MINDFUL COMPASSION

how the science of compassion can help you understand your emotions, live in the present, and connect deeply with others

PAUL GILBERT, PhD
and CHODEN

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Distributed in Canada by Raincoast Books

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First published in the UK by Constable, an imprint of Constable & Robinson Ltd, 2013

Cover design by Amy Shoup

Text design by Tracy Marie Carlson

Acquired by Tesilya Hanauer

Edited by Elisabeth Beller

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Gilbert, Paul.

Mindful compassion : how the science of compassion can help you understand your emotions, live in the present, and connect deeply with others / Paul Gilbert, PhD, and Choden.

pages cm

ISBN 978-1-62625-061-1 (pbk. : alk. paper) -- ISBN 978-1-62625-062-8 (pdf e-book) -- ISBN 978-1-62625-063-5 (epub) 1. Compassion. 2. Mind and body. I. Title.

BJ1475.G46 2014

155.2'32--dc23

2014000027

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Preface

Writing this book together has been a fascinating journey. We would like to share a little of how it began and unfolded.

Our mutual colleague Dr. Alistair Wilson is a consultant psychiatrist with a long-term interest in how Buddhist practices of mindfulness and compassion can be integrated with Western scientific understanding of mental processes. In 2008, Alistair organized a conference on neuroscience and compassion that took place at the Buddhist retreat on Holy Isle, off the island of Arran on the west coast of Scotland. It was at this meeting that we first met. We have very different backgrounds and life experiences, so we'll describe them briefly here.

Paul

I grew up in Nigeria in the 1950s and lived there until I was twelve years old. Living far away from any major towns, I had a fantastic sense of freedom, but I also saw a lot of suffering: poverty, and people with leprosy and other illnesses, all struggling to survive. I recall being quite distressed by a man asking me for money; his face and fingers were eaten away by leprosy. I spent my adolescence in a rather harsh boarding school in Britain, disconnected from my family and previous lifestyle. My first degree was in economics, but as I had always wanted to work closely with people, I did a second degree, eventually qualifying as a clinical psychologist in 1980.

I was very interested in how and why our minds evolved and came to function in the way they do. My focus was on depression, which can be so destructive that it can even lead people to kill themselves. Many early psychotherapists, such as Freud and Jung, realized that we need to understand the mind against an evolutionary background. When looked at through the lens of evolution, we can see something that most people often don't recognize, which is that this brain of ours is wonderful and complex but not that well put together. In fact, our brains are very "tricky" to handle and come with a lot of glitches and difficulties. It turns out that the way our minds and brains evolved can set us up for a lot of suffering. As I began to realize this, it was like a light coming on. It made sense of so much. In 1989, I published a

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book called *Human Nature and Suffering*, exploring these ideas.

I had always been very interested in nature programs, and I remember seeing one on how turtles scrambled from their sand nests trying desperately to reach the sea, only to be picked off by seabirds, foxes, and many other predators in the first hours of life —most of them wouldn't make it to adulthood. I think that David Attenborough and his team's wonderful work has perhaps done something that he may not have anticipated, which is to bring home the harshness and cruelty of nature: most life-forms must eat other life-forms to survive, the young are common targets for predators, and viruses and bacteria are life-forms that kill and maim and cause suffering to many other life-forms in a narrow pursuit of their own welfare. Then there is the small matter of recognizing that our own lives are very limited, and we will, like all other living things, flourish, decay, and die.

On becoming aware of these issues, I, like many of my generation, developed an interest in Buddhism in the late 1960s and the 1970s and dabbled in some meditation. But it was becoming aware of the deeper teachings that inspired me.

About 2,500 years ago, the Buddha worked out that life is about suffering, partly because everything is impermanent: all living things come into existence, flourish, decay, and die. The Buddha, of course, knew nothing about the scientific processes that lie behind the way things are, such as the Big Bang theory of the universe, the workings of our genes, and the processes underlying the flow of life, but he was able to focus on a very simple but profound observation—everything changes and nothing lasts. Despite this impermanence (which is obvious to anyone who thinks about it for a moment), we have minds that seek permanence and stability; and yet these very same minds are chaotic and consumed by easily activated passions, desires, fears, and terrors. The solution, the Buddha suggested, is to develop a clear insight into the nature of our predicament and tame the grasping mind so that we are less pulled this way and that.

This is fascinating stuff, and evolutionary psychology has added this insight: our brains and bodies evolved as survival and reproducing vehicles for genes. No wonder we have such a problem. *It really is not our fault*. As I spoke to my Buddhist colleagues about these insights, something seemed to strike a chord in them. Many acknowledged that they had never really thought about it like that. They said that sometimes it's very easy to convey the idea that we have a chaotic mind and that we are suffering because we've done something wrong or haven't done something right. Evolutionary understanding completely removes

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that kind of blaming and shaming. I've spent many years trying to understand shame and to help people who suffer from it, so marrying evolutionary understanding with Buddhist insight and training became something of a mission for me.

So at that lovely conference on the beautiful Holy Isle, Choden and I had the opportunity to walk, taking in the beauty of the island, and to talk in depth about our different approaches. (We also took swims in the cold Scottish sea that were quite invigorating, to say the least!) We shared many similar ideas about the problems of the human mind and the difficulties of training it. He noted that when people begin to practice mindfulness and compassion in depth, it can actually bring up very painful and difficult feelings. (He describes his own experience of this in chapter 6.) So it wasn't long before we both recognized that it would be a tough but exciting project to try to write something together, integrating our different understandings and experiences: mine from the perspective of clinical and evolutionary psychology and Choden's from a Buddhist tradition.

Although I had explored the concept of training minds in compassion in an earlier book (*The Compassionate Mind,* 2009), we wanted to include mindfulness as a basis for training in compassion; explore some of the obstacles that people encounter when they begin to train the mind; and, in particular, develop a step-by-step set of practices rooted in Choden's training and my experience of developing practices for people struggling with mental health problems.

You will see some differences in writing style that we have tried to smooth out, but we are not trying to disguise the source of the writing. I saw my task as building the insights from the science of mind and mind training and Choden's as bringing ancient practices to life for the Western mind. The last few years have certainly been an opportunity of great learning for me; and I express considerable gratitude for Choden's patience and perseverance in explaining things. I have been inspired by his knowledge and openness to think deeply about certain practices and to not be afraid to think of things in new ways. I've also been impressed by his openness and preparedness to engage in personal exploration of some very difficult issues (which he tells us about in chapter 6). And of course I have valued his friendship.

We've also had the opportunity of running some compassion-focused retreats together where we could develop and refine the practices in part II. The retreats involve periods of silence, reflection, and inner practice for building skills to cultivate our compassionate minds and engage more effectively with the

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world. These have generally proved very beneficial for people and certainly have been for me as a participant. We hope to continue these in the future.

Choden

My journey into Buddhism and intensive meditation practice took a somewhat unusual route. I grew up in Cape Town in the dying days of the apartheid era. I was privileged to lead a middle-class life and got pretty much everything I wanted at a material level. But I was not happy. Some big part of me felt unborn and unlived. Part of this was to do with living in a divided society. It affected us all. As a white person, I felt separated from the instinctual power of black Africa and felt condemned to live in the sanitized world of white privilege and prosperity. So despite enjoying good material circumstances, there was always a deep, nagging sense of dissatisfaction in me. Is life just about getting a house, a job, a partner, going on lavish holidays—is there not something else too? These questions lay unformed in my young mind.

Later, when I became a Buddhist monk, this resonated with the story of the Buddha who, despite being a prince with great affluence and prestige, felt somehow deeply out of accord with his life. Upon seeing how material prosperity did not deal with the deep questions of life and the suffering he saw around him, the Buddha renounced his affluence and privilege. As described later in this book, he deserted his palace and went alone into the wilds to seek out the roots of suffering and the causes of genuine happiness and peace.

Something that shocked me when I was still young was the murder of my primary-school headmaster by thieves who broke into his house one night and raped his wife. At a stroke, some part of my childhood safety was shattered. What struck me much later when looking back is how precious and fleeting this life is and how so many people live in a private, inner world filled with shame and secret pain, yet so little is spoken about it in this world and so few skills are provided for navigating this inner terrain.

After leaving school, I spent five years studying law, then graduated, and worked at a small law firm in Cape Town doing my legal internship. I spent most of my time at the debtors' court applying for orders to seize the property of people who could not pay their debts. I felt like a cog in the capitalist machine bringing more misery to people who were already oppressed and exploited. At this time I met Rob Nairn, a well-known meditation

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teacher and former professor of Criminology at the University of Cape Town. He had just given up his professorship and had founded a Buddhist retreat center in Nieu Bethesda in the semidesert region of the Karoo. He taught me meditation and became a close mentor and friend.

After I completed my articles, I was admitted to the sidebar of the Supreme Court as an attorney in 1985. I always knew deep within myself that this was not my destiny; it was instead a powerful part of my conditioning and a way of living out my father's dream of becoming a lawyer. I was then conscripted into the army for two years in the last days of apartheid and felt even more intensely the polarization within South African society. During basic training, I used to sit in a disused toilet and do my meditation practice. One night the duty corporal ran into me on the parade ground and seeing that I had a small Tibetan rosary in my hand, accused me of smoking a joint. I said, "No, I am saying my mantra." He was so dismayed and it was so far outside his field of perception that he completely avoided me after that. I think he thought I might cast a spell on him!

Soon after my national service was complete, I decided to leave South Africa and follow Rob Nairn to Scotland. My father had always said that I should complete my studies and then "go and meditate in the Himalayas." He always thought that my spiritual calling would be a temporary phase and that I would soon return and take up my career as a lawyer, marry, and have a family. But this was not to be. I had never left the country before, but after I did leave in 1990, I did not return for seven years.

First, I worked at Samye Ling monastery in southern Scotland, studying and practicing meditation. Then in 1993, I undertook a three-year, three-month meditation retreat. This was a huge experience in my life and a big turning point. The retreat was completely secluded and set in the rolling green hills of Scotland. Most of the time the weather was wild and stormy, and in the winter time, it snowed so often that the roads were frequently impassable. There was a strict regime of meditation from 4:30 in the morning till 10:00 at night. We were learning and practicing the deep tantric methods of Tibetan Buddhism that were about transforming our mind at its deepest level. The group was international and comprised Italians, Spaniards, Americans, and English, but very few Scots. During the retreat, we lived in very small and austere rooms with little more than a shrine, a small cupboard, and a box for meditating and sleeping in.

My father came to visit me just before I went to the retreat and asked me where the bed was. I said, "Dad, there is no bed.

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We sleep in a meditation box!" At that moment, one of the monks started blowing a long Tibetan horn designed for the Himalayas, and it let out a shrill, deafening sound, whereupon my father, not known for his spiritual austerities, said, "Get me out of here—I need to go to the pub and have a strong whisky!" But he was amazingly tolerant of my unusual journey, especially given that he had paid for my expensive school and legal training.

There was a six-month period during the retreat when we were not able to go outdoors and were completely silent—it was just ourselves, our minds, and the wild Scottish winter. But it was an extraordinary and transformative experience, especially looking back now. Unsurprisingly, when I came out of the retreat, it took some time to readjust to the outside world. When we had started the retreat, there was no such thing as the Internet or e-mail, so when we emerged in March 1997, we were all intrigued to know what this new cyber world was all about. Soon after coming out, I took robes and, all in all, I was a monk for seven years including the retreat.

Despite the fact that I deeply resonated with the tantric practices of Tibetan Buddhism and felt its transformative potential, I realized that not many people would embark on such an austere journey and subscribe to an ancient spiritual tradition from the East. So I began to work with Rob Nairn on developing a more straightforward approach that involved teaching people simple skills to work with stress and depression. For most people, the idea of becoming enlightened is a mere daydream, and a more pressing reality is to stabilize and gain insight into our wild minds and learn to cultivate skillful ways of thinking and behaving. This became known as *mindfulness meditation*, a secular approach to working with the mind that does not involve joining any religious tradition.

In 2008, I met Paul Gilbert on Holy Isle. We had invited him to present at a conference on neuroscience and compassion. He and I made an immediate connection. What struck me from the start about Paul was his focus on self-compassion and how important this is in accompanying mindfulness and working with the mind. Also what struck me was his notion of *affiliate connection*—how we are biologically set up to connect and relate with others, and if we are starved of these connections, our lives are greatly impoverished. This resonated with my background of Mahayana Buddhism in which compassion is at the forefront of training the mind. So we began to have many fascinating discussions, and out of these dialogues, the idea of writing a book together was born.

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In 2009, Rob Nairn and I played a key role in launching an MSc program in Mindfulness with Aberdeen University in Scotland, though the ideas of Paul Gilbert strongly shaped our approach to working with mindfulness and compassion together. In fact, this is the first Master's program in the UK that actively involves the teaching of compassion within a mindfulness training context. So the focus is not only on learning to be present and centered, but also on being kind and caring to ourselves as well as working directly with the self-critical mind.

We hope this book will provide readers with new insights into the relationship between mental health problems, our evolutionary history, and how easily our minds can be shaped by the environment in which we grow up. One of this book's themes is that many of the problems we have with our minds are not our fault but that, nevertheless, we need to take responsibility for training our minds. After all, it might not be your fault if a lightning bolt destroys your roof, but it is your responsibility to repair it—and learning how to do that skillfully is not a bad idea. Mindfulness and compassion are both means for doing just this and healing some of the other problems that nature has unwittingly bestowed upon us. While the struggle of evolution has built complex minds with complex motives and emotions, only humans have the potential to understand their own minds, train them, and make wise choices as to what kind of person they want to become.

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Acknowledgments

Paul

I'm delighted to be able to say that I owe a debt to so many. First, of course, to my family, especially Hannah (who promotes compassion with her own website, http://www.compassionatewellbeing.com) and James for their support and encouragement, with special loving appreciation to Jean (who usually wakes alone to my early morning writing). I now use speech software (I can't type to save my life), so she hears me chattering away. Heartfelt appreciation to the support and work of Chris Irons, Kirsten McEwan, and Corinne Gale for being wonderful research colleagues over many years—people I've been lucky enough to publish with, who did the clever bits. Special thanks to Andrew Gumley and Christine Braehler in developing and testing the compassion approach to psychosis.

Many thanks to all the colleagues and friends at our charity the Compassionate Mind Foundation (http://www.compassionatemind.co.uk), in particular: Diane Woollands, Chris Gillespie, Jean Gilbert, Mary Welford, Deborah Lee, Chris Irons, Michelle Cree, Ken Goss, and Ian Lowens. In America, Lynne Henderson, Dennis Tirch, and Russell Kolts have trained with me, bringing their many years of experience in meditation and clinical psychology to developing and advancing compassion-focused therapy and writing their own books on shyness, anxiety, and anger. Mauro Galluccio has been exploring the compassion approach for the conduct of international negotiations, and we now have many colleagues throughout Europe and indeed in other parts of the world who are using the model in their own inspiring ways. From the work of many, evidence is gradually emerging for the value of compassion-focused approaches to many aspects of life. Following the scientific, evidence-based approach is something that both Choden and I are deeply committed to.

Much appreciation goes to Chris Germer for his inspirational work on mindfulness and self-compassion and his preparedness to share so much and advise so kindly and wisely. Matthieu Ricard has been inspirational for us too. We are immensely grateful for some of the practices, the many discussions, his taking time to read some of this book and offer us his wisdom and kindness. You can see many of his ideas on compassion by

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following him on YouTube. Kristin Neff has also been a pioneer with her focus on self-compassion.

For many years, we have been keen to advance training in compassion-focused therapy, and so many thanks to Paul Lumsdon and Guy Daly, who together enthusiastically made possible the finances and organization to start the first postgraduate training in Compassion Focused Therapy in January of 2012 as a collaboration between the Derbyshire Healthcare Foundation Trust and the University of Derby. At the university, Linda Wheildon, Michael Townend, and especially Wendy Wood, the program leader, have been extraordinarily hard working in getting the process of the postgraduate training organized. Wendy's experience and enthusiasm have provided delight and great relief.

When I started clinical work in 1976, I had little idea at all of the importance of teaching people with mental health difficulties the value of developing compassion. Special thanks must go to the many people I have worked with over the last thirty years. They have not only taught me the importance of compassion but also about the real struggles and difficulties, fears, sadness, and yearning that can come with engaging compassionate feeling. Without them, their courage, insights, and support, we would understand far less.

Last but not least, I offer much gratitude and friendship to Choden for his enthusiasm in engaging in this project, keeping going when it became very tiring, and working to try to balance the importance of scientific insight with personal practice. I have certainly learned a lot and have been changed in the process. I hope to continue doing so.

Choden

I would like to acknowledge and thank Lama Yeshe Rinpoche, my spiritual teacher, for his wise and compassionate support over many years of guiding me on the Buddhist path.

I also want to thank Rob Nairn for his friendship and wisdom in shaping our particular approach to mindfulness training. Our partnership resulted in the formation of the Mindfulness Association, which is committed to teaching a compassion-based mindfulness training.

I would like to acknowledge the Mindfulness Association as being the source of the mindfulness teachings and practices that inform chapters 7 and 8 of the book. For anyone wanting to practice a compassion-based mindfulness training drawn from

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these chapters, see http://www.mindfulnessassociation.net.

Thanks also to the core team of the Mindfulness Association, who have shaped our compassion-based mindfulness training: Heather Regan-Addis, Norton Bertram-Smith, Vin Harris, Annick Nevejan, Fay Adams, Kristine Jansen, Clive Holmes, and Angie Ball.

I would like to thank Dr. Charlotte Procter for her work on the Mindfulness Scotland Manual, which influenced our mindfulness training, some of which is reflected in chapter 7 of the book.

Last, but certainly not least, I would like to thank Paul for his support and kindness over the last few years. He has been a great friend.

Both of us wish to thank all the folks at Constable & Robinson for their hard work, in particular, Fritha Saunders for her continuing encouragement and enthusiasm. She is a delight to work with, and we have been most fortunate in having her as our editor.

