

Special Issue 2: True Skills for Peace

Podcast Transcript

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Host: Yiyi Liu.

Is Compassion the Key To Peace Work?

(Intro) Yiyi: The world we live in is not in peace. We have seen too much violence and sufferings: constant barrage of conflicts, intractable political and social tensions, displacement, poverty, disease, etc. We ask ourselves, how can we respond to all these challenges? We claim to want peace, but what skills do we need to bring peace? And how to cultivate them? Welcome to the fourth episode of the Thought Project podcast. I am today's host Yiyi, I have two guests with us, Manuel and Samantha.

***Manuel:** In this Thought Project podcast, we would like to take you on a short journey to explore the 'True skills for peace', what it means to us, and how we could potentially do even better in the future. We're happy to open up this platform for political reflection and discussion.*

***Samantha:** On today's episode, myself and Manuel will be having a conversation with Yiyi on what skills we believe are essential for peace workers to have a sustained, successful impact.*

Yiyi: It is really important to learn about the human potential for peaceful behaviour. How can we pursue peace? What do you think are the "true skills for peace", Manuel?

Manuel: The ones I have in mind are more qualities, instead of skills, but without them, peace cannot be achieved: We must be able to *'Listen to others, be compassionate, and altruistic'*.

But I find this to be a really interesting question, part of a bigger debate. One that starts with speaking about 'compassion'. Regardless if you are a policymaker or a peace worker, 'Compassion' usually is at the top of our minds.

But what does compassion mean? for Buddhism. This is "the wish that all beings be free of their suffering", but must, immediately recognize that 'unfortunately, it is not possible for us to rid the world of it completely, at least not by ourselves.

This is such a big task, that not one single human being could be able to achieve it alone. They must, therefore, also have a strong mind, able to recognize the limitations of our

human capacity and we must build bridges for the ones that follow their steps, without feeling frustrated or hopeless.

Yiyi: I see your point. Compassion is an important skill for different peace actors, but we also need a strong mindset to deal with it, right? What's your take on this, Samantha?

Samantha: Manuel is correct, working in the humanitarian field and constantly being exposed to the brutal reality of our work is not easy on the mind. Being a skilled peace worker is not defined by one's ability to put a shiny ribbon on a very bad situation.

Rather, to me, the skill of compassion goes beyond our feelings towards those suffering and extends to ourselves as well. We, as humans, humanitarians, will suffer, and being able to address our inner turmoil is essential for peace work. Success comes from knowing how to involve our feelings and being highly in tune with our own and others emotions.

Compassion fatigue or empathic distress is a silent, costly epidemic. Working towards peace is emotionally demanding. It is easy to temporarily avoid unpleasant experiences of despair, sadness or fear, but this has long term effects on one's mental health. To me, being able to deploy healthy strategies that allow and manage the full range of emotions is an essential skill.

Manuel: Samantha brings out a good point, we cannot stay only with skills, the need for a warm-hearted, altruistic attitude toward all sentient beings should also be part of you.

Yiyi: That's right. It is truly a difficult task to manage the emotional challenges, we need skills to deal with it, to achieve "inner peace" while contributing to world peace. In this sense, compassion is not just to resonate with others, but also ourselves. But how to cultivate compassion? Can it be universal?

Manuel: If we want to be compassionate, we have to cultivate 'Empathy' in ourselves, and empathy is characterized by closeness. But this is not just 'physical' proximity or even just an emotional one, but rather a feeling of responsibility and of concern for other beings.

If we understand this, we might be able to recognize how our success or our failure depends upon the cooperation and contribution of other beings, e.g. we wouldn't have a phone or a laptop if others didn't work to manufacture them, and in that way, this 'Invisible hand' called empathy surrounds us and binds us even though we don't recognize it until we think about it. If this binding is not 'universality' then I do not know what this word is.

Yiyi: Yes, we need to cultivate empathy to take the perspective of others, and then to have the desire to help, which is compassion. And Samantha, What does compassion mean to you?

Samantha: Compassion to me, is a muscle. One that can be strengthened and expanded so that we are able to stay fully present to suffering without overwhelming ourselves into a paralysis. Neuroscience has proven that compassion is an emotionally connected response to suffering that doesn't deplete, overwhelm or paralyze. It is a natural response to kin, that can be exercised through healthy techniques that help us shift away from empathy to compassion.

Compassion, towards ourselves and towards others, will aid one from collapsing under others suffering, and also stop them from turning into lifeless robots in professional environments.

Yiyi: I totally agree that compassion is a key to professional peace work. But can we teach compassion in the international aid system? Is it a challenge for policymakers?

Manuel: If empathy is the basis for compassion, and it's the product of the sense of responsibility and concern for others. Then, this is the central aspect of international aid, and because of it, 'international aid' should be the biggest act of international compassion, right? Well, if we forget about the main limitation that compassion has: *it is impossible to eliminate suffering from the face of the earth*, then we will feel frustration, and anger, and suffering as we can appreciate if we watch a film like *'Welcome to Refugeestan'*.

We could agree that there is an underlying empathy in those that are field workers or volunteers, working tirelessly to improve the lives of others, but there is still a lot of room for improvement on how they treat those less privileged.

Samantha: I Couldn't agree more with Manuel, there are tons of room for improvement. Currently, the models of humanitarian work and activist culture depletes us and continues the patterns of trauma, harm, oppression and workaholism. We cannot afford for each other to burn out, as our empathy, hope and compassion is vital for success. To loose these tendencies, there are destructive consequences for not only ourselves, but also the organisations we work for, and the people and causes we serve. This is why, compassion towards ourselves and the world around us is key to the operations of any peace worker.

(Closing)Yiyi: Thank you Samantha and Manuel for this thoughtful conversation. Compassion is an essential skill to achieve peace.. Etymologically, compassion means 'suffering-with'. It is a moral sentiment to co-suffering, a source to relate us to the world, to extend concerns and engagement beyond ourselves. Thus it is a key component to counteract violence, intolerance, injustice. However, we must also be aware of the emotional challenges and mental health in peace work, the unavoidable empathy distress and compassion fatigue of peace workers. It is equivalently important to cultivate compassion towards ourselves, and to build individual and organizational resilience to support peace workers, to achieve inner peace and world peace.

Thank you for staying with us and see you in the next episode!