

Survival of the Kindest **Joen Snyder-O'Neal**

Fall 2005

Compassion is a central principle in Buddhism, as well as in human life in general. It is said that when great wisdom comes together with great compassion, a fully mature being is born. Compassion is more than just a sympathetic feeling—it is the strong wish that the suffering of another be alleviated, and the actual effort to bring that about, to whatever extent is possible.

A few months ago I went to hear a talk by Marc Ian Barasch, a writer and Buddhist practitioner. I first heard him speak several years ago when he described his experiences as he struggled with a very serious case of cancer. This time he was talking about his new book, *Field Notes on the Compassionate Life*, which is the result of his sustained interest and research into the origins and practices of compassion.

As part of his research, Barasch investigated kindness and compassion in the animal world. He writes in his book, “It turns out that Charles Darwin found in animals the taproot of our goodness. His writings are filled with admiring accounts of animal reciprocity, cooperation, and even love—a word that appears 95 times in his book *The Descent of Man*, against two entries for ‘the survival of the fittest.’”

Biologists often look to our genetic cousins the chimpanzees to confirm the idea of “survival of the fittest.” Barasch visited a chimpanzee colony in Georgia and observed the aggressive and dominating behavior of the alpha male. But then he went to a colony of bonobos, also in Georgia.

Bonobos have been called the hippie cousins of the chimpanzees. Primatologists who have studied the bonobos have found that it is not competition but conciliation, cooperation, compassion—and cuddling—that may be their central organizing principle of evolution—“survival of the kindest.”

In the bonobos’ world, if everyone isn’t happy, no one is happy. Barasch observed that there was an orangutan living with the bonobos that had lost her arms. None of the bonobos would eat until she was fed, and none would go to sleep until she had a blanket put around her. He was told that when two tribes of bonobos meet in the wild, the females of both tribes go out and cuddle with the males of the other tribe. This is the opposite of the chimpanzees, who send out their alpha males to fight.

As for human beings, we have an enormous range of possibility in the degree of kindness or cruelty we manifest. An important teaching in Buddhism is not only that compassion is important but that it can be cultivated so that it blooms in our life. It is too central to our wellbeing to be taken for granted.

Recently some friends and I have been studying and practicing ways to grow and ripen

kindness and compassion. As part of our study, we read Jeffrey Hopkins' book *Cultivating Compassion*, in which he offers many practices for this cultivation.

One practice he discusses is called "Recognizing the Kindness of Others," and it has three parts. The first part is to open our eyes to see the everyday kindnesses of those around us—our family, friends, and colleagues. These are acts of intentional kindness toward us that we often don't notice because we are caught up in self-centeredness. One class member said she often felt impatience and annoyance toward her partner. She was surprised when she sat down and made a list of her partner's daily acts of kindness—how many there were! She remembered him putting out her vitamin pills in the morning, hauling water for her garden, having dinner ready when she came home.

The second part of this practice is to see the nexus of provisions others provide. If we reflect deeply when we bite into a juicy summer tomato, we can be aware of so much contributing to it, and to us: the earth, air, sun, and rain; the people who planted, cultivated, and harvested; those who provided the food, clothing, equipment, roads and so on for those who planted, cultivated, and harvested; and on and on.

Really, everything is included in this tomato that is bringing us joy and nourishment—everything is part of the nexus of provisions. This is called unintentional kindness. It is the total dynamic working of the universe. The third part is called recognizing that we are coming under the influence of kindness. This is going beyond conceptual understanding to the experience of interdependency, realizing that our existence in each moment is dependent on innumerable beings and things supposedly "outside" of us but actually completely interwoven with who we are.

This recognition is then naturally expressed, through action. We act in ways that express our appreciation for all the intentional and unintentional kindness that permeates our life. For instance, at our Center as at most meditation centers we make a small bow when we enter the meditation hall. This is an acknowledgement of all the seen and unseen kindnesses that have taken place for the hall to be there, with all its cushions, bells, and flowers, ready for us! The more awake we become, the more we want to bow inwardly at all the crossroads of our daily life.

In zen practice we often recite, silently or out loud, little verses, or gathas, throughout the day, as reminders of "imperceptible mutual assistance"—the working of interdependence. For instance, a gatha before eating from Thich Nhat Hanh goes, "In this food I see the presence of the whole universe supporting me." This is a simple practice to cultivate awareness of the kindness that constantly surrounds us.

One of the meanings of mindfulness is to not forget. When we don't forget the kindness and compassion that support us in each moment, our heart naturally opens in appreciation, and we want to reflect this in how we live.

We can cultivate the flower of kindness through our attention, intention, and actions of body, speech, and mind. Like the bonobos, we can practice cooperation, conciliation,

compassion, and cuddling—remembering that if everyone isn't happy, no one is happy!