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Introduction

Have you ever thought about how wonderful it would be if we could cure cancer, prevent children from dying of starvation, build a more just world, and help people find peaceful ways to resolve conflicts? If so, you are already on the path of compassion. Focusing on the wish for others to be free of suffering and its causes, and *being happy* when this comes about, might not normally be considered as the very basis of compassion, but in fact, it is, and shortly we will explain why.

Within Christian traditions, having a compassionate and kind orientation to those less fortunate than ourselves, the sick and poor, is the central focus for life.[1] Commonly compassion is defined as "being sensitive to the suffering of self and others with a deep commitment to try to prevent and relieve it."[2] This definition is interesting because, if we think about it for a moment, we can see that this simple statement points to two very different mental abilities or psychologies. The first is being open and receptive to suffering, not shutting it out. Indeed, the word "compassion" comes from the Latin word *compati*, which means "to suffer with." So we can ask ourselves what special attributes and skills we need in order to move *toward* suffering. The second mental ability, or "psychology," is about how we then respond to suffering in ourselves and others. In this book, we will explore these two abilities in depth and suggest methods for training in them.

If compassion is only "to suffer with," then it comes down to things like sympathy and empathy, which are important but only part of the story. What is also needed is to do something to alleviate suffering (and indeed prevent it if we can); this is linked to the second part of the definition. This calls on a very different part of our minds that is linked to the abilities to be kind, supportive, understanding, and motivated for action. Now these might require actually learning how to be mindful and accepting rather than hating or fighting with suffering. We might also need to go more deeply into it—just like somebody who has an anxiety condition such as agoraphobia might have to learn to go out, face, and tolerate anxiety rather than trying to get rid of it. But the important point we wish to make is that our abilities to engage with, tune in to, and try to understand the sources of suffering are

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different from those associated with the alleviation and prevention of suffering.

Imagine the scenario of a doctor seeing a new patient. First, doctors must pay attention to the pain and suffering of their patients in order to identify where the pain is and what its causes are. There is no point in trying to treat the wrong condition. However, once they've pinpointed the malady, they don't stay focused on the pain but turn their attention to what will relieve it. They draw on their knowledge and experience in order to prescribe a treatment that will bring about healing. In addition, they might take their patient's hand with a reassuring smile and understanding that kindness helps settle fear.

Developing our inner compassion is like becoming our own doctors and healers. We develop the ability to engage with what is painful and seek to understand its roots, but we also need very different qualities linked to the desire to engage wisely, supportively, and kindly. Compassion involves understanding and acceptance of suffering but not just sitting in it—like sitting in one's own dirty bathwater and believing that acceptance means you shouldn't do anything. Indeed acceptance is an act of courage that calls for wise action (see chapter 8). So if we *only* focus on the ability to engage and understand pain we actually miss half of the story.

Training the Mind

Both of these processes require training. We need to work on the process of tuning in to and being moved by and empathic toward pain and difficulties we or others may be experiencing. And similarly, we need to work on cultivating the qualities of wise engagement and kindness. The only way a doctor can become a healer is to study and understand the nature of disease. Then he is in a position to facilitate healing. When it comes to our own minds, it's the same. We need to understand the nature and causes of suffering so we can engage with it in effective and caring ways. And given that one source of much of our suffering is to do with how our minds and emotions work, we need to study our minds to become aware of the forces at play. Learning how to observe carefully what goes on in our minds is a very important skill; it is known as *mindfulness,* and it is something we will be focusing on in depth in this book (see chapter 7).[3, 4]

So compassion is not about being overwhelmed or sinking into our own or other people's pain; it is not about being superficially nice so people will like us; it is not weakness,

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softness, or letting people off the hook if they cause harm. The key to compassion is tuning in to the nature of suffering, to understand it in the depths of our being, and to see clearly into its source; but equally important is to be committed to relieve it and to rejoice in the possibility of the alleviation of suffering for all.

Matthieu Ricard, a long-term Buddhist monk and French translator for the Dalai Lama, worked together with Tania Singer, a neuroscientist, to try to understand what goes on in the brain when we feel compassion. Their research led them to the conclusion that if you just have empathic concern for suffering (e.g., for the children who are dying in agony for lack of medicine or food, or the plight of the abused, tortured, and diseased) without engaging in some positive feelings associated with trying to do something about it, it can become a dark journey indeed. We could be left with feelings of rage or even hopelessness.[5] An example of this second aspect of compassion is evidenced by the tearful celebration that erupted among medical scientists in October 2011 when they looked at their data on a malaria vaccine and realized that it had worked and that they could now save thousands of children's lives.

Anger can be an important emotion to wake us up to the fact that compassionate action is needed. Paul often acknowledges that his interest in compassion arose from a mixture of anger and sadness that so many people's short lives are miserable; that vast amounts of the world's research resources are spent on weaponry and defense; that the bulk of the wealth of the world is held in the hands of a few; and that we seem locked into a competitive psychology in our economies that is driving us all crazy.[6] In 1984, Bob Geldof and Midge Ure became so moved by the famine in Ethiopia and frustrated and angry by government prevarications that they raised huge sums of money through Band Aid and Live Aid. So anger at injustice and suffering can move us to action. However, of course, anger can also be quite destructive and so, while understandable and a spark to action, mindful compassion offers a more skillful and assured way of engaging suffering and taking action.

Sadness too is an emotion that connects us to suffering. In Buddhist traditions, sadness is often an emotion that moves us to compassionate action (see chapter 6). Again, however, mindful compassion helps us not wallow in sadness but rather use it as a call to action.

Another crucial element to compassion is the concept of *flow*—again, a key theme we will be returning to in more detail later. We can be compassionate *to other people*, and it's this

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outward flow of feeling that is generally the main focus in the literature on compassion. But, again, this is only part of the story —that one-way flow. We also need to be open and receptive to the compassion *from other people toward us*. We can notice how other people's kindness supports us and affects us emotionally, and we can learn to be mindful of that too. Another aspect of the flow of compassion is learning to be compassionate toward ourselves, something that at times could be emphasized more in the Buddhist and Christian literature. It's simply not possible to develop deeper levels of compassion if you're not open to compassion coming toward you and if you are resistant to developing self-compassion.[7] For example, if there are things in you that you block or detest, then you're going to struggle to empathize about similar things in other people.

Our Multiple Selves

Gardeners and farmers love to see things grow. Most parents know the pleasures of seeing their children flourish. However, even though we can be sensitive to other's people's feelings and struggles and reach out to help them, there is a big "yes, but" to our deeply felt compassionate motive "to relieve suffering in ourselves and others." It is a fact that compassionate desires and motives compete with many other motives in our minds: to get on in the world, to compete and outperform others, to get rich, to get "laid," or to defend our religious or ethnic group. We are a species with many contradictory and conflicting parts. We can even experience joy when we see enemies being destroyed and rejoice in tyrants getting a bullet in the head. Our entertainment industry revolves around "good" guys killing "bad" guys with justification and pleasure; and, sadly, games for children exploit these aspects of our minds.

So the human mind is full of competing motives. If we live in a threatening world where people don't value compassion, and where instead we have to compete with others and worry all the time about keeping our jobs or preventing our houses from being repossessed, then these are not the conditions for nurturing a compassionate mind. In this case, our inner capacity for compassion can become like a forgotten garden that is overgrown with brambles. Worse still, people can start to think that compassion is a weakness—some kind of soft fuzzy thing that is all about self-indulgence or submissive kindness.[8, 9] It is absolutely not those things. As we will see, compassion requires strength, determination, and courage within an emotional context

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of kindness and connection with others. These are like seedlings in the ground waiting to be nurtured and allowed to grow.

Understanding the Mind

Most of us learn a lot about mathematics or history but very little about how our minds work. Societies that are only interested in whether people can toil from dawn until dusk don't tend to help people understand themselves better. They seek to foster aspirations of becoming an engineer, tennis player, pilot, or shop worker. At no time are Western children taught that our minds can be *very difficult and tricky to cope with*—riddled with passions and feelings emanating from a brain that has been evolving over millions of years. Little or nothing is taught about becoming mindful and compassionate toward what's going on in our minds, and how this can really help when we are struggling with anxiety, anger, depression, and self-doubt. Given the huge advances in psychology and our understanding about our minds, this is nothing short of a tragedy. However, it highlights just how much we orient education toward each of us becoming a productive unit.

While we recognize the central importance of compassion to spiritual systems such as Christianity, and indeed refer to them from time to time, in this book we are going to be focusing more on certain Buddhist ideas that derive from an Eastern philosophical system. We do this because Buddhism has been one of the few spiritual traditions that have argued that *far* more time needs to be given to becoming familiar with and training our minds because without insight and training, our minds can easily become chaotic, dangerous, and prone to fear, rage, and despair. In fact, Buddhist texts suggest that the untrained mind can verge on insanity because it cannot regulate its own passions and wild emotions, and for this reason there are so many terrible cruelties and injustices throughout the world.

However, we wish to make it clear that we are not adopting these ideas as a religion, but as a psychological system. Indeed, Paul does not buy into some of the metaphysical beliefs underpinning Buddhism, such as the need to earn a good rebirth and the idea that pain and suffering can be related to unskillful behaviors in a previous life—common though these are to most Buddhist schools.[10] According to some commentators, the Buddha himself never strayed into those metaphysical speculations. The Dalai Lama has frequently spoken about the importance of distinguishing Buddhist psychology from its more

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metaphysical dimensions.

The reason that Buddhist psychology is so important is simply because Buddhism has spent thousands of years focusing on the mind: observing how the mind gets itself in various tangles and learning to understand and train it so that we can live more peaceful and balanced lives. Our Western traditions of psychology and psychotherapy are also beginning to reveal important insights about how our minds work, and increasingly these two traditions are coming closer together as scientific studies substantiate much of what the Buddha taught thousands of years ago in terms of the importance and effectiveness of observing and training one's mind. The excitement for us in writing this book is to bring these two traditions together.

The Self We Might Choose

Compassion requires us to cultivate an inner capacity and become a certain type of person, referred to as a *bodhisattva* in the Buddhist tradition—someone who is committed to understanding suffering and relieving it wherever possible. For this we must train. Just like a marathon runner puts in hard work to train every morning even when it's cold because they are committed to taking part in a marathon, so too we need to actively cultivate the qualities of the compassionate mind, especially when the journey gets tough and we are up against all manner of challenges.

Coming face to face with the pain and suffering of life is difficult. We know that the reality of our lives is that we are born, flourish for a while, spread a few genes around, and then decay and die. This is the lot of all living beings. Life doesn't last that long. Today, middle-class people can expect somewhere between 25,000 and 30,000 days with a bit of help from modern medicine and healthy living. If you are born into poverty, it could be much less. And, of course, during these 25,000 days, all kinds of illnesses and tragedies can strike us and those close to us.

Being prepared to face the reality that we are part of a life that has multiple diseases and ways of dying in pain—and that we can be our own worst (intensely cruel) enemy—can be distressing and even traumatic. It might make us angry or anxious—but being confronted by suffering calls upon something very deep within us. It is actually a wake-up call and requires courage. This is a key element of the compassionate mind and one of the hallmarks of a *bodhisattva:* being prepared to face the reality of life and find ways to engage with it based on courage, kindness, and commitment.

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Now, to be honest, it's probably not a good start to talk about waking up to suffering when you want to sell a self-help book on compassion! We usually look to self-help books to promise that we'll feel better if we just follow the various recipes. So how can "waking up to suffering" do that? Well, the point is, it's not just waking up to suffering but what we do *next* that is crucial. Not surprisingly, we are going to argue that this will involve harnessing and developing the qualities of the compassionate mind, which begins the process of gradually transforming our inner world and awakening our capacity to care for ourselves, other people and life-forms, and the environment we live in. So even though things are difficult, awakening compassion changes our *relationship* to ourselves and our world, and this makes all the difference.

The Importance of Wisdom

Running throughout the path of development of compassion is wisdom. Now wisdom is not a mysterious or mystical thing. It is simply knowledge plus experience that gives rise to insight.[11]

Knowledge + Experience = Insight

We have to build our wisdom; it does not just arise by itself. We have to work at gaining knowledge and developing insight into the causes of suffering. In our view, the *type of wisdom* you develop really depends on your *motive*—and this is where compassionate motives become crucial because there are so many different motives and hence different types of wisdom. For example, if we are oriented toward a compassionate approach *to suffering*, wisdom is about understanding suffering so that we can alleviate it. So our motive is crucial in determining the kind of knowledge we seek and how our knowledge and experience is applied.

The Lotus in the Mud

The metaphor for this book is "the lotus in the mud." We have chosen this because it resonates with a core wisdom of the link between pain and suffering and compassion. It is drawn from an ancient myth within the Mahayana Buddhist tradition. Basically, the mud represents our darker side: our self-centeredness, aggression, fears, and cruelty, the things we might prefer to avoid and push under the carpet. It also represents the stark reality of evolved life: the struggle and pain of life that all things are impermanent, and we just find ourselves in the flow of life for a

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short while with many of the motives for self-survival and prosperity that other animals share (we explore this in chapter 2). And at times any of us can be hit by tragedies and feel we are "sinking." Mud of course prevents clarity of vision. Yet the mud is the sustenance for the lotus; without it, the lotus could not emerge. Therefore, it is the relationship between the mud and the lotus that is absolutely crucial. Similarly, compassion evolves from the evolution of caring behavior. It is an evolutionary development and could not have arisen without the struggle of life.

The lotus cannot separate itself from or get rid of the mud because it depends on it—it is the same for us. Compassion awakens as we are touched by our suffering and that of those around us. The lotus symbolizes the awakening mind of compassion, the shift from self-focused pleasure-seeking to addressing the core issue of suffering. With it comes motivation and commitment to enter the mud (suffering) and cultivate the positive qualities of love, care, understanding, and joy through which we open out and respond to the pain of life in ourselves and others. This is a key theme of the book, and it is something we explore in more depth in chapter 6.

Key Points

- There are two distinct "psychologies," or mental abilities, that make up compassion: one that helps us to *engage* with suffering, to understand it; and another that arises from our skillful actions and our efforts to *alleviate* it.

- The human mind is full of competing motivations and potentials. For the compassionate mind to arise and make a difference in our lives, we need to actively train in both these psychologies.

- While many spiritual traditions provide great teachings on love and compassion, Buddhism is a unique resource because it offers practical methods for training the mind in compassion.

- Western science too is now revealing ways in which we can begin to train our minds with the aim of creating improved well-being and compassionate living for all.

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Part I
The Issues

1

Waking Up

Understanding our minds is perhaps one of the greatest challenges for modern science and each of us personally. You don't have to think about this very much to recognize that the human mind generates outstanding achievements in science, medicine, and institutions for justice, but it is the same mind that can produce the most awful atrocities and acts of greed. For all the challenges that we face in the world, from the injustices of rich versus poor; the need to address global warming and nurture our planet; the need to reduce exploitation of young, weak, and poor; to the need to develop universal health care systems—the common denominator in all of these is our minds. It's our minds that will create grasping selfishness, pitting group against group, or an open, reflective, cooperative, and sharing approach to these difficulties. And, of course, it is our minds that are the source of our own personal experiences of happiness and joy, or anxiety, misery, and despair.

So this book is a story about how our minds came to be the way they are, what we now know about how they work, and, most importantly, how we can train them to rise to the challenges we face in the external world and also within ourselves, in the ebb and flow of our emotions and feelings. Indeed, we suggest that the more we understand our minds, the more we will be able to understand how and why we need to train them (which is what we set out to do in part II).

Many Eastern and Western philosophers, not to mention religions, have struggled with the issues of the nature of our minds and the nature of suffering in the world. In this book, we will explore insights generated from modern psychological research but also much older traditions, including Buddhism. The reason that there is now so much Western interest in Buddhism is

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because, for thousands of years, Buddhist scholars and devotees studied and developed practices of *introspective and reflective psychology* and an ethic based on compassionate insights—ways by which individuals can become very familiar with their minds, learn to stabilize and organize them for their well-being, and cultivate key qualities that are associated with personal and social health. We can explore Buddhism as a psychology of introspection and ethics that has given rise to insights about how tricky and difficult our minds can be and what we can do about it. So let's start at the beginning and think about what led the Buddha to become so interested in trying to understand the roots of suffering as arising from our own minds.

We start with an important story that comes from the early life of the Buddha. It is said that he was born into a family that ruled parts of a district that is now in Nepal. His name was Siddhãrtha Gautama, but he was to become known as the *Buddha* later in his life; this means the "awakened one." The exact date of his birth is unknown, but it is believed to be around 563 BC or 623 BC. He died at about eighty years old, a very good age for that time.

His father, the king, was by various counts an ambitious fellow and very keen for Siddhãrtha to become a great king in his own right. At his birth, many wise men foretold to the king that his son would indeed be a great leader and would be known throughout the world for many centuries. However, they prophesied that he would either be a great king or a great spiritual adept (or expert), depending upon the circumstances he encountered in his life. The latter possibility caused the king great anxiety, and, desperate to prevent it, he shielded his son from all forms of suffering and provided him with every pleasure conceivable. He built Siddhãrtha a golden palace (maybe more than one) with beautiful gardens, and provided him with plenty of distractions in the form of the finest foods, wines, and young ladies.

The king gave strict instructions that everything had to be kept beautiful so that Siddhãrtha would never discover the reality of poverty and suffering that lay beyond his palace gates, and would therefore never want to go on any spiritual quest. But curiosity got the better of Siddhãrtha, and one night he sneaked out of his gilded palace. There he discovered a totally different world—one of immense poverty and suffering, of disease, decay, death, and cruelty. It is said he saw a man beating a horse and was overcome by his first encounter with cruelty. He saw beggars thin and dying in the street and was shocked to see death and

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poverty. Perplexed and distressed, he fled the palace under the cover of night, leaving behind his wife and child, and set out on the dusty roads of India, determined to understand the causes of suffering and attain enlightenment. Unlike some spiritual teachers who came from positions of hardship and struggle, Siddhãrtha came from a life of luxury.

