā*) as its object (*ālambana*) (MSAB 118). Karṇakagomin, likewise, writes of objectless compassion being without the notions of grasper and grasped (*grāhyagrāhaka*) (PVST 53).
[24] The phrase, "a mind having emptiness and compassion as its essence" (*stong nyid snying rje'i snying po can gyi blo*), an important term for scholars, like Shakya Chokden, who thought that wisdom and method can be unified in a single experience, is a Tibetan rendering of *śūnyatākaruṇagarbha* (RV 4.96).

> *bodhicitta* that is in conjunction (*mtshung ldan*) with the perfection of wisdom, and so on (NT, 229).

Crucially, Shakya Chokden's appeal to "conjunction" (*mtshung ldan*), a term reserved for the connection between mind and mental factors (*sems dang sems byung*), suggests that the compassion and the cognition of emptiness can be united as two mental factors (*sems byung*) within a single mind (*sems*), a point he spells out explicitly elsewhere (LRR, 179).

To understand this point, it is worth taking a brief detour to introduce the Abhidharma account of mind and mental factors, a theory that provided the foundation for Tibetan discussions of how the mind works.[25] According to this theory, our cognition is constituted by a primary mind (*citta sems/gtso sems*) and mental factors (*caitta sems byung*). The mind is defined in terms of its intentionality, the fact that it is about a particular object, whereas the numerous mental factors are defined in terms of their particular functions (PK, 77). Thus, for instance, when we see a maple, the mind apprehends a maple, whereas various mental factors explain the cognitive processes of attending (*manasikāra*), remembering (*smṛti*), and so forth. While conceptually we can distinguish these mental factors, they join to form a single whole—the mind and its mental factors are *not* discrete (*rdzas tha dad*) mental events.[26]

Shakya Chokden's contemporary, Gorampa (1429–1489), unpacks and develops this claim more fully in the context of his discussion of *ultimate bodhicitta* (*don dam sems bskyed*) (Garfield 2019, 196).[27] Gorampa argues that, in the case of *ultimate bodhicitta*, the mind (*sems*) is an experience of emptiness that is joined by the mental factor of wishing for Awakening:

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[25] For a discussion of mind and mental factors see Jinpa (2020, 85), as well as Thompson and Dreyfus (2007).
[26] Although this claim was controversial in Indian Buddhism, to my knowledge all Tibetan epistemologists held that mind and mental factors were substantially the same (*rdzas gcig*) (see TK, 156).
[27] While his account of *ultimate bodhicitta* distinguishes Gorampa as perhaps the most articulate proponent of the unity of wisdom and method, he does not develop this point in the context of his discussion of objectless compassion. Not only does he side step the issue in several of his commentaries to the *Abhisamayālaṃkāra*, even in his *lta ba ngan sel*, a line-by-line criticism of Tsongkhapa's *Madhyamakāvatāra* commentary, while objecting to several other features of Tsongkhapa's account of compassion, he does not delve deeply into the question of

> Therefore, all of the mental factors subsumed within the equipoise of the first *bhūmi* are *aspiring bodhicitta* in terms of (*yin pa'i cha nas*) their conjunction with the mental factor *wishing* (*chanda*) which desires the attainment of complete Awakening. And, they are *engaging bodhicitta* in terms of (*yin pa'i cha nas*) their conjunction with the mental factor *intention* (*cetanā*) which accomplishes the path for the purpose of Awakening. And, they are *ultimate bodhicitta* in terms of (*yin pa'i cha nas*) their being the nature of non-conceptual primordial wisdom (*ye shes*) (ZK, 58).

While Gorampa's point is couched in the highly technical path terms of the *Abhisamayālaṃkāra* literature, his claim here is not just that we can identify the experience of emptiness with the mind and *bodhicitta* with one of the mental factors but that, insofar as the mind and the mental factors constitute a single unified whole, all of the mental factors are *aspiring bodhicitta* and *ultimate bodhicitta*. To take the simpler case of seeing a maple, Gorampa's claim is that since seeing the maple is accompanied by the mental factor of attending (*manasikāra*), the mind seeing the maple also attends to the maple.

