

## Sky Mind Is Where We Find Each Other

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This paper proposes a psychological model of altruism that is rooted in contemplative practice. I begin with the current state of mainstream social psychology. Here there is a need for models that normalize compassionate love and altruism rather than assume that only exceptional individuals can experience them regularly. In response to that need I propose a contemplative model of mind where "mind" refers to heart-mind and the immediate qualities of experience present in the moment. Finally, I briefly introduce a three-level map of experience that points to the accessibility of compassionate love at all times.

### The Field of Social Psychology

The psychology of compassionate love is necessarily a social matter, so it makes sense to ask about its place in the field of social psychology. Social psychology textbooks make it clear that it does not fit in the areas of social cognition or social influence, but an easy fit is found in the area of social relations within the topics of altruism and close relationships. By the way, this section is almost always found towards the end of the book after the chapters on prejudice and aggression. The subtle message is that altruism and compassionate love are secondary topics not essential to the way the field of social psychology defines itself. The implicit message is that social psychology, like our culture, sees altruism and compassion as extraordinary or non-normative. In other words, while we all admire altruism, we do not necessarily

aspire to embody it. Dan Batson's work is a notable exception to this marginalization of altruism. His empathy-altruism hypothesis propounds that "true altruism" as a goal in itself is **possible** even though there are also many egoic reasons why we might help. Over the past few decades, Batson has tested the "true altruism" hypothesis against several competing claims of egoic motivation and has accumulated a convincing mountain of evidence that true altruism is indeed possible and even common.

If we look into our own experience in social settings, we can see that compassionate love is the basis for all our close relationships if not all of our relationships. Close relationships, in turn, are the essential element in most of our emotions, pointing to the centrality of love and compassion in our moment-to-moment thoughts and experience. In other words, thoughts and emotions related to love are central to our inner lives, in contrast to the amount of attention they receive in the social psychology literature. Love, or at least attraction, an aspect of love, is what brings us into the world, nurtures and sustains us and gives us meaning and enjoyment in life. On a personal level, we hold our relationships accountable to a standard of love that we feel to be essential, without which there would be no relationships at all. Social psychology as a field paints a more neutral – we might say alienated - picture of social life and sees altruism and love as domestic topics belonging to the category of close relationships but not to the more general category of all relationships. In other words, social psychology views the generic person as ideally neutral except to important family and friends.

The field of social psychology provides empirically supported insights into ways in which we humans distance ourselves from, label and thereby harm each other. You might say that currently the field of social psychology provides a large set of excuses as to why we are all not humanitarians. Concepts such as stereotyping, the fundamental attribution error, ingroup-outgroup distinctions and groupthink have been tested in well-designed studies and accepted as psychological realities. However, when we examine these concepts together, an interesting trend emerges. Two features seem to underlie most of these conceptual excuses for harming each other: **arousal** and **mindlessness**. That is, we tend to use automatic labels and act harmfully when we are stressed or angry, and these negative reactions are most likely to occur when our attention is passive, for example when we are distracted or when we have no investment in the situation, as in most laboratory studies.

### Contemplative Perspective

Contemplative or meditative practices offer techniques that have been found effective for millennia among practitioners from diverse cultures and traditions. These practices have demonstrated effects on both the mindlessness and arousal that are key features of the negative social attitudes and behaviors reducing access to compassionate love. As antidotes to mindlessness, all contemplative practices cultivate awareness or mindfulness with active attention oriented to the present moment, the immediate felt qualities of experience. Contemplative practices also work with arousal via breath and body awareness. Because these practices are associated with religions, the secular world is reluctant to adopt them.

### The Person-Situation Debate

The popular impression is that to become compassionate and loving means we need to overcome negative tendencies that are caused by our personalities and/or the social situations surrounding us and that extraordinary belief and commitment are required to overcome these powerful forces.

The famous "person-situation debate" initiated by Walter Mischel in 1968 has helped to organize the fields of personality and social psychology into separate camps with competing views. For those with a person focus, social or situational factors are viewed as error variance in explaining altruism, and for those with a situationist perspective, individual difference or personality variables are viewed as error variance. Solutions to this controversy usually point to an interaction between person and situation variables, thus taking both into

account. Other solutions invoke mediating variables such as beliefs, attitudes, expectations and other cognitive or emotional states such as fear or happiness. For example, Batson's research emphasizes the importance of motives in understanding helping behavior.