The way he dealt with this traumatic shock is a very important part of the story, with something to teach us too, because it's quite possible he could have thought to himself: "Oh, my goodness, it is terrible out there. I am really much better off staying where I am. I think I'll just go back and enjoy my life, count the money, and keep the wine and the women flowing." How many of us in his position would have done just that and stayed in our bubble of pleasure? In fact when you think about it, this is a parable for *our lives*—most of us prefer to live in our own comfortable bubble and hope life is not too harsh with us. Part of the problem is that the longer we live in the bubble and become accustomed to turning a blind eye to the harshness of life, the more we can become desensitized to it until something knocks on our door and brings us face to face with reality.

In Siddhãrtha's time, India was awash with gurus and sages of all types practicing various chanting meditations, yoga, cleansing rituals, and much else besides—basically offering solutions to the endemic problem of suffering. He was to sample many of them. He tried the ascetic life of giving up all desires because desires were seen as the source of suffering. The problem was that he nearly died of malnutrition in the process, and realized that this wasn't a solution at all but simply a strategy of avoidance.

One story tells of how, when he was close to death from extreme fasting, he saw a musician floating past on a boat. The musician was tuning his instrument a little tighter and then a little looser, until exactly the right pitch was obtained, so that he could play the right note. Siddhãrtha immediately recognized that *balance* was the crucial ingredient for so much of life as this provides the condition for something new to emerge and flourish. In this way he came to recognize the importance of the *Middle Way*—a path of balance between the extremes of indulgence and denial.

Once he had given up the ascetic life and had begun to eat again, he knew that he needed to find another way—this was the path of *closely observing his own mind*. In the depths of his renunciation and despair, he had realized that his own mind held the answer to the timeless riddle of happiness and suffering. He

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saw that how he related to his mind, and what arose within it, determined whether he would be happy or not. So in this way he came to see his own mind as the greatest teacher of all. It was a source of his happiness or misery.

The Four Noble Truths and Modern Psychology

The Buddha's story is interesting for a number of reasons. First is the way he approached the problem of suffering in the world, trying to understand its root causes; and second is what he decided to do about it, namely find a path that uprooted these causes of suffering. You can immediately see that if the Buddha started with a theistic view that suffering was in the world because some gods had ordained it that way, then this avenue of personal research would never have got off the ground. His completely open approach to suffering was a revolutionary way to break free from the idea that things are *ordained* to be the way they are. Siddhãrtha was to put our own minds at the center of the story in a way that makes him like a modern psychologist.

Siddhãrtha's deep insights were expressed in his first teaching on the *Four Noble Truths*. He taught that these truths are self-evident if you spend time considering them for yourself. In fact, the Four Noble Truths are very compatible with the basic scientific approach to things in the world. Geshe Tashi Tsering, who wrote a very insightful and authoritative book on the Four Noble Truths, points out that they are completely compatible with secular scientific approaches.[1] Simply put, the Four Noble Truths come down to this: we can recognize that suffering exists; it has various causes; once we understand what those causes are, we can do something about them; the possibility of freedom from suffering exists by finding ways to prevent these causes from re-occurring.

In principle this is no different from any scientific endeavor, such as researching and treating cancer. Two thousand years ago, people simply died of mysterious conditions and nobody knew why. But now we know that there is such a thing as cancer; this leads us to study its causes; this offers the possibility of being free of the disease; and this leads us to apply the appropriate treatments and do the things that prevent cancer from arising (e.g., antismoking campaigns).

The Buddha applied the Four Noble Truths to the understanding of suffering, and this is what we will now explore.

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The First Noble Truth

The First Noble Truth is that suffering exists. As Geshe Tashi Tsering points out, there are many different types of suffering, such as the suffering associated with old age, illness, injury, and death; the suffering associated with encountering aversive things; the suffering associated with not being able to have pleasant things; and the suffering linked to the way our minds operate.[2]

Now, in the original Pali language, the term used is "dukkha." This has a far wider and more subtle meaning than "suffering." It refers to a pervasive sense of unease in which we sense in our very gut that our lives are precariously rooted in the shifting sands of impermanence and we cannot keep hold of what we like or keep away what we do not like. In their very accessible introduction to Buddhism for Western readers, *Buddhism for Dummies*, Bodian and Landaw put it simply when they say that *dukkha* arises from meeting things that you don't want or like (e.g., running into a hated enemy in the street); being parted from things that you do want and like (e.g., the death of a loved one or losing your job); and failing to get what you want (e.g., being rejected by someone you have fallen in love with). And then, as they point out, the Buddha asks us to reflect on how much our lives are ruled by these three things; how much they cause our minds to react with emotions of fear, anger, and sadness; and how we come to discover that we are not in control of what happens in our lives.[3]

In Buddhist texts, *dukkha* is described as operating on three levels. First, there is the "suffering of suffering"—the actual experience of pain and dissatisfaction. One example, often cited, is eating poisoned food and then experiencing the pain of being sick. Second, there is the "suffering of impermanence." The Buddha taught that the very act of being born creates *dukkha* because all living things are destined to flourish for a short while and then decay and die. Incidentally, this is true for all things in the universe. Even our sun will one day use up its nuclear fuel, become a red giant, and then collapse and explode, showering new elements into the universe that may one day become the building blocks for life on some other planet. A more personal example of the suffering of impermanence is that while we are eating poisoned food, we may be enjoying it very much but are unaware of the poison that has not yet taken hold—the suffering was avoidable (had we known the food was poisoned) but unintentional (because we didn't know). Third, there is the "suffering of the composite"—that all things are composed of

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other things; and this includes our bodies, which are made up of many parts that change and decay. This is the most subtle level of *dukkha*—that pain is built into the very fabric of being alive. It is part of the deal, and it is something that we cannot escape, yet it is something we can learn to come to terms with. An example of this form of suffering is that we have a body that feels pain and gets sick so eating poisoned food can affect us adversely.

Modern science is adding to our understanding of the causes of pain in ways that would have amazed the young Siddhãrtha. It has revealed that some of the sources of illness are partly our genes and partly viruses and bacteria that depend on living things like us for their own survival. They inhabit this earth with us and, like us, they evolve, change, and multiply. In 1348–1350, Europe was hit with the bubonic plague, caused by the bacterium *Yersinia pestis*. It is estimated that this wiped out 40–60 percent of the European population in two years. When Europeans turned up in the Americas, many of the indigenous peoples were not immune to European diseases such as measles or chickenpox, and more serious illnesses such as syphilis and smallpox were alien to them. These diseases accounted for the huge decline in their populations at this time. Furthermore, it's extraordinary but true that the influenza outbreak that lasted from June 1917 until December 1920 killed more people than died in the First World War—50–100 million by some estimates—making it one of the deadliest pandemics ever. And, of course, viruses are just one of a multitude of ways in which our lives are brought to a premature end; there are also earthquakes, tornadoes, floods, tsunamis, and countless other events.

While the focus of science has been on understanding and alleviating the physical nature and causes of pain, spiritual traditions like Buddhism have tended to focus more on alleviating suffering—that is, working with how the mind reacts to pain. Nonetheless, the Dalai Lama has always been a keen advocate of scientific research because the rationale behind the Four Noble Truths is to understand and alleviate suffering *in any ethical way possible*, not just through working with our minds. He has often noted that meditating is not enough—we need action! For science to address suffering is clearly a compassionate endeavor. It is linked to the Second Noble Truth.

The Second Noble Truth

The Second Noble Truth is that *dukkha* has a cause, or more

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accurately a series of causes, and when we properly understand and address these causes, *dukkha* can end. At this point it is important to make a clear distinction between pain and suffering —*dukkha* relates more to the experience of suffering than the reality of pain. In Buddhist texts, suffering primarily concerns the way our mind reacts to pain and the meanings we put onto things. The Buddha never said we can put an end to *pain*; rather, if we understand the causes of pain, then we can take actions to avoid it. For example, if you know that smoking causes lung cancer, then stopping smoking may prevent the onset of this disease.

But let's consider the case where you *are* actually dying from cancer. In this event, not only is there the pain of dying, but there are also the meanings you give to the pain and the experience of dying, which then become the focus of your suffering. Now, supposing you could control your pain through modern medicine and you knew you would not die in agony, and you saw your life as meaningful and perhaps believed that you would go to heaven to meet all your dead relatives for a happy reunion. In this case, your level of suffering would be much less than another scenario in which you felt that you could not bear the pain, you were frightened of it, you saw your whole life as pointless, and death was the end of the road with no life hereafter. Even though the basic event is the same—dying of cancer—how we experience it and attribute meaning to it varies greatly according to how our mind relates to it. Western philosophers and psychologists have also spent time thinking about how we give meaning to events and how that process then shapes our emotions and actions.

One of the central tenets of Buddhism is that it's our wish for things to be different from the way they are that can set us up for *dukkha*. We all tend to have strong ideas about what we want and what we do not want, but reality seldom accords with our preferences. It is not just a life free of pain that we want; we want so many other things too. We want to find people who will love us and whom we desire; we want to be free from hunger or cold; we want secure, well-paid jobs, nice houses, and top-of-the-range cars; we want holidays, TVs, iPads; and the list goes on endlessly. Although wanting is part of how our minds are and the way we live our lives, the problem is that wanting can become insatiable because we are a species that always tries to improve and get more. The Buddha was not being unkind when he said that it is our attachments to all of these desires that cause us trouble. He was simply pointing to the fact that if we feel we've "got to" or "must have" these things, and we "can't bear it" if we don't, this sets us up for suffering.

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In fact there are many modern psychologists who argue exactly the same thing. They say that it's our inner imperatives of "got to, must, mustn't, should, and ought" that bind us to the path of *dukkha*.[4] Cognitive therapies, for example, point out that we often tell ourselves: "I *can't bear* it that I feel this way" or "I *must* have somebody to love me" or '"She *should not* do that to me" or "I *must* have A or B." So what really drives *dukkha* is this intense emotional craving—the sense that we *have* to have things the way we want them. This holds us chained to the wheel of suffering. This is similar to what many psychologists mean when they say that it's not so much attachment that causes us problems, but more the motivational state of craving and "musting"; or, as the late American therapist Albert Ellis would say, "musterbation."[5] Again, it's not so much wanting things that is the issue; it's how we go about trying to secure what we want and how we react if we can't get what we want that are crucial.

The Buddha argued that because we are so driven to pursue pleasure and avoid pain, we are vulnerable to the destructive emotions of greed and hatred, and under the power of these emotions, we can inflict terrible suffering on other living creatures. For example, the way we produce food to feed ourselves now causes terrible suffering to billions of animals we share this planet with. This points to a deeper meaning within the Second Noble Truth, which is that the more self-focused we become in trying to avoid pain and service our pleasures, the more we fall victim to greed and not sharing, and one of the consequences of this is living in a world where some people have billions of dollars while many others are starving and don't even have 50 cents. In fact, a root cause of suffering, according to the Buddha, is our fierce sense of self-centeredness.

Interestingly, modern science and evolutionary psychology reveal that being self-focused and driven by our likes and dislikes is partly to do with genes—we are set up by evolution to experience strong likes and dislikes as this is what enables us to survive and reproduce. Imagine if overnight something happened to our genes and we gave birth to children who didn't want anything: they were not bothered about eating, learning to walk, socializing, developing friendships, or having sex. No species survives without genes building highly motivated organisms to pursue these things. When you think about it, this is just common sense, but it has serious implications for how these gene-built systems play out in our minds. As we will see later, though, the cultures we live in and also the choices we make are highly influential on the kind of motives we pursue.

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This leads to an extraordinarily important insight and an important corollary to the teaching of the Buddha: it is *not our fault* that we are the way we are with all our drives, passions, and aversions. All of the drives of wanting pleasure and avoiding painful things, desiring nice food, comfortable houses to live in, and loving sexual partners, are built into the very fabric of our genes. The key point, however, is that these basic motivations can take control of our minds in very self-focused ways, and if we do not become aware of them, they will run the show of our lives (we will explore this in the next chapter). This is analogous to having a garden and not paying it any attention—it will grow in all directions, but we might not like the result. So just as we can learn how to cultivate our garden and make choices as to what we want to grow, so too we can learn to cultivate our minds and make wise choices about the qualities and habits we want to cultivate and make manifest.

The Third Noble Truth

The Third Noble Truth is cessation—*dukkha* can end, or at least it can be significantly reduced. Bear in mind, though, this does not mean we will never again experience pain. What it means is that we can move toward developing an inner peacefulness and stability even in the presence of great pain and difficulty. The Buddha said that we can find ways to gradually let go of our attachment to things, even though we are still actively involved with our lives. *Dukkha* (but not pain necessarily) can gradually be reduced as we learn to live with things *as they really are*, moment by moment.

The method by which we begin to recognize the way our desires and emotions grab hold of our mind is by learning to observe our mind in action, and becoming very familiar with it. We have a capacity for self-awareness and reflective thought that other animals do not. Right now you can stop reading this book and become aware of yourself: you are aware that you exist, aware that you're sitting somewhere reading, aware that you are having thoughts and feelings about what you are reading, and you can decide whether to continue reading to follow the story, even though you're tired and don't feel like continuing. It's amazing what our minds can do! And, most significantly, you have an *awareness of being aware*. You can be aware that you are thinking all these things. It's like mirrors within mirrors within mirrors. This capacity for awareness of what's going on inside

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ourselves is the basis of *mindfulness*. It is a mental capacity that enables us to stand back and look at the moment-by-moment processes and dramas of the mind and experience what it is like to become an impartial observer.

For many people, this initiates the beginning of an important shift within themselves—instead of being caught in the storylines that are easily triggered by our desires or emotions, such as reliving an argument from the night before, we touch the momentary liberation of looking at this story from the outside, realizing that we don't have to fuel it. We take a view "from the balcony" with respect to what's going on in our minds. This can gradually diminish the power of the "have to" and the "must" mentality.

This is the potential path to liberation that the Buddha was pointing to with the Third Noble Truth. It takes birth in the *small* moments of our lives. When we pay attention to these moments through practicing mindfulness, it has the potential to awaken an entirely different dimension of awareness within us. The Buddha also taught that through observing the mind, it becomes quieter, and when it does, insight naturally arises into how it works. So when the mind is no longer caught up, moment by moment, in the tumble dryer of emotions, desires, views, and worries, it settles. It's like a person sitting in a muddy pool; if she can just sit still, the mud will gradually settle and the water will become clear. This will enable her to *see into the depths of the water*.

Modern psychology is also trying to find better ways of helping people settle their minds and develop clearer insights into the nature of their problems. But Buddhism goes one step further. It focuses on insight into the nature of mind itself. When our mind settles and becomes calm, we can begin to see how we are living in a world full of mind-created illusions. With a clear mind we can recognize how our sense of an individual mind is itself a temporary creation. It has been formed from the genes of our parents, shaped by the world we inhabit, and lasts for a relatively short time until the body it inhabits decays and dies. But this is not the end of the story. As our insight deepens, we can gain insight into a different level of mind, referred to as "big mind" in Zen Buddhism—a quality of unbounded awareness that is free from the limited creations of our biological mind and is characterized by the full development of our innate qualities of wisdom and compassion. So the Third Noble Truth points to the cessation of one type of mind and an initiation into a much deeper experience of who we can be.

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The Fourth Noble Truth

The Fourth Noble Truth points to a path to freedom from *dukkha*—how we can come to grips with *dukkha* and gradually soften and loosen it.[6] Siddhãrtha understood that if we want to bring about change at the deepest level, we need to develop skills for working with all the different parts of ourselves in a sustained and coordinated way. This is something we will be coming back to when we describe the compassionate attributes and skills in chapter 4.

The path of awakening set in motion by the Buddha went through various phases after his death, generally referred to as the *Three Turnings of the Wheel of Dharma*, but two skills for training the mind run throughout these phases of teaching: mindfulness and compassion. These skills are the main focus of our book, but they are approached from a secular perspective, both acknowledging their Buddhist source while also applying the latest insights from neuroscience and psychology.[7]

When we really come down to it, what the Buddha was saying in his teaching on the Four Noble Truths is that it is the mind that gives rise to the experience of *dukkha*—suffering only arises because we have minds that enable it to arise. We could imagine computers or robots doing similar things to humans, but they don't suffer because they don't have feelings or conscious awareness, and they don't have a mind that wishes to be happy and free of suffering. And since the mind is the root of *dukkha*, learning to train the mind to behave differently is crucial for alleviating it.

It naturally follows then that the first skill is to become more familiar with the workings of our mind by observing it in action. In fact the word "meditation" simply means familiarization. Today, all over the world, people are practicing "mindfulness meditation," which is the practice of paying attention to the moment-by-moment flow of our thoughts and emotions in a nonjudgmental way.

However, it has been understood within the Mahayana Buddhist tradition for a long time that what really changes the mind is the practice of compassion, which is the second main skill. Furthermore, in order for deep change to take root, we need to apply both mindfulness and compassion together, as these skills work together like the two wings of a bird. This is also the understanding that is emerging from both neuroscience and psychology—that compassion transforms the mind, but

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mindfulness provides the basis and stability for such change. This is a theme we will be exploring throughout this book.