Unlike Gorampa, however, Shakya Chokden makes the same point about objectless compassion, albeit somewhat more obliquely (LRR, 179). In short, when we experience objectless compassion, the mind (*sems*) experiences emptiness while accompanied by the mental factor (*sems byung*) of desiring other beings to be free from suffering. To grasp the significance of this move within the context of Tibetan debates over objectless compassion, it is critical to bear in mind that for Shakya Chokden and other Tibetan thinkers, since the mental factors are not substantially distinct (*rdzas tha dad*) from the mind, the difference between objectless compassion and the adept's experience of emptiness is purely linguistic.[28]

The extraordinary outcome of this view is that the experience of emptiness also includes experiencing people and their suffering. Unlike the epistemological difficulties I introduced in my

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whether compassion realizes emptiness, only remarking that objectless compassion observes beings who are distinguished by their emptiness (TS 298: *rang bzhin gyi stong pas khyed par du byas pa'i 'gro ba la dmigs nas…*), a stock phrase found in all discussions of this topic.

[28] LRR, 172: *ngo bo gcig la ldog pa tha dad*.

discussion of Tsongkhapa and Panchen Sonam Drakpa, the philosophical implications of this point come out even more clearly in the case of the non-conceptual experience of emptiness. As I mentioned earlier, for Tsongkhapa, to claim that persons and their suffering are part of the phenomenal content (*dngos yul*) of a direct experience of emptiness would entail that they are truly existent (*bden grub*) insofar as they are found under ultimate analysis (GR, 260). Against this, Shakya Chokden argues that the direct experience of emptiness sees things as illusory, and, for something to appear as an illusion it must appear.[29] Shakya Chokden's final word on objectless compassion is that it is a genuine experience of compassion for other beings who are perceived as illusory within the meditator's experience of emptiness.

The Big Picture

In pursuit of our question of what constitutes objectless compassion, we have stumbled upon fundamentally different ways of thinking about the unity of method and wisdom. Tsongkhapa and Panchen Sonam Drakpa thought that even though objectless compassion was a discrete mental state, substantially different (*rdzas tha dad*) from the cognition of wisdom, compassion and the experience of emptiness, method and wisdom, must be cultivated together. As it is said in the *Vimalakīrti Sūtra*:

> Wisdom not joined with method is bondage. Wisdom joined with method is liberation. Method not joined with wisdom is bondage. Method joined with wisdom is liberation.[30]

According to their way of thinking about method and wisdom, compassion and the experience of emptiness, the danger the *Sūtra* warns against is that we might neglect one or the other (LCM 344).

[29] To be more precise, in this context Shakya Chokden restricts his claim to what he sees as the view of objectless compassion according to Haribhadra, perhaps the most important of the Indian commentators on the *Abhisamayālaṃkāra* (LRR, 179).
[30] *dpe bsdur ma* 60, 522. Also quoted in BK 2, 128.

And, it should be noted, Tsongkhapa and his followers are not the only ones to think about compassion and wisdom as two separate things—this assumption is fairly standard in contemporary scholarship on compassion in which the two are often talked about as a mutually reinforcing "synergy" (Makransky 2012, 71). In this sense, method and wisdom are akin to swimming lessons and piano lessons: if our kids only swim they will be brutes, and if they only play the piano, they will sink. The only way to grow up is to cultivate both skills.

In marked contrast, Shakya Chokden, however, is pointing to a much deeper unity between method and wisdom. For him, the danger of divorcing method and wisdom that the *Vimalakīrti Sūtra* is pointing to is that we might see the two as separate, even though they are, in fact, one (*ngo bo gcig*) (LRR 172). Although the terms "method" and "wisdom" continue to be semantically different (*ldog pa tha dad*), there is an important sense in which method is wisdom, wisdom is method.