The contemplative perspective points to an alternative view. As I mentioned earlier, contemplative practice looks to the immediate, often subtle felt qualities of experience. With contemplative practice, thoughts or concepts are ignored or seen through so that the totality of experience can be encountered directly with a panoramic perspective. (This is often called "big mind" in contrast to the "small mind" that focuses solely on mind's contents.) In the terms of social psychology, the contemplative perspective shifts the focus from personality traits and situational constraints which give rise to mediating thoughts, motives and feelings to the qualities of the experiencing mind itself (e.g., openness, spaciousness, active vs. passive attention, rigidity, etc.) that characterize and influence our experience of each other. This is a shift in focus from the contents of mind, such as beliefs or expectations that the cognitive perspective informs, to the qualities of mind itself, independent of its contents that the contemplative perspective informs. Mind here is synonymous with experience or field of experience. Whereas mind itself is usually the background while thoughts are the foreground, contemplative practice reverses this orientation by foregrounding mind itself.

Foregrounding mind itself leads to insight about how the mind and its qualities influence experience. For example, a rigid, closed mind leads to

thinking in terms of simple categories without looking further, and that leads to stereotyping. When we foreground mind itself, our perspective is vast, you might even say limitless, and this panoramic view allows us to examine where thoughts come from rather than entertaining this as a philosophical question. We can be surprised to learn that we can have stereotyped thoughts that we do not even agree with that seem to arise from nowhere and stay with us for just seconds or even less before we dismiss them as ridiculous. When we actually notice this happening, we have a mind that is open and not reactive. It then becomes obvious that it is helpful to cultivate certain qualities of mind via both contemplative practice itself and its analogue practices in everyday life (e.g., remembering to pause, relax and open in moments throughout our day.) Interestingly, as I said before, these practices are antidotes to the automaticity or mindlessness and also the arousal found in antisocial thoughts and responses.

In psychology we do not have an adequate vocabulary or measures to describe and assess the subtle and varied qualities of mind that are important to the contemplative perspective. Ways of describing qualities of mind vary from those that are most related to the contents of mind such as emotions and affects to those that are content-free. Content-free qualities of mind include openness, softness/pliability/flexibility, attention focused broadly or narrowly, clarity, spaciousness, immediacy and inclusiveness. These can be subtle and difficult to articulate. Just as contemplative practice opens our awareness to these qualities, allowing a new vocabulary of precision and clarity about these states to emerge, so too a contemplative perspective in psychology will allow us to

examine these states via empirical methods. (By the way, William James, the so-called founder of American psychology, put forth a method he called “radical empiricism” that foreshadowed the emergence of such a contemplative perspective.)

When we shift to examining these qualities of mind or experience that occur in moments rather than enduring traits or aspects of the surrounding situation, we are on the way to a psychological model that is considerably more optimistic than the field of social psychology usually offers. Contemplative practices offer skillful methods for cultivating those qualities of mind that enhance compassion either by simply cultivating mindfulness that is the antidote to stereotyping and other habitual patterns of reaction or by practices that cultivate a loving attitude directly. The contemplative perspective focuses on the plasticity of mind available to all regardless of personality or situational variables. Rather than viewing compassionate love and equanimity as qualities of exceptional people, the contemplative perspective points to the accessibility of these prosocial mind states in everyday life. In the lives of so-called average people, there are many moments of generosity, openness, acceptance, kindness and altruism. Although these are generally expressed more towards family and friends, we can think of many moments of tenderness between strangers. In fact, it is not difficult to imagine that even the most hardened criminals, who are below average in terms of prosocial motives or personality traits, have such moments of tenderness and connection, even if it is only with a beloved pet. These are natural moments of mindfulness and involve the same orientation to

the present moment that is cultivated in contemplative practice. It is interesting to note that love, interest and attention seem to go together, and when you find one of these mind states, the other two are also usually present. The fact that everyone experiences such moments means that everyone can cultivate them. If the field of social psychology were to promote the view that one can cultivate a loving quality of mind in many if not all moments, it would move beyond the stagnant view that personality or situational constraints are driving our experience.

The shift in focus to moments and qualities of experience allows us to examine acts of caring and the qualities of mind that accompany those acts. One quality of mind that accompanies acts of kindness is happiness. Alice Isen's research on the effects of happiness or contentment on altruistic helping demonstrates the relationship between happiness and helping. But this research is usually interpreted with a situationist lens: desirable situations are seen as the cause of the happiness that leads to helping. The contemplative perspective simplifies this view to say that happiness itself is both the cause and result of helping and that happiness can be cultivated independent of a particular situation. This is illustrated by the value in many contemplative communities of "happiness for no reason," or happiness independent of circumstances.

