

*“People who are healthier and safer are more productive. Any attitude contrary to this is mindblind, lacking the ability to imagine the reality of others. Empathy is essential for compassionate capitalism, one where human misery and alleviation carry weight.”*

Social Intelligence; Daniel Goleman

Individuals, communities and societies that lack compassion suffer from social anosognia, which is the lack of insight into one's own inappropriateness. Compassion stimulates kindness and respect for the rights of others and personifies character with grace. Without compassion, a person or society is grace-less, i.e. with no soul.

What about us makes us compassionate? When and how does one learn to be compassionate? Is it a biological fact or a trait one develops as part of personality? What does compassion achieve and what are its downs? What impact does it have when it exists and when it does not?

Last night, when I flew back from Islamabad, the plane was packed. I was on the aisle seat with men on the two seats to my left. The one immediately next to me insisted on spreading himself very wide to reach for his seatbelt and, of course, touched me several times in the process. I kept squeezing in the other direction, but since passengers were still boarding, I would get bumped by them from the aisle. So I started shrinking into myself, hoping the man will become a gentleman for the rest of the flight. Yet, he insisted that the armrest on my side was the one he had to lean on throughout the flight, indulging in several more brushes against me. Since I couldn't change my seat, there was none, I chose to stand at the back of the plane for most of the flight.

On another occasion, there was a foreigner sitting next to me in a similar position. Not once during the flight did he even come close to putting his arm on the armrest, let alone ever come close to brushing against my arm. Even when he had to use his seatbelt, he leaned far forward to make enough space to grab the two ends of the belt that are, for some reason, placed at a cross on the seat which then one struggles to take out from one's underneath.

This is a simple example of being civilized, which is the result of compassion. Compassion is a

habit that comes from practice but is an endowment we are all born with – a potential that has to be extracted to be used.

Genetic scientists have pinpointed the compassion real estate in the brain. It is the middle brain, the one above our reptilian brain and below the Prefrontal Cortex, the executive centre. The reptilian brain has learnt and holds information and perceptions since mankind came into existence and enables us to survive. It is selfish and egoistic and is incapable of rationalizing or being compassionate.

The Prefrontal Cortex is the power-centre of our intelligence, where we set goals, make plans and decisions. It enables us to do analysis and to have foresight. It is this part of the brain that is 'educated' in schools with 16 or more years of theory.

The centre brain is called the social brain. It has the ability to make connections with self and others. It comprises mainly of mirror neurons that reflect. For example, when someone smiles at you, you automatically smile back (you or even a child of 6 months). It is this brain that has picked up every word, sound and action ever made since you were born and captured those pictures and videos, with soundtrack, as part of its repertoire - forever. What you do today is 90% what has been recorded here.

It is this middle brain that produces compassion. But it has to be enabled to do so. The ability exists, yet it must be refined with the right pictures, videos and soundtracks. This process is very rightly expressed in Urdu as *tarbiyyat* or grooming. Genetic scientists claim that if this middle brain is not developed from babyhood, till the age of 3 or 5 at the most, and, since this brain has direct and innumerable connections with the rest of the brain, with neurons going up to your intelligence and down to your animal brain; all features of the intelligent brain become useless and the animal brain takes over. All that education is wasted and we end up doing what we know is wrong. We have knowledge of the 'right', but our behavior is 'wrong'.

The animal brain is angry, hungry, afraid and horny. If it says, "I am hungry," and your social brain lacks compassion, it will not connect with the upper brain to receive information on how to earn the food. You will steal. The guy sitting next to me in the plane with the sole purpose of touching me, was led by his animal brain. His intelligence could not be accessed to explain the discomfort he is causing me. His compassion was disabled. In the second case, the gentleman put himself into an uncomfortable position to give me my right and respect. Compassion makes you respect the rights of others and, therefore, take responsibility for it. As a result, authenticity,

sincerity and ownership develops.

We women often see guys starring at us when in the bazaar. Many make direct obnoxious comments and offers. Others will go to the extent of physical abuse, the level of which can be sexual harassment. They are all obeying the commands of the animal brain, which has taken over their behavior. Most of the time they are not even aware that they are staring. When visiting a zoo, I've seen the same look in the eyes of monkeys. So low can we be on the stage of evolution.

In any human interaction, the same is true. When you, as a boss, refuse to listen to the idea of a junior, knowing it is a good idea but, if you agree or accept, it will belittle you, that is your ego taking over. When you do not thank another, or say sorry for your mistake; when you get offended or defensive; when you want appreciation but cannot give it; when you do not trust others; when you are unable to respect another or your environment; when you don't stand in line to wait your turn; when you talk about yourself only, being over-absorbed with the self, and are not interested in the other; when you fill your plate with food and waste it; when you stub out your cigarette on the floor or litter; when you steal someone's idea and do not attribute it to him/her; when you talk about others behind their back; when you are rude, demeaning and disgraceful; when you discriminate against people based on their ethnicity, religion, race, color, economic status; at all times you lack compassion. Such societies cannot flourish or progress. Mostly it is others who will take them over or they will, over time, shrivel, implode and become extinct.

Compassion is the state of mind that produces harmony. Here, your intra and interpersonal relationships are integrated and aligned. The linkage with yourself and others is strong yet respectful of their distinct characteristics. At the banks of the river of compassion are two states of mind: Chaos and rigidity. Lack of compassion can either put you into a state of chaos; the indicators of which are confusion, lack of integrity, dishonesty and behavior that is misaligned with Values. At the other bank, you can become rigid; the indicators of which are depression, negativity, laziness, defensiveness, rebellion and extremism. It is only when you are in harmony, that you can achieve inner security; the indicators of which are confidence, trust and faith.

Like with anything out of balance, too much compassion can be dangerous. When we feel the other's pain too much, it can handicap us and them. We can get into a state of flight, freeze or fight, with unexpected and unwanted results.

Compassion must lead to positive action. If my colleague has a problem and I get overwhelmed by it, my reaction may make the situation worse. Or, if I jump in and solve her problem, that is not compassion. When I help her, I make her dependent on me. Instead, when I show faith in her ability to solve it, I enable her to do more. So, I feel the pain but must not incapacitate her by 'taking over'. My compassion must bring to fore my sincerity and conviction to cooperate and commune and steer toward a richer state of being.

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