What is the takeaway of all of this for the empirical investigation of objectless compassion? As I mentioned at the outset, in the scientific literature on objectless compassion, there is considerable unclarity over what it is that is being studied. More specifically, researchers have yet to clarify whether the concept of objectless compassion that they have attempted to operationalize refers to an objectless experience or the affective state induced by such an experience. It should now be apparent that their unclarity is not due to a simple terminological confusion but, rather, to old and deep philosophical tensions at the heart of Buddhist concepts of objectless compassion.[31] Supposing that objectless compassion is the sort of concept that is amenable to specification and

[31] Note that these Tibetan debates around objectless compassion are only one among many of the historical conceptual tensions around how to understand compassion. For an in-depth discussion of the development of views on compassion within Buddhism see Anālayo (2015).

measurement, further empirical research on objectless compassion will need to be cognizant of these conceptual issues and further specify what sort of objectless compassion they intend to study.

The Limits of Empiricism?

While thus far I have been using Tibetan theorizing about objectless compassion to shed light on the conceptual unclarity that plagues contemporary compassion research, Shakya Chokden's position also raises questions for the view that Buddhist path terminology can be translated into the language of cognitive neuroscience. This view that the awakened experiences described in Buddhist texts refer to psychological states that can be correlated to neurological changes in the brain has fittingly come to be called "neural Buddhism" (Brooks 2008; Thompson 2020, 12 & 145; Faure 2017, 116).[32]

To see the role path concepts like objectless compassion play in the neural Buddhists' research program, we need to understand why they shy away from the overtly normative and soteriological concept of awakening (*bodhi*). The issue is that Awakening turns out to be extremely difficult to operationalize. While Evan Thompson and others have pointed to the lack of consensus within Buddhist communities over what constitutes awakening, and over which individuals are awakened, as the primary obstacle to its operationalization, it seems likely that this lack of consensus is a symptom of deeper issues (Thompson 2020, 145; Davis and Vago 2013, 2).[33] Since Buddhist traditions often emphasize that awakening is inconceivable (*acintya*) and has no necessary

[32] To be clear, we should not conflate empirical research into Buddhist meditation with neural Buddhism. While the latter takes its inspiration from the former, unlike the neuroscientific research on Buddhist brains, neural Buddhism is an ideologically charged quasi-philosophical way of interpreting Buddhist discussions of the mind and the path (Thompson 2020, 12).

[33] Lack of consensus need not be an obstacle to empirical investigation. While it would certainly prevent empirical conclusions about the neurobiology of awakening as it is understood by *all* Buddhists, if lack of consensus were the only obstacle, there would seem to be no reason why one could not simply select one such concept of awakening for empirical investigation.

connection to any particular physical form—according to traditional accounts, bridges, brigands and animals all may be Buddhas—awakening is not indicated either by physical features or self-reports (PV 3: 532, PD 567). And, as such, it is unclear how awakening could be "a predictable and distinctive state whose occurrence is clearly indicated by certain cognitive or physical features or events" (Lutz, Dunne, and Davidson 2007, 502).

Regardless of the reasons for why awakening remains elusive, aware of these difficulties, scholars who are serious about finding the neural correlates for the experiential states described in Buddhist texts—the so-called "neural Buddhists"—place their hopes on the prospects of researching the neurobiology of particular experiential states whose content can be clearly specified (Davis and Vago 2013, 3). Davis and Vago, for instance, have argued for a qualified optimism about finding the neural correlates for Buddhist experiential states based on the success of empirical research into objectless compassion and other path states:

> More recently, attempts have been made to operationalize meditation in very specific contexts of automaticity… For example, Lutz et al. (2004) found gamma band electroencephalography (EEG) power over lateral frontal and parietal electrode sites to correlate (r = 0.69) with self-reported clarity in expert Tibetan practitioners of "non-referential compassion" (Tibetan: *dmigs med snying rje*), suggesting a particular mechanism for increased phenomenal intensity (Davis and Vago 2013, 3).