Because these qualities of experience can be cultivated with extensive positive effects on prosocial feeling and behavior, it seems worthwhile to integrate contemplative practice into the local culture of schools and organizations. I've been presenting the contemplative perspective in this paper



without mentioning the religious traditions in which these practices originated. While the practices are typically taught in religious contexts, this paper demonstrates that religious language and belief are not needed to understand and value contemplative practice. Contemplative methods can be viewed psychologically as ways of cultivating desirable mind states or as modes of inquiry to examine experience directly without verbal mediation. Because contemplative practices shift our attention from the contents of mind or thought to mind or experience itself, they offer a powerful set of methods to examine our inner life or experience directly without the usual beliefs and expectations that inadvertently limit our view. Contemplative methods can be applied to all areas of experience. For example, in terms of self-image or identity, contemplative methods of inquiry allow us to examine who we are independent of who we think we are.

### A Map of Experience

The contemplative perspective involves a reversal of the usual way the mind holds concepts, with thoughts in the foreground and mind or experience in the background. This background foreground shift points to a new view of psychological functioning. Introducing the contemplative perspective into social psychology is both powerful in terms of potential for cultivating compassionate love **in all moments** and ordinary in terms of its accessibility to all people **independent of personality or situations.**

Now I'd like to sketch out a map that clarifies the relation between the usual view of human nature in social psychology and a contemplative view that

points to a place for spirituality in psychological terms. Although this map has three levels, the most important distinction is between the second and third levels.

The first level, passive reactivity, involves the mindlessness that I mentioned earlier accompanies stereotyping, prejudice, scapegoating and other forms of social reactivity. In this first level, passive attention is easily captured by impulses or events. This is the level of automatic unexamined thoughts and behaviors, and it is this level that describes many of the negative phenomena of social psychology that I've talked about. As an aside, there are meditative practices that work with the powerful energy that often accompanies level one reactivity (e.g., anger or sexual attraction) by bringing the mindfulness one has already established in practice together with the energy of reactivity to fuel heightened awareness and insight. But these practices are tricky and often harmful when used by underprepared meditators.

The second level could be called "fair-mindedness." This is usually considered to be the only antidote to the first level. Level two involves deliberate adherence to values such as reciprocity and mutuality. There is careful consideration of who and what matters. In level two, the mind is objective, an obvious improvement over the mindlessly subjective and reactive mind of level one. Education, both religious and secular, attempts to make access to this level prominent in experience, for example, the popular admonition to "Think before you act." Level two contains active values that are chosen and promoted rather than the passive reactive or hedonistic values of level one.

Level two contains all of our concepts and examined beliefs and attitudes. Functioning at this level in most moments is considered to be the goal of education and socialization more generally.

Just as movement from level one to level two involves a shift from a emotional/reactive to a conceptual rational/deliberate mode of inquiry, level three involves a shift from the conceptual mode of level two to an open inclusive inquiry, an inquiring into experience with “bare attention” or simply noticing. Movement from level two to level three involves a foreground/background shift, where concepts are not eliminated but placed in the background. Level three is “sky mind” and entails attention to the totality and immediacy of experience cultivated in contemplative practice. It is called sky mind because it is like taking the entire conceptual apparatus of thoughts and logic of level two outdoors, into an outdoor perspective or bigger view. The frame (mind) can even become so big that it seems to disappear. Whereas rational logic and careful attention to detail are the qualities of mind found on the second level, the third level qualities of mind include the following:

1. openness, spaciousness, vastness
2. relatedness, oneness, a feeling of kinship with others, intimacy, feeling connected [Note: No need to deliberately “think before I act” when awareness is truly at this level. At the level of sky mind, one’s own interests are inseparable from the welfare of others. One views oneself if at all as simply another “other.”
3. spontaneity, immediacy, trust in oneself, confidence
4. ineffability, indeterminacy, don’t-know mind, no preconceived ideas

(See handout for a more elaborate overview of the three levels.)

Within such a panoramic view, multiple logics and paradoxes can be held without foreclosure. Whereas level two is about verbally mediated thought, level three is about direct experience, the immediate experience of the present moment. Whereas level two is cultivated via education, level three is cultivated via contemplative practice, especially practices that foster openness and connection in addition to awareness. Whereas level two involves abstract concepts that have opposites, such as good vs. bad, at the level of sky mind, there is simply a direct experience of goodness-with-no-opposite because this goodness is not a concept but rather an experience. (Experiences cannot have opposites.)

Practices that cultivate level three qualities of mind include meditation and religious practices of contemplation, prayer, devotion and sacred rituals that cultivate pure perception or sacramental vision. There are also secular contemplative practices such as beholding beauty, becoming a mindful parent or any mindful devotion that expands one's view beyond the personal. One simple practice that is familiar to all is the sky-gazing meditation, mingling awareness with the vastness of sky, that children do naturally on the beach or other outdoor places. In fact, many of us experience this state of wakeful openness when we relax outdoors on vacation. We usually attribute the spaciousness and openness of mind we experience to the place and circumstances of a carefree moment in nature, but this quality of mind can be cultivated through practice. When we shift to realizing that this openness is a quality of mind that can be cultivated

rather than of the place or our personality, we can see the possibility of sustaining openness in all moments. A social psychology that includes the possibility of a third level, rather than viewing the highest level of psychological functioning as level two, would look very different from that currently practiced and described in texts and journals. This is because the contemplative perspective does not view mindlessness as normative and insists that openness and compassionate love are ordinary and accessible.