Emergence and Interconnectedness

Although we are going to focus on training our own individual minds, we also want to make a strong point here about *interconnectedness* and our relationship to other minds and the societies we cocreate. Western philosophies, stretching as far back as the Stoics and early Christianity, as well as more recent sciences such as sociology and anthropology, all stress the importance of seeing ourselves as highly interconnected beings—our very sense of self depends on each other. An important principle that is at the heart of Western science and Buddhism is that everything co-arises—everything is based on relationships. All the molecules in our body are determined by the relationships of the atoms that make them up. There is no grand designer putting the atoms together to make molecules, or building molecules into proteins or proteins into bodies, and so on. Instead, due to the operation of the laws of nature, molecules emerge out of atoms, proteins emerge out of the combination of molecules, and bodies emerge out of the relationship of proteins (and other substances of course). Taking another example, anthills are not built by any designer directing other ants and making architectural drawings but simply through the interactions of individual ants going about their instinctual business. In a similar way, genes build our bodies simply through a process of interaction.[8]

In this way, we can see that everything emerges through patterns of relationships. Moreover, anything new is dependent upon preexisting processes and the laws of their interaction. This applies to our personal relationships too. It is now well understood by modern psychology that we are mutually interdependent and influence each other.[9] This is not a metaphysical sense of connectedness but the way we have been built, the way we have evolved as a species. We know that the love children receive when they are young influences the genes that become expressed[10] through them and how their brains develop.[11] But whether or not parents are able to love their children may be linked to what happened *to them* in their own childhood and the *intergenerational flow* of love or abuse and neglect. Furthermore, having friendships and supportive relationships, in contrast to being bullied or isolated, can have a huge impact on people's physiological states, vulnerability to

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illnesses, and susceptibility to mental health problems. In fact, the way we relate to each other influences our physiological states moment by moment.[12]

Our identity is also linked to our connections with others and the social conditions we grew up in. This is illustrated by an example that we will use a number of times throughout this book: if we had been kidnapped as babies and brought up in violent drug gangs, the chances are we would now be violent ourselves; we might have killed or tortured people, or perhaps we might be dead or languishing in prison. This is a tragedy because we know that this is the destiny of many young males who grow up in these environments. In this instance, there would be no possibility for the version of ourselves as a long-term Buddhist and long-term clinical psychologist to come into existence. Even more tragic is that if we had been adopted into rival gangs, we might have tortured or killed each other, and the friendship and mutual learning that we now have would be a completely unlived potential. To think about it from the mindset of the kinds of people we are now is of course extremely distressing—but it's important because it shows how fragile the sense of self is.

Consider also that if we were living in Rome 2,500 years ago, we might be looking forward to the Roman games this weekend. In the first three months of the opening of the Colosseum, over ten thousand people lost their lives just for entertainment. The Roman Empire lasted for around 700 years, so the number of deaths for violent entertainment is probably incalculable. Also, crucifixions—a dreadful way to die—were standard practice at that time and so too was horrific torture. But the Romans were not aliens with different genes or different brains; in essence they were exactly the same as you and me. What was different was that the culture they were part of and the values that underpinned it condoned acts of great cruelty and this then shaped the relationships that arose in this culture. So, for example, it might have been a respectful job at that time to be an organizer of gladiatorial shows.

Although some people remain fascinated by sadism and modern television wants to sell us more and more violent TV shows, as a culture we have nonetheless moved away from the horrific values of times gone by. The reason many of us have the values we do and enjoy lives that are relatively free of fear is because of the cultural values and institutions we have built up to contain the destructive potentials within us. It is because of the courageous efforts of those long dead that we now can live lives of relative freedom.

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Therefore, every facet of our lives, from the way our brains are organized to our cultural values, is part of a complex, interconnected web that not only operates in the here and now, but is linked to generations long gone and will ripple on into generations to come. The American psychologist Philip Zimbardo has spent a lifetime understanding how good people can end up doing bad things. He called it the Lucifer effect.[13] We are very vulnerable to behaving well or poorly because we are deeply social beings. Perhaps one of the greatest enemies of compassion is conformity; a preparedness to go along with the way things are, sometimes out of fear, sometimes complacency, and sometimes because we do what our leaders tell us to do.

We can also recognize just how much everything around us depends on the actions of others. Consider your car. Its creation depended on generations of inventors, people who are prepared to mine the iron that made the steel, people who work in the factories to assemble the parts, and people who risk their lives in deep sea oil wells. There is nothing around us—from the food we eat to the clothes we wear to the houses we live in and to the hospitals we go to when we are sick—that does not depend on the actions of others. Sometimes we kid ourselves that we are single, encapsulated selves that are completely self-reliant, but this is mere illusion and fantasy.

Within this context, it's extraordinary how often we don't notice the everyday kindness of people who go out of their way to be helpful and considerate, and who go the extra mile to make sure they do a good job. It's so important that we pay attention to the kindness and compassion coming *toward* us because the news media constantly pulls our attention to the tragic and destructive stories such as rape, murder, and bombings. But the fact of the matter is that we have evolved as a species to be emotionally oriented toward cooperating and helping each other, and a large part of our happiness comes from these relationships of love and care.[14, 15] Indeed, this brings us back to a key theme of this book, which is that compassion is not just about tuning in to the details of suffering, but is also very much about appreciating and being grateful for those living beings that surround us and whose actions make our very survival and well-being possible. There are some psychologists who suggest that every day we should bring to mind what we are grateful for—not in a guilty way, but simply paying attention to the helpfulness of others—as there is now good evidence that focusing on gratitude can be very helpful for our well-being.

All this is also very relevant to our modern era because,

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although we seem to be becoming less cruel and violent[16] due to social change, we are allowing tendencies to emerge, driven by political and economic pressures, that are overly focused on competitiveness, selfishness, and greed, and this is causing serious trouble for so many people.[17] Frankly, we are driving ourselves crazy![18] The drive for increased efficiencies is now recognized to be turning the British National Health Service (which should be at the heart of compassion) into an uncompassionate service.[19] We may get efficiencies but we will create a world that is just cold and heartless to live in. Efficiency often means streamlining so that two jobs are collapsed into one, or people are given more and more responsibilities and duties until the job is too big and they struggle to maintain quality. If we are to create compassionate societies we need to understand these processes and to work out how to neutralize social forces that are pushing us toward greater competition, greed, and exploitation. We need to wake up and, as the Buddha did, come out of our golden palaces. In this way, mindful compassion needs to address the fact that our lives are interconnected with the lives of others and that we cocreate the world we live in.

The Buddha's Story and Us

Stories that last for centuries usually do so because they point to a fundamental insight about our lives. The Buddha's story is an archetypal one of waking up to a certain reality and then, just like the heroes of old, rising to the challenge of going out and gaining knowledge and wisdom for the quest so as to reach the goal—for the Buddha it was liberation from suffering. In many ways the Buddha's story is the story of all of us who, to some degree, live in our gilded palaces. If we are lucky enough to grow up in loving families, then our parents will try to protect and care for us so that we can enjoy our childhoods, and we will grow up with more or less the same aspirations that they have, and live similar lives. Also, in our production-focused society in the West, we feel so proud of having developed our science and technology to such an extent that we are relatively free from famine, and, for the most part, enjoy the comforts of warm houses, running water, and sanitation. Our science has served us greatly and has cushioned us somewhat from the harsh realities of life that existed just a few hundred years ago. Anesthetics and pain control, coupled with palliative care, ease the passage of those who are dying. Modern medicine can even cure many diseases and injuries that would have killed us less than a hundred years ago. There is much to

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celebrate and be deeply grateful for in modern science and in those who have dedicated their lives to these causes.

But, in our quieter moments, most of us glimpse a darker truth. We sense that despite our best efforts the reality of pain and suffering is a constant glimmer on the horizon, sometimes far away yet at other times, very close. There are many things that medicine and our world of gadgets cannot protect us from. So we try to keep ourselves constantly distracted with our iPods, BlackBerries, multichannel TVs, and so on. In fact, the whole capitalist system seeks to hold us addicted and needy of things and possessions—enticing us to buy more, have more, and enjoy the pleasures of life. It needs this to keep functioning like a serpent eating its own tail, more and more, faster and faster, cheaper and cheaper. In this way it subtly encourages us to close our eyes to the suffering beyond our gates and the reality of our own lives, and indeed of life itself. Mindful compassion, however, is not about turning a blind eye; it is not about dishonesty and greed; it is not about hiding through fear. It is about seeking the truth of how we create suffering within our own minds and how we create suffering in the social systems we are part of.

Just like the Buddha, our first step is to understand the causes of suffering and to seek the knowledge that will equip us to understand our minds better. Therefore, the next two chapters will focus on how our minds are constructed, enabling us to gain this knowledge and, in so doing, show how the Buddha's Second Noble Truth is still very relevant today.

It might be useful to engage in the following reflections in order to convert some of the knowledge in this chapter into personal wisdom.

Reflection One

Sit quietly where you will not be disturbed and consider how different you might have been if you had grown up in a different environment. Choose any environment provided it's very different from the one you grew up in. Perhaps think of one of great wealth or one of great poverty or one that is violent. What would it be like to give up the identity you have right now? If this feels difficult, remind yourself that this is a reflection exercise designed to provoke insight. Notice how this resistance affects you. Try to be curious, open, even playful if that helps. The point of the exercise is just to notice your resistance without feeling

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guilty or ashamed. Paul has often reflected on the fact that giving up the identity of "being a psychologist" would be extremely tough indeed! There is no blame here, just mindful fascination of why it's so important.

Reflection Two

The next reflection is to think about how you would feel if you lost the material things around you. Again this may be difficult. For example, Paul is very attached to his house and to his guitars, even though he doesn't play them very well! Again, this exercise is not to encourage you to give things up, but simply to help you notice your resistance to losing them and how this feeds into holding onto and needing to maintain a certain lifestyle. When we begin to think about the suffering this would cause us, we might give a thought to what happens to somebody in a war situation who sees their house blown up or perhaps swept away by a tsunami—by being in touch with our own distress we can feel that of others.

Both these reflections can help us understand how attached we are to so much that has been created around us but also how tragic it is that some people who lose these things can lose their very sense of identity too; or worse still, they remain in destructive relationships and life situations because their sense of identity depends on them.

Reflection Three

Now, without needing to change your identity too much, imagine what it would be like to start every day thinking of yourself as a deeply compassionate person; that you are going to train and practice every day, even for just a few minutes; that you are on this mysterious journey of life, in a world full of pain and suffering, and your principal job is to do what you can while you're here. We are going to look at this in detail in the practice section of the book, but for the moment, think about whether this shift in orientation might open you up to wanting to know more about the nature of life and how you can respond more skillfully to the struggles and difficulties that occur. Focus on the joyfulness of this reflection.

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Key Points

- The Buddha realized that our minds are a major source of our own fulfillment and happiness but so too of our unhappiness and despair. Therefore, learning to understand and train our minds is crucial. This was expressed in his teaching of the Four Noble Truths.

- In the Fourth Noble Truth, the Buddha set out a path to ending suffering and the causes of suffering. Two key skills that are part of this path are mindfulness and compassion. Learning to understand these skills, what blocks them and how to train in them, is the focus of this book.

- Not only do we inhabit individual minds that are very tricky, but we are part of relationships and social systems that can be a source of happiness or suffering depending upon many conditions that lie beyond our control.

- Mindful compassion helps us wake up to what we are caught up in. It is about seeking the truth of how we create suffering within our own minds and how we create suffering in the social systems we are part of. With this wisdom about suffering we can set out to alleviate and prevent it.

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Evolved Mind and Motivations

Suffering arises precisely because we have biological bodies and minds, with nerve cells and brain systems that can feel pain and emotion. These have evolved and emerged over many millions of years in what we call the *flow of life*. This is the story of how our world gave birth to the simplest of single-cell organisms in the sea (called *prokaryotes*) some three to four billion years ago and how those life-forms gradually evolved and transformed into all of the species we see on Earth today.

It is important for us to understand how our bodies and minds were designed in the flow of life, and how they function, so that we can begin to cultivate them in ways that are conducive to mindful compassion. Understanding how our minds have evolved offers deep insight into the major problems we are going to face when trying to cultivate a wise, mindful, and compassionate mind.

Understanding Our Origins—The Flow of Life

Over the last two to three thousand years, many thinkers and philosophers have realized that our minds are tricky and troublesome, and riddled with problems. For example, our capacity for reason struggles to restrain many of our motives and emotions, and we can find ourselves doing things because powerful irrational forces control the inner show, such as seeking out sexual partners, falling in love, wanting children, and, more destructively, defending our status or identity, joining tribes and groups, and then rushing off to war to protect our particular group. These motives are not based on reason or logic. Many early Greek philosophers argued that reason is the faculty that we should cultivate so we can avoid getting lost in the chaos of our passions and instinctual drives. But, while reason is helpful to us, we can also reflect more on what our motivations really are and which of them will help us grow, develop, and prosper. So given the various motivations that can take hold of us, our task is to be reflective enough to choose wisely which motivations to cultivate

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and which to be wary of. This book will argue that the cultivation of motives based on mindfulness and compassion can have far-reaching consequences for our own well-being, mental health, and relationships, our sense of the person we are and the meaning in our lives, and for the world that we are part of and want to create.

While some spiritual traditions have tried to focus us on universal love, forgiveness, and the brotherhood of humanity, these motives, noble as they are, run up against opposing motives that are about getting ahead, securing power, destroying our enemies, or behaving with excessive cruelty to those around us. Even today, thousands of people are suffering from the terrors of war and torture, starvation stalks the lives of millions, and human wealth is held by a small minority who are reluctant to share. Consequently, compassionate motives are up against an evolved mind that is riddled with conflicting motives and desires that are propelled by powerful emotions. These are not new insights, of course, but what many early thinkers on the human condition could not know was exactly *why* we are "up against it," *why* our minds are so chaotic and driven by passions, and *why* it is so hard to apply our reason or take a compassionate position. This knowledge has only become available relatively recently with our understanding of evolution.

The Evolutionary Journey

The person most associated with uncovering how we are all part of the flow of life is Charles Darwin (1809–1882). He was the son of an affluent landowner and tried his hand at medicine before deciding to go into the church. However, he had a fascination for the natural world and jumped at an opportunity in 1831 to set sail on the HMS *Beagle* as the ship's naturalist. He was to spend eighteen months at sea exploring diverse lands in South America and the Galapagos as the *Beagle* engaged in its activities of surveying the southern hemisphere. Darwin encountered many species that were alien to Europe, and this prompted him to inquire how such variety could come into being. His insights into how the great variety of life came about transformed our understanding of life on Earth. Species change, he said, because they are constantly confronted with challenges for food, survival, and reproduction, and those best fitted to survive do so and pass their characteristics on to their offspring. This groundbreaking insight gave birth to the concept that species change by natural selection and evolution, although Darwin himself never used the term "evolution."

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So relentless is the struggle for survival that 99 percent of all species that ever existed are now extinct—a sobering thought. The Neanderthals became extinct about 250,000 years ago during the last ice age, and now only their bones and artifacts are proof that they ever existed at all. We will never know exactly how they thought or what they loved, or the feelings they had for their children and their families, and their hopes for the future. But, as Buddhist philosophy points out, all things change and nothing is permanent—especially life-forms and their genetic combinations and mutations, which we now know are constantly changing in ways that are quite surprising.[1]

Precisely *how* characteristics (e.g., running speed, color of fur, body mass, or human brains) were passed from one generation to another was unknown because Darwin knew nothing about genes. The first clue of *genetic transmission* came from Gregor Johann Mendel (1822–1884), an Austrian scientist and friar. He experimented on thousands of pea plants and explored how characteristics could be passed from one generation to the next. His important observation, that you could deliberately cultivate and transfer specific characteristics of a pea, was overlooked until 1890. Nonetheless, *Mendelian inheritance*, as it became known, formed the basis for looking for the means whereby information was transferred from one generation to the next.

In 1953 at Cambridge, Francis Crick and James Watson published their discovery of this mechanism of gene transfer and called it *DNA* (short for *deoxyribonucleic acid*). Over the next sixty years, scientists who were part of the genome project, tried to code all of the genes that we inherit. Originally, it was thought that we would have hundreds of thousands of genes, but in fact we have only 25,000 to 30,000. Even more fascinating is that we share many genes with other species. We have 70 percent of our genes in common with mice, 80 percent with cows, and 98–99 percent with chimpanzees. Of course this does not mean that a mouse is 70 percent human or a chimpanzee is 98 percent human. This is because genes work very differently in combination, and many genes appear to be "silent."

In fact, it is the way genes interact and the way they build our bodies and brains that is the key to understanding our minds. What is interesting is that much of our DNA shows evidence of the remnants of viruses that have deposited their DNA in us. This may be one way in which our genes get mutated and changed. What is also important is that some genes can get turned on and off according to the environments (from the womb to early life

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experiences) in which we live. We now know that even if you carry genetic sensitivity to certain conditions like depression, those conditions don't necessarily manifest but depend on certain types of environment (e.g., loving and affectionate ones will literally protect you from the activation circumstance of repressive genes).

The Consequences of Evolution for Mindful Compassion

Genetic evolution actually fits quite well with Buddhist thinking "that everything emerges from preexisting conditions," which is precisely how the evolutionary process works. We would not be here as we are now (you as you and me as me) without all that has gone before, stretching right back to the birth of the universe. Central to this insight is the recognition that there is no pre-design in the evolutionary process, only adaptation and change with "the new" constantly emerging from "the previous."

Precisely because it's a constant process of emergence of what is new from what went before, evolution can't go back to the drawing board and start again but instead adapts previous designs. In this way, what has gone before always exerts a strong influence on what can evolve later. For example, our basic skeleton, with our spine running down the back and our four limbs, was designed in the sea for fish. This works well as a coat hanger suspended in water but becomes more troublesome when creatures move onto land and then much later evolve into mammals and stand upright.

Similarly, evolution cannot design things in advance; rather, designs emerge because they have certain advantages. For example, if you look at the giraffe, it has difficulties getting down to drink, and sex is none too easy either. You'd think: *How on earth did that creature evolve in that way?* But then you discover that actually it can eat from branches that no other animal can reach, so this advantage led to a gradual elongation of its neck *at the cost* of creating other difficulties. These are called trade-offs. Another example commonly cited is the peacock's tail: it's a fantastic display that is designed to entice females, but can be a problem when it comes to running away from predators.