From the success of this empirical research, Davis and Vago conclude the following:

> It is therefore, necessary to responsibly unpack traditional constructs into common psychological and neurocognitive terms that can correlate with first-person experience with some consistency… Responsible scientific investigation of Enlightenment can proceed only on the basis of rigorous understanding of particular experiential states or behavioral traits within a particular tradition as part of a whole value system… (Davis and Vago 2013, 3).

In short, since alongside the fuzzy, difficult to operationalize, concepts of awakening, there are other path markers whose content can be rigorously and precisely demarcated, this is where empirical research into the Buddhist path can make headway.

Maybe. But, what if Shakya Chokden is right? What if objectless compassion (*anālaṃbana-karunā*), the desire for awakening (*bodhicitta*), and wisdom (*prajñā*) are a single experience? Supposing objectless compassion is wisdom, and wisdom is inconceivable, it is not clear what we have accomplished by turning from an empirical investigation of *bodhi* to supposedly more precise path constructs.

As such, Shakya Chokden's account raises two sorts of questions for neural Buddhists. First, for him, objectless compassion does not involve a distinctive experiential state with its own phenomenology, which was supposed to be one of the virtues of focusing on specifiable path markers.[34] Since objectless compassion does not involve a clearly specifiable psychological state distinct from other aspects of the meditator's experience, how does focusing on objectless compassion get us any closer to a rigorous understanding of particular experiential states?

Second, given that, on Shakya Chokden's account, objectless compassion is not distinct from wisdom, any misgivings we might have about the feasibility of empirically investigating the latter would apply equally to the former. As such, the empirical study of objectless compassion would be faced with the question of whether there is something about non-dual objectless experiences that make them more difficult to specify with any precision. While we can certainly use the tools of social psychology to gain a better understanding of how particular communities attribute wisdom to themselves or others, what they consider to be wisdom is, at the most, only very loosely correlated with the normative concept of wisdom. Just as studying what people think constitutes justification is different from studying justification, sociological inquiry into what Buddhists think is wisdom is different from studying wisdom. Since wisdom, on many Buddhist accounts, Shakya

[34] To clarify, saying that Shakya Chokden rejects the notion that objectless compassion is a discrete state that can be studied separately from wisdom is not to suggest that his language of the path is any less precise than Tsongkhapa or Panchen Sonam Drakpa. While there are Tibetan thinkers who are loose with their terminology, Shakya Chokden is not one of them.

Chokden's included, cannot be conceptualized, what does it mean to specify wisdom—and objectless compassion—as a distinct psychological state that can be reliably measured (Komarovski 2015, 4)?[35]

In short, the neural Buddhists' hope that, alongside the soteriological and normative concepts of the Buddhist path, there are also other concepts, like objectless compassion, that denote phenomenologically distinct and empirically specifiable psychological states, itself presupposes a controversial way of thinking about the Buddhist path.[36] Since, for Shakya Chokden, objectless compassion and the experience of emptiness, and wisdom and method more generally, are different ways of accounting for a single experience, his position raises fundamental questions about the coherence of trying to find particular "path markers" or experiential states that can be rigorously distinguished and delineated (Davis and Vago 2013, 2).

Whether objectless compassion is a distinct state distinguishable from the wisdom of the *bodhisattva* or the laboratory meditator is an open question. My point is that when neural Buddhists think of path concepts as precise constructs that pick out phenomenologically distinct psychological states, they are already taking a philosophical position. And, as the Tibetan scholastics we have been following demonstrate so magnificently, philosophical positions must be argued for.

[35] To be clear, my point here is about the sort of questions that Shakya Chokden's account of objectless compassion raises. I do not intend to settle either the question of whether this sort of empirical research requires objectless compassion to be a specifiable and distinct experience or the question of whether Buddhist accounts of wisdom can be operationalized. My reasons for this are, firstly, that settling these questions is beyond the scope of this paper and, secondly, questions of what is or is not empirically feasible are generally best answered empirically.

[36] For an insightful discussion of how Western scholars have tended to interpret Buddhist accounts of experience as if they demarcated "states of consciousness" see Sharf (1995, 231), but also Janet Gyatso's response about the applicability of his point to Tibetan Buddhism (1999).

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