

Compassion in Practice

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Summary: Compassion here is not a feeling but a trained capacity — karu G — trained with the same discipline the monastery gives to logic. It is studied formally in the Perfection of Wisdom, where wisdom and compassion are held to arise together and neither counts as complete alone, and it is practised in the residential school that takes in boys from vulnerable families in the Himalayan border regions, in a community where the slow and the brilliant study side by side without competitive pressure. It also answers a question the present century keeps asking: when machines can reason, remember and argue, what is left that is distinctively human? Not speed. The capacity to care.

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SEVEN PILLARS

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Compassion in Practice: Lived Altruism

In a world where intelligence, memory and judgment are increasingly externalised to machines, one question keeps returning: what remains genuinely human? At Dzongkar Choede the answer is not a theory. It is a daily, physical practice of active compassion — karu G — treated not as a sentimental feeling but as a disciplined form of cognitive and ethical training, and serving as the moral anchor of the community.

Historically, Tibetan monasteries were the backbone of their society: primary universities, cultural archives, and social safety nets providing medical care, support for the vulnerable and response in a crisis. Re-established in exile in South India in 1972, Dzongkar Choede continues that work.

Compassion Is Trained, Not Felt

The distinction the tradition draws is between a feeling that arrives and a capacity that is built. Sympathy comes and goes with mood and proximity. Karu G is cultivated deliberately, over years, with the same discipline the monastery applies to logic.

It has a formal place in the curriculum. In the study of Prajñāramitā the Perfection of Wisdom, monks work through how profound wisdom — the understanding of emptiness and interdependence — and active compassion must arise together. Neither is regarded as complete without the other. Wisdom without compassion is merely clever; compassion without wisdom is sentiment that cannot help anyone.

The training works on a specific target: the reflex of taking oneself as the centre. If nothing exists independently, the self that seems to sit at the middle of experience is not the exception, and others are not the background against which one's own life happens.

This is why the monastery treats compassion as something that can be got better at. It is not a disposition some people happen to have.

The Sanctuary of Care

The most direct expression of this is the monastic school, which provides free education and residential care to young novices. A large part of the student body comes from economically and socially vulnerable families in remote Himalayan border regions — the Monpa community of Tawang, Nepal, and the Tibetan region of Tsum.

The school is fully residential. Young monks live in monastic houses under guardian teachers who take a broadly parental role: daily health, homework, monastic studies, and a secure environment that balances academic focus with emotional safety. Alongside classical scripture and Buddhist philosophy, they study English, mathematics, Chinese, computer literacy, history and Tibetan grammar.

What that costs, and who carries it, is not abstract. In the school's early years the monastery struggled to pay teachers at all, and an abbot covered their salaries from his own funds so that the children's education would not be interrupted.

A Community Without Competitive Pressure

In a performance-driven world, worth is measured by productivity and comparative success, which reliably produces status anxiety. Here worth is anchored in conduct, attention and restraint.

The practical form this takes is a community in which the slow and the brilliant study side by side, without competitive performance pressure. A monk who takes twelve years over material another finishes in eight is not behind. He is studying.

This is compassion as an arrangement rather than a sentiment: a set of conditions under which people are not measured against one another.

What Machines Cannot Do

Modern artificial systems analyse data, simulate arguments and generate fluent prose. What they do not do is suffer, or feel another being's pain. They have nothing at stake.

That makes the cultivation of altruism a strange kind of frontier. For most of history, the things humans were proudest of — reasoning, memory, argument, recall — were the things a machine now does faster. What is left is not speed of thought. It is the capacity to be moved by someone else's situation and to act on it.

A monastery that has spent six centuries training exactly that capacity turns out to have been

working on the relevant problem.

Shared Custodianship

The care of more than 300 monks and the running of a residential school place a quiet strain on limited resources. The monastery does not do spiritual marketing or aggressive fundraising. It continues its work, sustained by disciplined dedication and by the people who have chosen to help.

If this resonates with you, consider making a contribution. Support goes to teacher salaries, student sponsorship, textbooks and the library.

In a world where intelligence is no longer uniquely human, we do not need to compete in speed. We need to deepen our capacity to care.