Human bodies and brains are full of all kinds of trade-offs and compromises too. Standing upright rather than being on all fours gave humans the advantage of being able to see into the distance and have both hands free. The downside of this adaptation is that considerable force now goes down through our

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spinal column, hips, and knees, which were not originally designed to carry a weight like ours today. There have been adaptations to the spine and joints, of course, but because of this original design, many people today get slipped discs and require replacements of key joints because they wear out. Standing upright also affected the female pelvis in such a way that childbirth became more difficult because the fetus can get stuck; and tragically, millions of women and their babies have died because of this evolutionary adaptation—bigger heads to accommodate increasing intelligence running up against constrictions in the birth canal.[2]

We should also consider that many of our basic systems are designed to work within limits. This is especially true for systems in our body that try to protect us. For example, diarrhea and vomiting are the body's normal way of dealing with toxins. For the most part, they work quite well. But there are some illnesses that cause these natural defenses to stay active longer than is needed, and when that happens, people can die from dehydration and loss of nutrients—a very common cause of death for children in the developing world. It's not so much the illness that kills them but the body's own defenses to the illness. There are also a range of autoimmune diseases where basically our immune system fails to recognize our own body as its own and attacks it. Cancer cells are appearing in the body all the time, but it's when the body fails to regulate them that problems arise.[3]

The point of this story is to show how the evolution of our bodily systems is not moving us toward perfection but responding to challenges in ways that, on the whole, are helpful but not always so. In fact, the process of evolution is one reason that we are susceptible to many diseases and injuries and can die in so many different ways. Moreover, we come to see that it is precisely because there is no designer in the way our brains and bodies have evolved that causes us all kinds of difficulties. So when we look at the human brain, we can see that evolution has given rise to an extraordinarily complex but not that well put together organ. Indeed, the first flickers of compassion for ourselves begin when we have compassion for the fact that our brains are very tricky and full of conflicting motives, desires, and emotions that often don't work well together. This is one reason we are so susceptible to anxiety, depression, rages, and paranoia!

As we saw, the Buddhist approach to the dilemma of being alive is based on acknowledging the reality of suffering and trying to understand its causes—and seeking a way out. Science is contributing to this process by showing how the causes of

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suffering are linked to basic evolutionary process and design. An authentic path of mindful compassion requires us to be aware of the life situation we are in and why our minds are the way they are. Such insight and knowledge become a part of our emerging wisdom, and this wisdom then informs our compassionate response.

Old and New Brains

Using these insights, we can now focus on how our minds came to be the way they are, why it can be so hard for us to find inner peace, and why we can so often become our own worst enemies. The evolutionary model begins with the basic premise that humans are an evolved species and that over many millions of years, the brain has evolved as an organ to coordinate the body's actions in the world. Every function of the body from breathing to heart rate, every movement we make, every emotion we feel, and every thought we have is regulated by the brain. What the sensors pick up, the brain interprets: "Is this food?" "Could that be a predator?" "Could this be a sexual opportunity?" "Is this a storm coming, and do I need to take shelter?" Once the brain has decided that certain signals offer certain possibilities, it needs to direct the body to act accordingly: to approach and eat food, run from a predator, fight with a competitor, mate with a sexual partner, or take shelter. So our brains have mechanisms for dealing with threats and taking advantage of certain opportunities that promote survival and reproduction.

If we look at the natural world around us, for instance by watching wonderful naturalist films by people such as David Attenborough and the BBC cameramen, we see that most animals pursue similar goals to humans. These include finding food, avoiding becoming food, seeking out sexual partners, fighting over status and desirable things, and looking after offspring. We can also see that they display types of emotions similar to ours, such as anxiety, anger and aggression, being satisfied and relaxed, or being high on sexual desire and pursuit. Their brains are built to be motivated in ways that are similar to ours.

The human brain is part of this flow of life and comes with very similar design features. We too have mechanisms in our brains that are oriented to these kinds of goals, and we too can react with anger and anxiety if our goals are threatened or blocked. And, likewise, we can feel joy when things go well. We can call these motives and emotions *old-brain* functions because they have evolved over many millions of years and are common

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to many other forms of life (see figure 2.1).

Emotions are guides for our motives. We will spend the next chapter looking at emotions in some detail because they play a fundamental role in giving our lives meaning and they underpin compassion; but they also have the potential to cause havoc and block compassion. For the moment, we will note how they are linked to our motives. For example, if you want to pass an exam, make money, ask somebody out on a date, or grow vegetables (all of which are motives), you then make the effort to accomplish these things; if successful, chances are you will experience agreeable emotions such as pleasure, excitement, or satisfaction. In contrast, if you fail the exam, lose money, your date turns you down, and your vegetables get eaten by slugs, your emotions are likely to be unpleasant, and you may well end up feeling frustrated, disappointed, or sad.

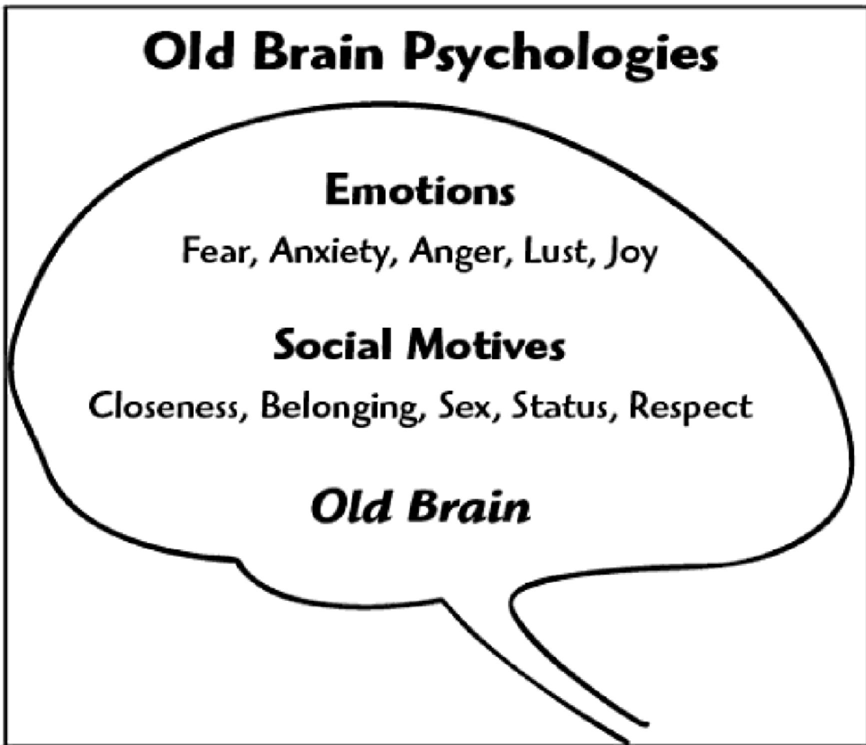

***Figure 2.1** The functions of our old brain*

In this way, our emotions are inner signals that indicate whether we are accomplishing our motivating goals. This is going to be an important point when we start thinking about what *compassionate motives* are, how they work in us, and what emotions go with them.

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The Problems with Humans Getting Smart

What's crucial to our approach is that we need to explore the implications of having newly evolved, specialized brain systems that offer us a whole range of competencies that no other animals possess. Around two million years ago, the human brain started to get smart! Fossil studies tracing human origins have revealed a number of different species going back to ones called *Homo erectus* and *Homo habilis*, allowing us to see a gradual change in brain size and capacity over millions of years. The typical functions that we now have as part of our new "smart" brain are depicted in figure 2.2.

We became able to imagine and fantasize and to think, reason, and plan in ways that animals cannot do. We developed language as a wonderful medium to help us think and communicate with each other. We became able to use symbols that again provide a huge capacity for thinking. But our thinking brain can be a double-edged sword. Consider, for example, that a zebra runs for its life when chased by the lion, but once the chase is over, it quickly returns to grazing on the savannah. But this is seldom the case for humans because we constantly think, analyze, fantasize, predict, and anticipate. These new-brain capacities can cause us to spend half the day dwelling on how terrible it would have been if the lion had caught us. We might run all kinds of images and fantasies through our minds which terrify us. And then we worry about whether something similar might happen tomorrow—what if we don't spot it next time and what if the children go out. And what if and what if…! This is the downside of our new-brain capacities. Other animals do not spend time worrying about putting on weight or what will happen to the children if they aren't able to find a job or whether others like them or not or how to go about developing a good reputation. Getting smart has introduced a completely new dynamic to the flow of life: a thinking, self-aware, and reflective mind; but also one that can get *caught in loops of thinking* about, for example, frightening things that stimulate anxiety, getting more anxious, and then thinking about frightening things again. In his famous book *Why Zebras Don't Get Ulcers*, Robert Sapolsky makes plain that our thinking smart brains can give us all kinds of hassles.[4]

Not only were we able to stand back and think about ourselves in relation to the world we lived in, but at some point we also became able to think about the minds of other people. So we can think about what someone else is feeling, what their

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motives might be, and why they might be feeling what they are feeling right now. This is quite extraordinary when you consider it. So you can think in this way: *If I tell Sally this, she will probably tell Fred, who would then tell John, but John is unreliable and could well use this information to get back at me.* Thinking in this way gives us insight into ourselves as humans and, together with our ability to communicate, allows us to become fantastic storytellers, novelists, and producers of Hollywood movies.

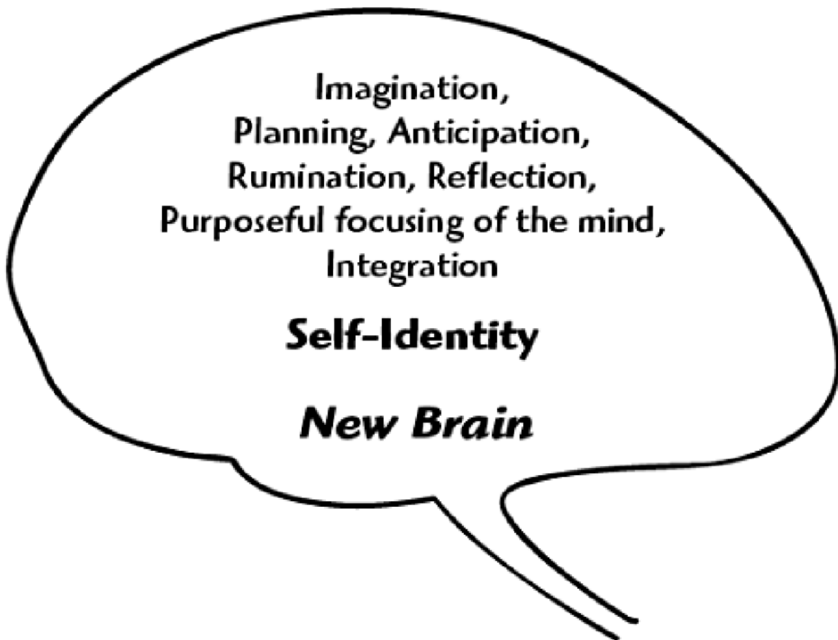

Figure 2.2 *New-brain competencies and abilities*

Our new brain also endows us with the capacity to be *aware of being aware*. We are aware that we exist, that we have a mind, and that our existence will end. We can be aware that we are having the thought that "we are aware," or be aware of the experience of being aware. Thus the *quality* of our awareness is different than that of other animals as well, and this recently evolved capacity "to be aware of being aware" enables us to practice mindfulness. It allows us to observe our minds and then make choices about them. Clearly, no other animal can *choose* to become mindful by training and purposely directing their attention (see chapter 7).

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Another quality that makes us different from other animals is that we have a sense of self as being unique and individual. Now the whole emergence of life depends upon individual organisms. When the first life-forms came into being, they had membranes around them that separated the inside (the cell) from the outside. So life itself is a process whereby organisms become individual entities, separated from the environment in which they exist, but at the same time being dependent on that environment too. So the beginning of "individuality" and being a "separate self" is billions of years old.

However, humans have a completely new awareness of what it means to be contained within our own skins with our unique bodies and brains. This awareness and sense of being an individual self enable us to think about the future and the kind of people we want to be (or don't want to be), how we want to feel, and the life we want to live. In contrast, other animals live day to day. They cannot reflect on what it means to be a separate self existing in the world; they simply live out their innate motives and emotions. This process, of course, can be helpful or very unhelpful because clinging to and trying to create certain types of self-identity can cause all kinds of problems. Nonetheless, the desire to become a certain kind of person is also important for developing mindfulness and compassion; and this again highlights the importance of motivation, namely what kind of self we are motivated to try to become.

When we refer to all these abilities as being part of our *new brain* this does not refer to *where* they exist in the brain (although the frontal cortex is important) but simply that they are very *new competencies* on this planet as far as we know. As we have seen, these abilities use our attention, imagination, and ability to fantasize, anticipate, plan, think, and reason. Our new-brain abilities have made the world what it is today with diverse cultures, science, cars, TVs, mobile phones, and medicine, but—and this is a big but—these new-brain abilities can also cause us serious problems and distress. For example, we can reason about conflicts and plan revenge; we can also use our intelligence to work out how to build nuclear weapons. We can ruminate on how unhappy we are and plan to kill ourselves. We can create in our heads a sense of our self as inferior and unloved, or we can feel entitled to have far more resources than other people.

Basically, our new-brain capacities can be hijacked and directed by our old-brain passions, motives, and fears. Our planning, reasoning, and imagining can be directed by the emotions and motives of the old brain. Rather than using our

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thinking and attention to help us regulate or cope with unpleasant emotions or help us stimulate positive emotions, the old brain can pull us in the direction of threat-based anxiety and anger, and this can become the focus for thinking, dwelling, and ruminating. We get stuck in loops of "thinking stimulating feeling" and "feeling stimulating thinking" and so on. This is an unfortunate consequence of getting smart; and if we do not take responsibility for it, this *evolutionary glitch* can land us in deep trouble. This is depicted in figure 2.3.

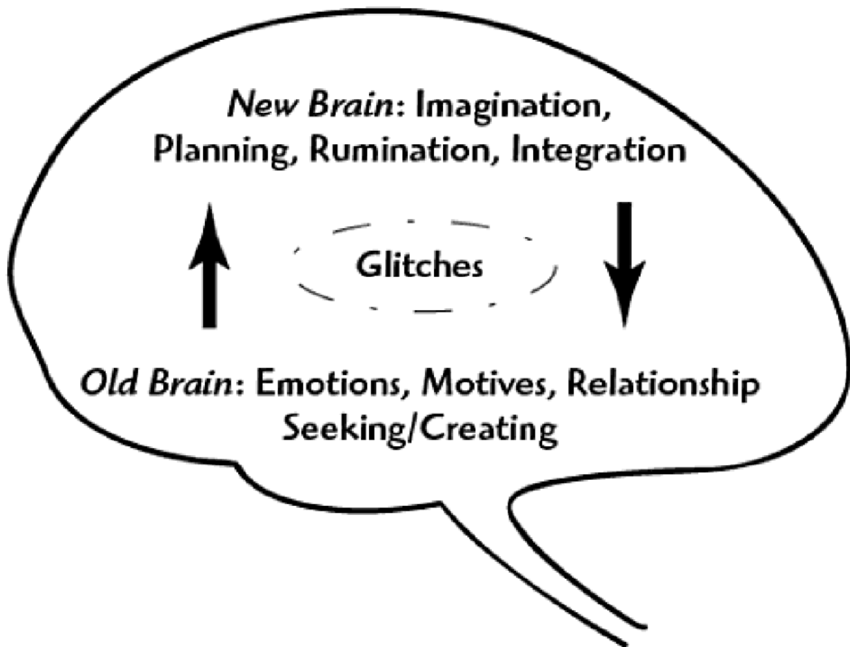

Figure 2.3 *Interactions of new- and old-brain psychologies*

These are not new insights; over the last two thousand years, Eastern and Western philosophers have understood that we can get caught up in vicious circles in which our emotions stir up our thoughts and our thoughts then further inflame our emotions. For example, if we become anxious, we can start to dwell on anxious thoughts and possibilities, and this can then make us more anxious. Many developments in psychotherapy, especially in the cognitive schools of psychology, have focused on the way our thoughts, motives, and emotions can cause us all kinds of difficulties because of the feedback loops that they create in our minds.

Getting smart also means that, unlike other animals, we are able to think about our own inner emotions and motives, and we

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can judge them along with our behaviors and efforts too. The problem is, we might not like what we experience inside of us. We might not like the surges of fear or anger or our tendencies to get irritated with people or be submissive to them. We might be alarmed by some of the sexual or aggressive fantasies that flow through us, and instead of having compassion for ourselves for having such a tricky brain, we might become critical and at war with ourselves.

In this respect, many mental health problems are caused by people trying to avoid "feeling their feelings" or experiencing a fantasy life. Clearly, if you're avoiding, suppressing, and dissociating from what's going on inside you, then there is very little chance for understanding your mind and there's little basis for being compassionate toward yourself.[5]

But, of course, our brains have also evolved capacities for enjoyment and happiness, for caring, affection, affiliation, and peacefulness. So we can learn how to use our new-brain abilities to focus on peaceful feelings and to organize our minds in constructive ways. We can learn to pay attention in particular ways and become more mindful of what goes on in our heads. How we go about doing this is a central focus of this book.

How the Brain Coordinates Itself

By now we are beginning to see the problems of why the brain is *so* tricky. It is because it's complex and multilayered and has been put together in bits and pieces over many millions of years.[6] A lot of processing that goes on in the brain doesn't even come into consciousness because consciousness is actually quite a late stage in the processing sequence. Nonetheless, given all our different motives, desires, and possibilities, the brain has to find ways of enabling these different systems and structures to interact in a coordinated way, and this is typically where both helpful adaptations and problems arise.

Key to our human abilities is our capacity for a fantastic *coordination of abilities and competencies*, such as attention, reasoning, facilitating and inhibiting behaviors, and regulating emotions. We are a species that can integrate information at a fantastic level. Take driving a car, for example: you are changing gears with your hands and feet; using your eyes to steer and watch out for cars behind you, in front of you, and to the side of you; talking to your friend next to you; answering your mobile (hands-free of course); keeping an eye on your GPS; and stopping at red lights. And you can do this for hours on end! A

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chimpanzee, our nearest relative, would never survive more than a few seconds because it could not coordinate anything like that level of activity and attention focusing.

Our body enables a fantastic coordination of processes that allow us to take in and digest food, breaking it down into nutrients that the body can use to build proteins and various chemicals that then give energy to our muscles and so on. So physiological systems need to be very carefully coordinated to function appropriately; and if one aspect gets out of balance, then the body as a whole can suffer. But it's the same with the mind. Our brain needs to coordinate an amazing number of different systems, types, and amounts of information.

Motives Coordinate the Mind

What we focus our attention on and how and what we think, feel, and behave, can all be coordinated by the motives that are operating in us, some of which we might not even be aware of. This is going to be an important insight when it comes to choosing compassionate motives because compassion will also coordinate our mind in a particular way. We can see how powerful motives are for influencing how our minds operate by imagining somebody who is highly motivated to get on in the world, make as much money as possible, grab every sexual opportunity, and live a hedonistic life. Then compare that to somebody who is motivated to understand their own minds and be as thoughtful and compassionate to others as possible. Can you see how focus of their attention, feelings, and behaviors will be organized in different ways according to what they are motivated to become or do? Back in 1989, Paul coined the term "social mentality" to describe the way in which our motives are like the conductors of an orchestra of attention, thinking, and behaving.[7] Becoming more mindfully aware of how our motives are triggered, which then coordinates our thinking, attention, feeling, and behaviors, allows us to stand back and decide if we want to go down that road or not. There is increasing evidence that different motives and social mentalities actually stimulate our brains in different ways. For example, the psychologist Emiliana Simon-Thomas and her colleagues[8] looked at what happens in our brains when we focus on either compassion- or pride-based goals. They found that inducing compassion stimulated areas of the brain that are also activated when people respond to pain in others and are associated with parental caring behaviors. In contrast, inducing pride activates areas in the brain related to

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thinking about oneself. As with all these things, it is not that one is good and the other bad; it is about finding balance and appreciating the effect of a compassionate focus in our brains.

So we can contrast a caregiving and compassion-oriented motive with a self-focused and competitive one. When we are in a caregiving mode, we focus our attention on the distress or needs of others, feel concern for them, work toward providing them with what they need, and feel rewarded by their recovery or prosperity. In humans this may even become linked to self-identity; for example, "I would like to be a caring person." In contrast, our self-focused, competitive motives would have us focusing on how we can do better than other people, constantly comparing ourselves with others, taking pleasure in being better than them, and not wanting to share our successes. This is outlined in figure 2.4. It is essential then to recognize that our motives can organize so much of what goes on in our minds.

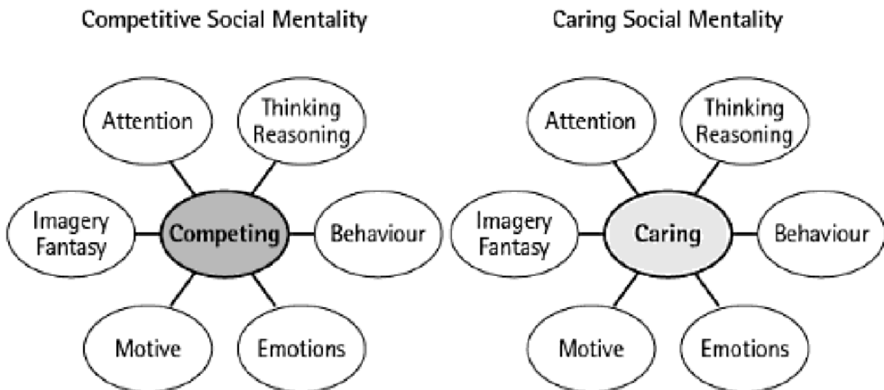

Figure 2.4 *Different social mentalities*

In general, a social mentality can only develop in relationships. Once a social mentality is activated, it is "looking for" a response from others. If you "seek care," then you need others to provide it; if you make a sexual pass, then you need another person to reciprocate in order to develop a sexual relationship. Receiving certain signals from others enables the social mentality to function in the unfolding development of that type of relationship. This is important because what do you think happens if a social mentality can't elicit certain signals—for example, if every time you seek care, people humiliate or reject you; or if you make a sexual pass at someone and they respond by telling you that you are too old, fat, and ugly? The social mentality is then blocked. Not only can this cause emotional disturbance, but it can also thwart the development of skills

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associated with the social mentality. So, if your care-seeking is constantly rejected, you might simply close it down or become very unskilled in recognizing and dealing with your need to be cared for. So you can see that our social mentalities are constantly being shaped by our interactions. This is why we call compassion a *social mentality*, because it is focused not just on the self, but also on one's interaction with *others* and how we respond to the ways that they interact with and react to *us*.

At times, then, it's useful to give ourselves the opportunity to pause and reflect on what is actually motivating us: What are our core goals in life? What do we see as being a meaningful life? If we imagined that we were approaching the last days of our life, what would we like to look back on? How would we like to be remembered? What are we doing right now to try to become that person?

Minds Full of Conflicts

By now it is clear that we have many different types of motives that organize our thinking, feelings, and behavior, which are set up to do different things in different contexts. Despite this, it's still something of a shock to recognize just how "multiple" we are. Paul had not been qualified as a clinical psychologist for very many years when these issues really began to hit psychology; in particular, a book that made a big impression on him was Robert Ornstein's *Multimind*. Over twenty-five years ago, Ornstein wrote this:

> The long progression in our self-understanding has been from a simple and usually "intellectual" view to the view that the mind is a mixed structure, for it contains a complex set of "talents," "modules" and "policies" within. … All these general components of the mind can act independently of each other; they may well have different priorities.[9]

In fact this is now a pretty standard view in psychology. Twenty years ago, Dennis Coon opened an introductory undergraduate text on psychology with this graphic depiction:

> You are a universe, a collection of worlds within worlds. Your brain is possibly the most complicated and amazing device in existence. Through its action you are capable of

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> music, art, science, and war. Your potential for love and compassion coexists with your potential for aggression, hatred…murder.[10]

What Coon and other researchers suggest is that we are not unified selves, despite our experience of being so. Rather, we are made up of many different possibilities for creating meaning and generating brain patterns and states of mind. What is surprising is that this knowledge is still not filtering down into society in a more general way. Perhaps this is because the illusion of being a single self that has control over all aspects of the mind is so powerful and compelling that we don't want to let go of it. As we become more mindful, however, we become more aware of this *family of competing emotions and motives*, or different types of self, that are bubbling away inside us. It is important to remember that these are created because of basic brain design and social context—they are not personal and not our fault—so it's useful to shift more and more to an observing stance and not to overidentify with them. This is why mindfulness is so important in providing the basis from which to cultivate a compassionate motive.

Clearly, motives and social mentalities overlap, and one can suppress another; for example, it can be difficult to be competitively aggressive and caring at the same time. But, of course, people switch between different mentalities and can blend them together. Indeed, the ability to switch between them when we need to is an indication of good mental health.[11] For example, a man may compete in the job market by trying to prove to people how skilled and valuable he is, but when he goes home, a different self may emerge within him; he may be a loving father who does not feel the need to compete with his children for his wife's affection and time. Individuals who become trapped in a particular mentality or motivational system (like being competitive or submissive all the time) can struggle with being cooperative, caregiving, or care-receiving. This can then impoverish their lives in many ways. So these are important questions for all of us: What motives can take control of our minds, under what circumstances is this most likely to happen, and what are the consequences of this happening? How mindful are we of our minds being controlled by these various motives that evolved over many millions of years?

The Affliction of Self-Identity

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Not only do motives organize our minds, but also maintaining a sense of self is very important for most of us because it helps us to maintain our self-integrity and our sense of being connected to others. We can find ourselves becoming very distressed if we feel things or behave in ways that do not fit with our sense of who we are.

In her book *Multiplicity*, Rita Carter offers a fascinating overview of how we are a whole host of different selves in one head.[12] There's the self that appears when we are angry, the self that turns up when we get anxious, the sad self, the perfectionist self, the self as romantic lover, the self as a fantastic friend, and the self as loving or irritable parent, and the list goes on—each of these selves having its own individual way of thinking, feeling, and wanting to act. For the most part we are aware that these different feelings, thoughts, and experiences of ourselves are constantly flushing through us on a daily basis. We do our best to feel centered in ourselves and be in control of all our emotions, but deep down we know we are not. The recognition that we have the potential for many different selves within us, and that these selves can be in conflict with each other, is something that has been understood for a long time. One of the founding fathers of modern psychology, William James, wrote about this problem over a hundred years ago:

> I am often confronted by the necessity of standing by one of my empirical selves and relinquishing the rest. Not that I would not, if I could, be both handsome and fat and well dressed, and a great athlete, and make a million a year, be a wit, a bon-vivant, and a lady-killer, as well as a philosopher, a philanthropist, statesman, warrior, and African explorer, as well as a "tone-poet" and saint. But the thing is simply impossible. The millionaire's work would run counter to the saint's; the bon-vivant and the philanthropist would trip each other up; the philosopher and the lady-killer could not well keep house in the same tenement of clay. Such different characters may conceivably at the outset of life be alike possible to a man. But to make any one of them actual, the rest must more or less be suppressed. So the seeker of his truest, strongest, deepest self must review the list carefully and pick out the one on which to stake his salvation. All other selves thereupon become unreal, but the fortunes of this self are real. Its failures are real failures, its triumphs real triumphs, carrying shame and gladness with them.[13]

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As James explains, one motive for being a certain kind of person can turn off the attributes or qualities needed for another motive. For example, if you are fighting your enemies, then your motivation to care for them, and your feelings of distress at the suffering you are causing them, are all firmly turned off. You might even take pleasure in seeing them suffer. Indeed, this seems the focus of much of our entertainment these days. So the important point here is that there may be some elements of our mind that are not accessible to us because other aspects have turned them off. We may not even stop to think about the distress we cause other people because we are so focused on our annoyance with them or the threat they pose us and our wish to dominate or be heard.

What so often determines the course of action we take is our sense of self-identity, who we take ourselves to be: “the bon-vivant or the philanthropist.” Our self-identity is the way we coordinate the multiple influences that have shaped us, the values we have acquired along the way, the things we aspire to and the things we defend.[14] Our identity is simply a way in which we can organize our minds; otherwise it would be almost impossible to know what to think, value, or do in any given situation.

But identity is so often an arbitrary thing. For example, as we mentioned in the previous chapter, if we had been kidnapped as babies and brought up in violent drug gangs, that would become our identity. This background would be our main reference point within that culture, and we might defend our gangster identity with a passion and genuine belief.[15] Unless we had some way of stepping outside of that culture and coming to appreciate just how much the violent gangster identity had been *shaped for us*, we would have no way of choosing to be different.

Consequently, there are many downsides to having a sense of self and self-identity. The American social psychologist Mark Leary has actually referred to the evolution of self-awareness as something of a curse in his book *The Curse of the Self*.[16] It’s a compelling read and illuminates just how tricky having a sense of self can be because we can overidentify with its values. We then feel compelled to defend our sense of identity and values, which can make us very aggressive if we feel threatened, or we can become vulnerable to depression if we feel we have lost a sense of self-identity. If identifying with being slim and attractive is a core value that defines who we are, then putting on weight threatens our very self-identity and can plunge us into feelings of shame, self-loathing, and depression.

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Another example might be identifying with our self as being a "tough guy." If someone jostles us in the pub one night, this may threaten our self-identity, and we may feel compelled to lash out because we don't want to lose face or appear to be weak—especially in the case of a young male. Our self-identity can also be linked to how we feel we belong to a particular group, for example, a religion, country, or even a football team. This link and "fusion" of us to a group can be so strong that if someone threatens or insults our group, we feel personally threatened or affronted and even can take it as a reason to kill that person. This is particularly true with certain religious groups. What is interesting is that there may be *no material* losses or gains; it all comes down to attachment and clinging to who we think we are. In Buddhism, self-identity is seen as an illusion, and becoming attached and clinging to it as being real is considered a cause of great suffering.

The Shamed Self

One sense of self that we certainly don't choose but many people can get locked into is the shamed self (see chapters 5 and 6). When the Dalai Lama first came to the West, he was reportedly stunned by the level of self-criticism, shame, and self-hatred that afflict so many Western people. Many people with mental health problems are riddled with shame and even kill themselves because of it.[17] We may feel this way because people have been critical in the past or have condemned us. People who have been physically or sexually abused, come from emotionally neglectful backgrounds, or have experienced bullying or acute loneliness can experience strong feelings of shame and unlovability. They believe that they are seen negatively in the minds of others or that if others really knew them well, they would reject them as bad, inadequate, or flawed. They live their lives in hiding, never being able to open up and connect with others because of the fear of being judged and rejected.

When we feel ashamed, we not only fear that people will lack understanding of and kindness toward us, but we also start criticizing and attacking ourselves. What happens then is that our sense of self becomes focused around a shamed identity and feelings of shame with oneself.[18] And just when we need compassion and the support of others to help us with our inner struggles and difficulties, we find the opposite: the negative feelings that we direct toward ourselves are full of disappointment, hostility, and condemnation. As we will see in

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chapter 5, shame is one of the biggest blocks to developing mindfulness and compassion.

The Compassionate Self and Its Benefits

A shame-based identity is not something we usually choose, and it can cause us huge suffering. But supposing we develop an insight into how we became the way we are, and then deliberately choose to cultivate the compassionate potentials within us and make *them* the focus of the self we want to become? Compassion-focused therapy was designed for people who suffer from high levels of shame and self-criticism because developing compassion for ourselves and for others is one of the biggest antidotes to shame.[19] Supposing too we started using our special human abilities for thinking about what other people are thinking and feeling, and for working out what their needs and feelings might be? We have the ability to empathize and imagine what it's like to be another person; so these smart human qualities of our minds—and they are special—can be put at the service of either harming other people or helping them.

Mindful compassion is about recognizing the benefits of deliberately harnessing our caring motives as a way to organize our minds. Compassion, therefore, is not soft or fluffy but is rooted in the fundamental ability in our minds to enlist our smart brains to focus on cultivating motives like compassion, on purpose and with intent (see chapter 4). Without training, our minds can be a chaotic mix of different motives and emotions, but making deliberate choices of what motives and emotions to cultivate can change our minds. This is going to be a principal focus of this book—learning how to cultivate our compassionate self and how to relate to ourselves and others from this standpoint.

The benefits of learning how to cultivate our compassionate selves, which will improve not only our own well-being but also how we relate to others and how we create the societies we live in, is now increasingly backed up by research. Indeed, researchers from all over the world have started to explore the benefits of training our minds for compassion. It turns out that this training is associated with many physiological changes in our brain that are very conducive to our well-being and that help us to form harmonious relationships.[20] Researchers have also shown that if we have compassionate goals (such as genuinely wanting to help others and to avoid harming them) as opposed to ego-centered goals (wanting to get ahead and for others to recognize our good

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points), we are more likely to have positive relationships with others, be content, and be less depressed, stressed, and anxious.[21] In addition, we often talk about finding a greater sense of connection between ourselves and the world, which arises because compassionate motives are linked to parts of the brain that give rise to feelings of connectedness and meaningfulness.

To understand your own personal mix of motives, shaped by the circumstances and cultures you were born into, consider the following reflections.

Reflection One

Consider how *competitive motives* work within you. Are there times in your life where you are competing against others, be it for a new sexual partner or a new job? Notice how you compare yourself with others and (perhaps) worry about what others might be thinking of you. What fantasies do you have for getting ahead in life? What do you want from achieving success? What happens inside you when you try and fail, and when others do better than you? Are you critical of yourself or can you accept it as part of life? Can you take pleasure in the success of others? What happens to you when you are in conflict with other people and have different points of view? Try not to judge what comes up, but just be curious about how this evolved motive system works in you.

Reflection Two

Consider how *compassionate motives* work within you. What plans or fantasies do you have about becoming more compassionate to yourself and others? What do you think a compassionate self is like? (We explore this in more detail in chapter 10.) Are you worried that being compassionate might make you appear to be weak or soft, or that maybe you do not deserve it (as some people do)? Or do you see it as courageous, wisely authoritative, and at times difficult? When things don't go so well for you, or you make mistakes, can you be compassionate toward yourself? If it's other people who make mistakes, can you be compassionate to them or do you blame them? When people are in conflict with you, are you able to stand back and see their point of view and treat them with respect?

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Bringing Our Story Together

This chapter has taken us on a journey into how we became who we are. We have seen that although the brain gives rise to fantastic capacities for science, arts, and cultures, it is a very tricky brain because it also creates problematic loops between our thinking, imagining, and ruminating, on the one hand, and our emotions and motives, on the other. Remember that the zebra will go back to eating soon after escaping from a lion, but a human may well ruminate about a similar experience for days and even be traumatized by it for his or her whole life. This is because of our capacities for thinking, imagining, and ruminating. So our new brain can cause our emotions to be switched on when they *aren't needed* and not be switched off when they *are needed*; in fact, the triggers, frequency, duration, and intensity of our emotions can all be affected by our new brain.

This is where mindfulness comes in because mindfulness is a way of paying attention that interrupts these loops. Rather than being carried away by our thoughts—allowing our thoughts to fuel our emotions and our emotions to fuel our thoughts—we can use this particular kind of *observing awareness*, which is called "mindfulness." We will explain this in more detail later; what is pertinent here is that mindfulness is a recently evolved human ability. As far as we know, animals (as opposed to humans) cannot deliberately pay attention to the present moment; they cannot observe their own thoughts and know that they are doing so. So mindfulness is a new-brain competency.

In some approaches to mind training, developing mindfulness is seen as a way of developing compassion in itself. However, in both Mahayana Buddhist and evolutionary approaches, compassion is seen as being rooted in *old-brain* evolutionary systems. Having said this, we should also note that our new-brain competencies for imagining, anticipating, thinking, and reasoning are also fundamental to compassion. These are what enable us to be able to think about and come to understand suffering, the causes of suffering, and the prevention of suffering in much deeper ways than any other animal. Indeed, we know there are areas of the frontal cortex that are very important for capacities like empathy (our ability to think about and understand what's going on in our minds and in the minds of others) that play a key role in compassion. Importantly, these abilities themselves may have evolved because of how they facilitated social bonding, caring, and affiliative relating. This is called the *social brain hypothesis*.[22] The basic story is that developing positive social

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relationships, such as being cared for by our parents, forming bonds through grooming, developing altruism and cooperative behavior, and the emotions of warmth and friendliness, provides huge evolutionary advantages for humans. Not only do these qualities affect our actual behavior, but we now know that they have a significant impact on our physiological being—our bodies. People who feel part of a supportive network, loved and valued by those around them, have much lower stress levels, better immune systems, and a higher sense of well-being than those who feel isolated and vulnerable to rejection. There is now no doubt at all that affiliative relationships, where you feel friendly toward others, have an interest in the well-being of others, and feel that others are similarly interested in you, are extremely important for our mental and physical health.[23] It is sad that many governments simply don't understand this and are quite happy to maintain and even enhance economic systems that are moving in exactly the opposite direction.

The point is that mindfulness and compassion work together but from different positions. As depicted in figure 2.5, compassion helps us to reorganize our minds by generating particular motives and feelings, while mindfulness helps us to step back and disengage from emotional thinking loops that suck us in, thereby providing the stability and perspective which is the basis for insight. If we start at the lower level of the diagram, we begin with compassion as a basic motive; we commit ourselves to compassion, and this influences our thinking and gives focus and direction to mindfulness. On the upper level of the diagram, we might start with mindfulness, which helps us to stabilize the mind and lay the foundation for the emergence of our compassionate qualities. They work together.

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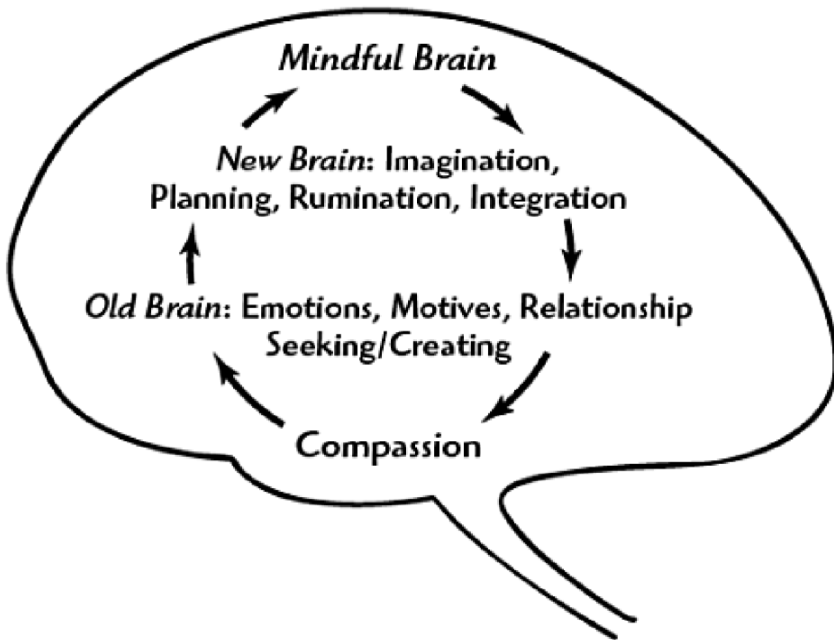

Figure 2.5 *Interactions of mindfulness and compassion with old and new brains*

Diagrams like this are useful but, obviously, the brain does not actually look like this, with the new brain clicked on top of the old like a Lego brick! Rather, distinguishing between the old and the new brain in this way is simply to help us think about how our minds work. Humans evolved a different kind of mind to other primates over two million years ago, and the differences in our mental abilities are obviously linked to physiological systems in the brain, which are extremely complicated to illustrate in a diagram such as this. What this simple diagram does illustrate, however, is how different *functions* of our minds interact and work together, from which different properties and competencies emerge.

As we noted earlier, compassionate motives are linked to part of the brain that has been associated with parental caring.[24] So compassion may be using old-brain systems, but of course our new-brain systems are vital for it too; for example, the capacity for empathy and the ability to imagine the thoughts and feelings of others are relatively new-brain capacities. The point and central theme of this chapter is that motivational systems organize the mind.

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Key Points

- Our brains and minds have been created in the flow of life and are built for survival and reproduction.
- Our values and motives have been shaped and fine-tuned by the circumstances in which we were born and grew up.
- So much of what we are has been completely outside of our control and is not our fault.
- We have a smart new brain that gives us amazing ways of thinking, imagining, planning, and having empathic insight.
- The way that our motives and emotions link up with these new-brain capacities can bring out both the best and the worst in us.
- This calls upon us to take responsibility for the fact that, without training and effort, our minds can be our own worst enemy.
- Standing back and recognizing this gives us an opportunity to cultivate those things within us that will bring us improved physical health, emotional well-being, and better social relationships.
- As recognized thousands of years ago, and percolating through many religions, a mind motivated by compassion can be a source of great wisdom and universal change.

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Emotional Systems

Motives guide us in life but they need emotions to *guide them*. For example, imagine you want to be a famous musician. You will give your energy to practicing regularly. You will experience positive emotions when your practice goes well but may feel frustrated if it doesn't; you will feel good when you get an offer to play a concert but feel bad when you are rejected. Emotions ebb and flow according to what's happening in relation to our motives and goals. Motives, like wanting to be a good parent or musician, can last a lifetime, while emotions, such as anger or excitement, come and go. As we will see, compassion is a motive —not an emotion—but it's linked to emotions in important ways because it also depends upon the ability to feel certain types or combinations of emotions.

Emotions play through the body according to how our motives are going. They give rise to feelings such as anger, anxiety, joy, pleasure, happiness, and lust. Emotions give texture to our lives: we feel love for our children, anxiety if something threatens them; anger at injustice; joy at success; excitement at a new opportunity; and desire for a sexual partner. Think what life would be like without emotions! You would have no feelings if you achieved your goals or if your house was knocked down; you would not be stirred by seeing your children do well or die; nothing would really matter. Life would be meaningless. This little thought experiment helps us see how central emotions are to our lives. We can of course feel more than one emotion in response to the same situation, and our emotions can often conflict with each other. Our emotions are the source of our most meaningful experiences in life, but they can also lie at the root of our deepest problems. Some theorists even think that emotion is the root of consciousness itself.

Our emotions can also have an impact on whether we develop our motives and goals further or whether we give up on them. Many of us know that in order to be successful we have to be able to keep going even when we are tired, experience setbacks, and have feelings of disappointment and frustration. So our motives and life goals will set us on course and our emotions will be like the weather we meet along the way. It matters greatly, therefore,

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how we come to understand the changing weather of our emotions as we travel through life and the degree to which we allow our emotions to determine how we are in the world.

Even though we have a "smart brain," our emotions can easily hijack it. One reason they can do this is because evolution has designed emotions to make animals behave in certain ways. There is no point in having a threat system that alerts you to a lion if there is not an immediate surge within the body to run like hell when a lion approaches. You don't want your smart-thinking brain slowing you down, weighing up whether the lion is a threat or not, whether it's eaten already, or whether your karate moves would be up to the task of stopping it! This type of thinking needs to be taken "off-line" so that the impulse to action is urgent. So some emotions come with a sense of urgency, and they can knock out the smart brain because they are *designed to take control* in these types of situations.

Problems with Emotions

Although emotions help to give our life meaning, they are not always easy to live with, and we have to learn how to recognize and deal with them as we grow up. For example, as babies, we can't really differentiate much more than between pleasure and pain; but by the time we become adults, we are aware that we can have many different types of emotion such as anxiety, fear, anger, disgust, sadness, joy, excitement, contentment, and happiness. We also recognize that we can have *blends of feelings*, experiencing more than one emotion at the same time; that emotions can conflict with each other (we can be angry about being anxious or anxious about being angry; we can be anxious about getting [over]excited). We can experience emotions when we absolutely don't want to (shaking with anxiety in an important interview or on a date, or getting angry with people we love and then feeling guilty). We can do things to deliberately stimulate our emotions such as watching an exciting film; and then of course some people use drugs and alcohol to try to regulate difficult emotions and feelings as well as to get high. Whereas some people might think it's okay to express anger, sadness, or affection, others can be frightened of expressing certain emotions. And some psychologists have shown that we can have emotions such as anger, anxiety, or even sexual desire that never quite reach our consciousness. We can also use our emotions to justify the way we think, even when our thoughts are quite irrational.[1]

Emotions are also central in our relationships. The emotions

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we experience when relating to somebody are crucial to how the relationship develops. We tend to find people who exude positive emotions and have what we call a sunny disposition attractive, whereas we might be less keen on people who are rather gloomy and critical. If we get disappointed in a relationship, we might try to do things to affect the emotions of the *other person* (e.g., try to generate more love, guilt, or even fear in them). Finally, many psychologists recognize that the way we think about situations and the interpretations we put on them, which may be linked to our past, play a major role in what emotions get stirred up in us and what we might ruminate on.[2]

So even though evolution has built our brains to be capable of developing and experiencing a range of emotions, it hasn't made life easy for us. This is a very important insight because as we engage with the path of mindful compassion, we are prepared for the fact that engaging with some of our emotions might be very tricky, even painful or frightening, and that's absolutely *not our fault*. Indeed, many mental health problems relate to how people experience and deal with their emotions. Also, if you think about it, many of the horrible things that happen in the world are a result of people just allowing their emotions to rule them.

Mindfulness (see chapter 7) is one of the most important skills in learning to recognize and understand our emotions rather than be carried away by them.[3] For this reason, it makes sense that before we start developing our mindfulness skills, we get to know more about how our emotions are designed and work through us. It's like looking at a map before we set out on a journey so that we will have some idea of what we're likely to encounter. Furthermore, understanding our emotions, where they come from and how they work, contributes to our understanding of compassion, as we will soon see.

Emotional Regulation Systems

Studies looking into how our brain works when it is experiencing emotions have revealed that we have at least *three types of emotion*.[4] Understanding these types of emotion can help us to understand how compassion can regulate and calm some of our more difficult emotions so that we feel more emotionally balanced within ourselves. This in turn helps to create compassionate feelings.

Now, we openly admit that we are simplifying things here a bit and that the neuroscience is less neat and straightforward than

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we are presenting here,[5] but what is important for the purposes of this book is seeing the overall picture so that we can understand where compassion has its roots and where it can get blocked.

Each type of emotion has evolved to do different things, but of course they interact in very complex ways, as shown in figure 3.1. We are going to refer to them as *emotional systems* because they are groups of emotion that have particular functions.

The three types of emotional systems are as follows:

- Our *threat and self-protection system* helps us detect and respond to threats and harms. It is the source of emotions like fear, anxiety, anger, jealousy, and disgust. When these emotions flush through us, they can direct our attention, thinking, and behavior in particular ways. For example, when we are anxious and our attention is focused on something that might be frightening to us, we might ruminate on this thing, turning it over and over in our mind, and we might behave in ways to try to avoid what we are anxious about, such as applying for a new job or meeting new people.

- Our *drive and resource-seeking system* helps us detect, be interested in, and take pleasure in securing important resources that help us survive and prosper, such as in finding food, sexual partners, friends, money, and careers. It is the source of emotions like excitement and pleasure. Again, when these emotions flush through us, they can direct our attention, thinking, and behavior in particular ways, related to that emotion.

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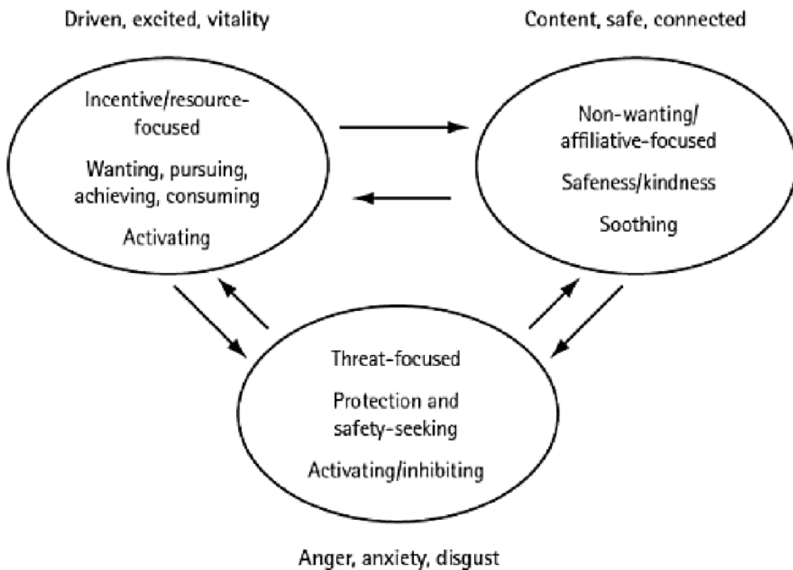

Figure 3.1 *Three types of affect-regulation systems*

Source: P. Gilbert. 2009. *The Compassionate Mind*. London: Constable & Robinson.

- Our *soothing/affiliation system* is linked to feelings of contentment in situations where we are not threatened or driven to get things we want. It is a source of emotions such as peaceful well-being, contentment, safeness, and feeling connected. These emotions tend to be gentler and slower acting, but when they move through us, they also influence our attention, thinking, and behavior in particular ways, such as opening our attention, softening anxiety, helping us to reason and reflect in more positive, gentler ways, and directing behavior toward slower, calmer actions.

Threat and Self-Protection System

All living beings need to detect threats and then do something about them. Plants curl their leaves to retain water when there are droughts. Insects fly away or burrow. Some animals freeze or flee. In other circumstances, threats are dealt with by threatening and fighting; this is especially the case with social threats (e.g., males challenging and fighting each other). In the flow of life, the functions of the threat system have been fundamental to our

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ability to detect and respond to threats, and as humans we inherit these old design features of quick detecting and rapid responding.[6]

This system helps us (as it does other animals) avoid or minimize harms and losses. It evolved to alert us to dangers and to gear up the body to take appropriate defensive actions when we need to. It protects us from the suffering we'd experience by becoming a hungry animal's lunch, falling off a cliff, getting beaten up because we've picked a fight with somebody twice our size, getting bitten by things that slither along the ground, or eating something that tastes bitter and makes us sick. That's why it's a *self-protection* system. It's designed to help us spot threats and deal with them quickly. We call it *self*-protection, but it of course extends to people we care about such as kin, friends, and at times the groups we belong to—we can feel anxious if they are threatened too.

Although this system is designed to protect us from suffering, it does so in a way that can actually *create* suffering. Pain is part of the threat system, and it evolved to alert us to damage to the physical body so that we would then protect that part of the body until it heals. People who do not experience pain—for example those with conditions associated with certain genes (a very rare condition of congenital insensitivity to pain)—are very vulnerable to serious injuries. Cases have been recorded of people with major cuts not realizing it and then getting infected, or even walking with broken ankles and bones, and doing themselves great damage in the long term.

So pain is a good example of how a system that has important adaptive features can also become a big liability. Our basic pain system can also give rise to states of agony that we can't do anything about. It makes it possible to be frightened of being in pain and, of course, that opens the avenue for people to deliberately exploit it and inflict pain (as in torture). Sadly, we are evolved to survive and reproduce—being happy or pain free is not part of the equation. Thus many living beings actually die in great pain unless they're lucky enough to have a stroke or heart attack so they die quickly, or are fortunate enough to be treated with anesthetics.

Wired into our threat systems is a range of emotions and action tendencies, such as anger with a desire to act aggressively, anxiety with a desire to run away or avoid, and disgust with a desire to get rid of or destroy. One such emotion is anxiety; it raises an internal alarm and causes us to run away if we are confronted by something or someone that could cause us harm or

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distress. In this way anxiety helps us to be careful. Let's explore anxiety by doing the following exercise. You might want to have a piece of paper so that you can make some notes as you do it. Try to approach the exercise in a light way and maintain a curious, friendly interest in how anxiety manifests in you.

Anxiety Exercise

Bring to mind a time recently when you felt anxious—perhaps it was when a cyclist wobbled out in front of your car, you put your hand in your pocket and discovered your wallet was gone, or an aggressive-looking drunk took an interest in you as you were walking down the street. Notice how fast anxiety can arise, how it feels in your body, how it affects your attention and focus, and then how it affects your thinking and behavior. Recall how fast your heart rate went up; you might have felt a churning in your stomach, you might have sweated, or your voice might have sounded funny. Your attention becomes narrowed and very focused on the threat and other things that might be of interest are ignored. This is the threat system kicking in.

Next, recall the kinds of thoughts that went through your mind and how they arose, even though you might not have wanted them to. Notice how they might spin around the thing that you're anxious about and how you might be focusing on the worst possible outcome. Just notice how your mind is being controlled by the anxiety. After a few moments, switch your attention to your behavior. What does your body want to do—run away, avoid, melt into the background, apologize, or cry?

Reflect on the fact that the way anxiety takes control of you is *not your fault*; it's what your mind's designed to do, and it will continue to operate in this way until you make efforts to

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train it and refocus your attention.[7] Even then, because anxiety is such an important part of our emotional system, we might learn how to manage our anxiety rather than stop it altogether.

Another important threat-protection emotion is anger. Anger allows us to respond when we are challenged, thwarted in pursuit of things we want, or need to defend ourselves. Whereas anxiety tends to be an emotion that moves us *away* from the source of threat, anger moves us *toward* it in order to subdue it or damage it in some way, thereby rendering it a lesser threat. Let's do a similar exercise with anger.

Anger Exercise

Bring to mind a time recently when you felt angry—perhaps somebody at work was unfairly critical of you or maybe you were angry at yourself for putting on weight. Notice how fast anger arose. Notice how your attention becomes narrowed and very focused on the things making you angry, while other things that might be of interest are ignored. For example, when we're very angry with our partners, we don't mind how much we might love them, at least not in that moment. Notice and recall how anger felt in your body; maybe you felt your heart racing or tightness in the chest or clenching of the fist. And as these physical experiences were running through you—how did the anger influence your thinking? Next consider the feelings in your body and what anger wants to do; if anger could be in control, what would you do—shout, slam the door, walk out, or something more? Notice how anger can pull your mind into ruminating about the thing you're angry about. Whether it's a rapid surge of anger or slow-burning frustration and irritation, notice how it wanted to take control of your mind. Remember that these things are not your fault; it's what anger is designed to do unless you make the effort to pay attention to it and work

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with it.[8]

In social situations we can sometimes feel a mixture of anxiety and anger. Anger empowers us to be assertive but also to put our foot down, shout, or even lash out. If it takes control, it will have its own way of reasoning that can seem very plausible at the time. The anxious part of us, though, might be thinking: *I'm going a bit far here; maybe part of the problem is my fault actually; this person will see something in me they won't like and maybe they'll reject me in the future. I don't like myself when I'm in this angry state of mind!* If anxiety and anger are balanced they will help each other, but often they are in conflict, as the next exercise demonstrates.

Anger vs. Anxiety Exercise

Bring to mind a situation in which you felt a mixture of emotions, in particular anger and anxiety. For example, it could be an unwanted argument with a loved one. Once you have got a sense of both the angry and anxious feelings, then think about what your angry self feels *toward* your anxious self. Does the angry self like your anxious self? Probably not much: it is typical for the angry self to be very contemptuous of the anxious self and see it as getting in the way. Do spend a moment breaking off from this book to really think about this in a curious way.

Now switch your attention. What does the anxious self think about the angry self?

It is possibly quite scared of the angry self. The anxious self knows that if left to its own devices, the angry self could be very destructive. It will protect you to the end of its days, it won't let anyone stand in your way, and it won't take nonsense from anyone, but because it's a very basic system in our brain, it's not terribly wise and it doesn't like working with anything that can constrain it. This is how the angry self is designed. Again none of this is our design or fault, but it is important to understand *the*

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relationship between our emotions—literally what they "think" and "feel" about each other. Mindfulness and compassion will help us recognize and hold these different parts of ourselves in balance. When they get out of balance, and our inner selves become involved in intense conflict, then people can begin to experience mental health problems. Some people can't acknowledge the depth of their rage toward people who they want to be loved by; some people use anger to keep people away and are unable to recognize within themselves a deep sense of sadness and grief, a yearning for love. Aggressive adolescents can often use anger like this because they may have been hurt in the past, so it's a way of defending themselves.

Disgust is another emotion associated with our threat-protection system. It is very useful because it's associated with spitting out and getting rid of toxic substances. If you put something bitter in the mouth of a baby, she will immediately spit it out because she is biologically oriented to do so. Disgust is often associated with bodily excretions or functions, and is designed to prevent contact with things that could contaminate or carry disease. We can have very strong feelings of contamination even when we know it's not logical. For example, would you live in the house of a serial murderer? Disgust emotions can have a very nasty side to them when aroused in certain situations. Disgust is often associated with feelings of badness, contamination, or sometimes even wickedness, and stimulates desires to avoid, cleanse, get rid of, or even exterminate. For example, many tyrants use the language of disgust when talking about their enemies, describing them as "subhuman," "a disease," or "vermin to be eradicated." We saw this during the Rwandan genocide in 1994, when Hutu extremists referred to the Tutsi minority as "cockroaches." Some people justify moral positions using the emotions of disgust, for example in regard to homosexuality.[9] So we have to be very cautious how we use these types of feelings to make moral judgments that guide our behaviors.

Self-disgust is also important because people can feel very bad and want to reject parts of themselves or even self-harm. Some years ago, Paul's research team found that people can actually come to hate themselves and experience strong feelings of disgust toward themselves, and that these feelings can be linked to quite serious mental health difficulties.[10] So, although disgust is an emotion that is often ignored, it is potentially one of the more powerful emotions when it comes to cruelty, both to ourselves and others. This is because it's associated with the

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desire to cleanse and eradicate—it can really push us into quite cruel behaviors.[11] When some Buddhist practitioners talk about certain kinds of emotions being like "poison," they are using the language and psychology of disgust, which may not be so helpful. We know what they mean—they are actually thinking about the *consequences* of acting on some emotions, such as anger, fear, disgust, or lust, but emotions *themselves* can't be a poison. The key thing with emotions is understanding and transforming them, not trying to cleanse or eradicate them, in part because these emotions are hardwired in our brain—we are designed to experience them—so we cannot simply "get rid of" them.

Disgust Exercise

You can do the same exercise with disgust as you have done with anxiety and anger—thinking about what disgusts you, then noticing how it directs your attention to focus on certain things, how it feels in your body, and how it seeks to control your thinking and behavior. You can be curious whether there are things about yourself, your body, and your feelings that you are rather "disgusted by" in the sense that you feel them to be bad and would like to "get rid of them, or get them out of you"; they may feel like a stain. These kinds of feelings can be common in people who are overweight, for example.

When you do the exercises above, you will gain insight into the fact that the emotions of the threat system can "flush" through us and literally take control of our attention, body, thinking, and behavior. Nobody wakes up and thinks: *I need to practice being more angry today* or *I need to practice being more anxious* or *A bit more self-disgust wouldn't go amiss!* That we still have these emotions is because they are part of our automatic threat-defense system.

This is where training in mindfulness-based compassion is so important because it enables us to notice how these emotions play out and to train our minds not always to fall prey to them. Sadly, we can see many people who simply surrender themselves to

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anger, and they can behave in ways that are very destructive to themselves and others.

Why the Threat System Gives Us a Hard Time

Although evolved for our protection, the threat self-protection system can give us a very hard time indeed. It is the source of many mental health problems, and even violence. This is because it's not designed for careful thinking; it's designed for fast reaction because that may save your life. If you are a rabbit munching away in a field and you hear a sound in the bushes, the best thing to do is to run away. Nine times out of ten, it is likely to be a false alarm—but that doesn't matter. So it's better to be oversensitive to threat and make mistakes that overestimate danger than to be the other way round, because sooner or later the tenth occasion will arrive, with the sound being a real predator this time. We call this "better safe than sorry" thinking.

Now your threat system was designed over millions of years in these conditions of high threat where predators were common and, if you got injured, there was no modern medicine to help you. There are very fast-acting pathways in your brain that, with the first flush of threat, bypass your frontal cortex and rational thinking.[12] So it's very important to realize that in fact your brain is actually *designed to make mistakes in certain contexts*.[13] It will overestimate danger for you; our ancestors who acted out of "better safe than sorry" survived, as did their offspring. Unfortunately, this tendency to overestimate threat is one of the reasons we have so many problems with anxiety—it's just very easy for our minds to go into anxiety mode. If we are prone to anxiety, it is not our fault, but likely to be a combination of the way our brains are and the things that have happened to us in our lives. This means that we will need to work to overcome these tendencies—as we will see in the practice section of this book.

Another way our threat system gives us a hard time is that it directs our attention in such a way that it blocks out positives. For example, going back to the little rabbit munching on one of the sweetest lettuces it could find and maybe eyeing Miss Bunny close by, if a signal indicating "possible predator" appears on his radar, he needs to lose interest in the lettuce and Miss Bunny immediately and run. The threat system immediately turns off any interest in anything else. If you watch birds feeding on your lawn you will see that most of their time is spent looking around

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anxiously and gingerly approaching the food rather than actually eating it, often flying away before they do. And as we saw before, more problems arise when we get stuck in those old-brain/new-brain loops where threat emotions are fueling our thinking and then those thoughts fuel our emotions, which continue to flush through us—even when the threat is long gone. The result is that not only can we continue to feel bad long after a threat has gone, but we will also continue to block out positive experiences.

Here's another example that indicates how our threat system can block compassionate awareness. Imagine you're out Christmas shopping and you go into ten shops. In nine of the shops, the assistants are extremely pleasant and actually help you buy presents for less money than you were planning to spend. You're really pleased. But then you go into one shop where the assistant is chatting to a friend, has very little interest in you, appears bored and at times rude, and, on top of it all, tries to sell you something that's of inferior quality but at a higher price than you are willing to pay. When you go home with your presents, who do you talk to your partner about? Will you say, "I love Christmas because it reminds me that 90 percent of the people I run into are so helpful, kind, and imbued with the festive spirit"? Unlikely—the threat system will make you focus on the one person who was unhelpful, and you may end up speaking to your partner throughout dinner about how rude salespeople are these days!

Gaining insight into how our threat emotions work and often conflict with each other lays the basis for learning to relate to them mindfully and compassionately. It's important that we are not harsh or critical of how our emotions operate, because they're all built into us by evolution—they are not our design and not our fault. When we give up blaming and shaming ourselves, we can step back and genuinely take responsibility to work with them as best we can. This is a key component of training in mindful compassion.

Drive and Resource-Seeking System

We have seen that threat emotions help us avoid harms and losses. However, we are also motivated to acquire things: to find food, shelter, sexual partners, and to get on in the world. Here positive emotions are very important for gearing us up to get on with these life tasks. However, when it comes to positive emotions, it is crucially important to distinguish between two very different types of positive emotion.[14]

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The first positive emotion system is the one that most people are very familiar with, namely the *excitement and drive system*. It's the one that our society focuses on a great deal. It is linked to achievement and acquiring and consuming things. The second type of positive emotion is very different because it doesn't create that hyped-up sense of drive; rather it is associated with a more peaceful sense of well-being, contentment, and connection to the people and world around us. This *soothing system* has an important role in helping us regulate and calm down some of our threat-based emotions and keep our excessive drive-based emotions in check. We will look at this positive emotional system shortly—but for now, we will focus on the excitement and drive-based emotions associated with seeking, getting, achieving, and acquiring.

As we noted, the drive- and resource-seeking system evolved to motivate us to go out and achieve the things that are important for our survival and reproduction. So when we encounter things that could be helpful to us, we are motivated to pursue them, and if we acquire them, we get a buzz of pleasure. This buzz means that we're likely to try to do the same thing again. Psychologists call it *positive reinforcement*, but the important thing to identify is what gives us the feeling of the "positiveness." It turns out that it's linked to a brain chemical called dopamine and to an increase in the activating system in the body called the *sympathetic nervous system*. The sympathetic nervous system has effects on our muscles and hearts because it gears us up for action. It can be activated when we are under threat as well as when we are excited because it is a sort of "let's go" system. In contrast, the *parasympathetic* system does the opposite; it slows us down and helps us to feel calmer and quieter so we're not activated to take actions, or *to do* things.

Now imagine that you win $100 million in the lottery. What do you think will happen in your body? You are likely to become very excited and even agitated; you will have a rapid (sympathetic-driven) heart rate and a cascade of racing thoughts; you may become quite giggly; and you may have a lot of trouble sleeping for a night or two because of your elevated dopamine and sympathetic arousal. When really good things happen to us, we get a big buzz from the excitement and drive system. Passing an exam that is important to us or going on a date with someone new can give us a buzz of pleasure. We can also get something of a buzz from *anticipating* good things happening. This is where our new, smart brain comes in: just as we can ruminate on worries and fears, so too we can focus on hoped-for outcomes and imagine how we will feel if we pass an exam or win a

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competition. We can also spend a lot of time ruminating and thinking about how to achieve these goals because they are associated with good feelings.

Of course the more we live in the daydreams of success and the more unrealistic we allow our fantasies to become, the harder the comedown will be when we encounter our everyday reality and things don't go quite so well; also, of course, the threat system will then be activated all the more as we fail to live up to our dreams. And then there are some people who don't bother with all the effort of achieving things to feel good and look for shortcuts to these feelings. They take drugs such as cocaine and amphetamines as a way of getting that energized, positive feeling. Unfortunately, these drugs are highly addictive and the comedown is pretty horrible.

There have been many concerns that Western societies and competitive businesses are overfocused on elevating the excitement- and drive-based emotions associated with pride in accomplishment, owning, and controlling. This striving, getting, having, achieving, and owning is almost like an addiction—partly because we are constantly overstimulating our dopamine and sympathetic nervous systems.[15] The constant pursuit of material possessions or money, status, or sexual relationships, and so on, can be problematic. Indeed, some people can *only* feel good if they're constantly achieving or satisfying certain drives. Spend some time watching television advertisements over the next few days and notice how many of them appeal to excitement states: excited, smiling people getting hyped up for all kinds of reasons related to the goods and services on offer. This is particularly true for advertisements aimed at younger people, and it creates a climate in which people believe that this is what good feelings or the good life are all about—simply getting hyped up, having a good time, and so on. So while the drive system is important to achieve certain things, we have to be careful that it doesn't get out of balance so that we become overly focused on achieving and feel frustrated and depressed when we do not succeed.

One consequence of materialistic self-focus is that it undermines our interests and efforts to build, be part of, and contribute to, our social communities. Indeed, some people can become so work-focused that they hardly get to know their neighbors. This materialistic and competitive striving and needing "to have and own" has been linked to deteriorating mental health, especially in young people.[16] In addition, we can feel under increasing pressure to strive to achieve, to keep up, to prove ourselves, to do more for less; we may fear not being able

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to keep up. Paul's research team has shown that fearful striving to avoid being seen as inferior or not up to the job is actually linked to mental health difficulties, especially depression, anxiety, and stress.[17] There is increasing worry about the rates of liver disease and alcohol-related problems because middle-class and older people are drinking more. But if you talk to them, what you find is that their busy lives are so stressful and exhausting that when they come home, all they want to do is open a bottle of wine to unwind and relax. It is very important that medical agencies understand the link between our lifestyles, stress, and drinking and not simply think that the solution is to raise the price of alcohol. So once again, it's a question of balance and direction, and again the Western mind seems very out of balance when it comes to competitive psychology—and we haven't touched on the fact that it's our excitement and drive system, our competitive psychology, that will gobble the Earth's resources if allowed to, leaving polluted environments in its wake.

Perhaps one of the most serious consequences of an out-of-control excitement and drive system is that when opportunities arise for acquiring large amounts of resources, we can be driven to become deeply immoral and corrupt. Much has been written on the banking crisis, the excitement of bankers doing deals and getting carried away with opportunities to make masses of money —and all of us can get caught up in that. The problem is that individuals get locked into the drive system and simply do not pay attention to the potential damage they can do. Social psychology tells us that this is not because people are evil; it's because this is what happens in certain social groups if they are allowed to do these corrupt and immoral things, because the social group creates the values and contexts for people's behavior. This is why governments are so important for compassionate regulations. These need to be put in place, perhaps by organizations like the government to encourage people to behave in more morally and socially aware ways. Without them, people can behave destructively. Harnessed, drives are helpful and essential, but unregulated, they can be extremely damaging. Excessive drive leads to excessive self-focus, as well as immoral and corrupt practices because of the enticements of such practices, as has been shown in various investigations into top businesses that have fallen from grace. And of course countries have been ruined because of corruption, with their populations left destitute and in fear because the people who are supposed to protect them are involved in the corruption too. Frankly, without regulation either from the outside or within our own moral codes, drives can lead to the worst types of greed and corrupt

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immoralities, which people will even try to justify.

So while all too human, unregulated drives grossly distort our sense of our common humanity, where some individuals are worth billions, justifying it and believing they are “worth it,” while others just down the street may not have enough to eat. In our hearts we know this is simply wrong. Pandering to our collective drive system has led to it being out of control in modern society, as exemplified by the current, widely held belief in the value of unregulated competition, and it’s difficult to know how to restrain it. Unregulated drive can promote callousness and indifference toward those who suffer.

The issue for us is to recognize how our economics, politics, business models, media, entertainment, and education systems are constantly stimulating the competitive mind and excitement- and drive-based emotions and how this will have consequences for how we think about ourselves, get to “know ourselves,” and relate to each other. The problem is not just with us as individuals; it’s the way social systems work and how our minds both generate these systems and then become trapped by them. We end up feeding the very systems that are causing us problems, and this is because we’ve lost control of the systems we’ve created. Lacking both mindfulness and compassion, we simply go along with it because this is what our drive emotions push us into—constantly striving for states of pleasure. So if we keep in mind the Four Noble Truths, and if suffering is really the focus of our attention, then mindful compassion is not just “training our own minds or meditating for personal benefit” but about really opening our eyes to these drive-linked realities. This brings us back to the Buddha’s concept of the Middle Way.

Compassion enables us to understand the importance of regulation and the rule of law—it is not just an appeal for everybody to be kind, but the recognition that it is our social context that can bring out the best as well as the worst in us. As we have said before, if we the authors had grown up in violent drug gangs, we would not be writing a book like this! So we will need to find ways in which we recognize the limits of our individuality, that we are all partly socially constructed and need new political ways of thinking that understand this in a deep way (beyond the small differences between political left and right), and begin courageously to build the kind of society that we want our children and our grandchildren to grow up in.

Now it might seem that we are giving drive emotions a very bad name. But just like the threat emotions, they have an important role when understood and wisely approached. Drive

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and excitement emotions are important in affiliation—the joys and pleasures we get out of being with others and sharing with others. In this respect, it is useful to keep in mind that compassion can also harness drive and excitement emotions to help a person become highly motivated, enthusiastic, and determined in pursuing compassionate goals, such as finding a cure for cancer or working for a just society. What is so important, then, is the motive underlying what we are driven to do. What do you become *excited* about and what gives you *energy*? Is it making money, killing your enemies, scanning the Internet for pornography, shopping, going clubbing with friends, or working for a compassionate cause? Of course at different times an answer might be "all of these," but then the question comes—which do you really want to focus on and make more prominent in your life? Emotions can attach themselves to very different motives, and for this reason, motives are crucial. In the context of mindful compassion training, this means that we become increasingly aware of our motives and desires, for example, to excel in a career, make money, impress other people, be accepted and not rejected, avoid shame, and help others as best we can. What we place at the center of what we want and seek in the world will determine the direction in which our drive-based emotions will take us.

Drive Emotions and Our Social Relationships

For the majority of us, the most important things associated with drives are our relationships. Imagine winning a $100 million lottery jackpot, but then being told that you will have to live the rest of your life on a desert island. The island will have everything you want: a wonderful home, comfortable beds, swimming pools, saunas, fancy sports cars to drive around on hundreds of miles of empty roads, wonderful scenery, boats to sail the crystal-blue seas, the best food in the world, and a perfect climate—it is a place where every physical desire can be satisfied! However, the catch is that you will never see another human being again, you will never know affection and love, and you will never be able to talk and be intimate with anyone. Would you make that trade-off? Or would you prefer to stay where you are, relatively poor perhaps but socially connected?

This is extraordinary when you think about it because it brings home to us just how important relationships are, even though we live in a world that constantly promotes the fact that

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