I mention this sky gazing practice or openness meditation because I have been studying this method in my lab over the past few years. We now have the results of six experiments comparing a meditation group with a control group. Even with naïve participants who have low motivation for contemplative practice, the meditation group in this series of studies has shown greater acceptance of a “difficult” protagonist, greater empathy, and a greater willingness to help someone in need than the control group. These studies demonstrate that even with only two 12-minute meditation sessions, there is a clear impact of sky-gazing meditation on prosocial thoughts and behavior.

### References

**C. Daniel Batson's** empathy-altruism hypothesis (There are many empirical articles by Batson in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* and others):

Batson, C. D. (1990). How social an animal?: The human capacity for caring. *American Psychologist*, 45 (3), 336-346.

Batson, C. D., Sager, K., Garst, E., Kang, M., Rubchinsky, K. & Dawson, K. (1997). Is empathy-induced helping due to self-other merging? *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 73, 495-509.

For **Walter Mischel's** view of the impact of the person-situation debate, see:

Mischel, W. (2003). Challenging the traditional personality psychology paradigm. In R. J. Sternberg (Ed.), *Psychologists Defying the Crowd: Stories of Those Who Battled the Establishment and Won*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.

For further information about **contemplative practices** from many religious and secular traditions, see the website for the Center for Contemplative Mind in Society, Northampton, Massachusetts (Mirabai Bush, Director):  
[www.contemplativemind.org](http://www.contemplativemind.org)

For information about **sky-gazing** meditation, specifically the technique used for my meditation research studies, see **Lama Surya Das's** teaching of meditation techniques from the Tibetan Buddhist Dzogchen tradition (website:  
[www.dzogchen.org](http://www.dzogchen.org)):

Surya Das, Lama (1997). *Awakening the Buddha Within: Tibetan Wisdom for the Western World*. New York: Broadway Books.

Surya Das, Lama (1999). *Awakening to the Sacred: Creating a Spiritual Life from Scratch*. New York: Broadway Books.

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## Level 1: Ignorant Simplicity, Reactivity

Ignorant of distinctions, simple minded, appearance-driven, lacking detail, concrete, egocentric reasoning, dependent on others/experts, simply dichotomies, reactive/irrational, hedonistic, egocentric reasoning. [Education especially in methods of analysis, critical thinking and research methods opens door to Level 2.]

## Level 2: Complexity, Thinking, Concepts

Contents of mind including values, beliefs, self-concept, logic, conceptual elaborations, finer and more hierarchical distinctions, increasingly aware of subtlety, mastering the methods of a field so can generate new findings, hypothesis-testing, experimentation, rational argument, objectivity, categories may be complex but often do not allow for paradox or ambiguity, fair-mindedness, social interactions and relationships based on mutuality, reciprocity and fairness.

Result: knowledge, expertise, skillful problem-solving. [Reflection/contemplation brings us to the door of Level 3.]

## Level 3: Sky Mind: Profound Simplicity, Totality of Experience

Vastness without loss of detail/precision because all the complexity of level 2 is included, experiential rather than conceptual, unconstructed (so there's no abstraction.) Direct knowledge without abstraction. More advanced than formal operations because it sees the reification of concepts at level 2. From that, a sense of **play**. Centered in one's own experiential immediacy. Knowledge based in awareness of interconnectedness or communion, and that which is beyond our sense of separateness. Unpredictable. Able to see big picture, be empathically connected to a person while also aware of the big picture, the larger social context. Able to hold paradox, keep questions open, appreciate slippage between concepts and reality, able to hold multiple logics simultaneously. Sense of wonder and mystery. Appreciation of fleeting, ephemeral qualities of experience.

Four qualities of the experiential consciousness/sky mind at this level: openness, a sense of relatedness or oneness with all objects (such that subjectivity is not egocentric but includes all,) spontaneous knowing or insight (where knowledge seems to come from nowhere, as a result of the openness and relatedness), and ineffability (since experience at this level is not conceptual, it must be translated into language because it is not the result of language-based reasoning or judgment.)

Result: creativity, appreciation of beauty, compassion, appreciation that "perfection" "love" and other level 2 concepts are actual experiences and therefore do not have opposites. Experience that has its own authority.

Whatever we do, wherever we go,  
whatever happens on this crowded surface  
of interactions constituting our world,  
there is also the sky.

-Tarthang Tulku, *Time, Space and Knowledge*

The sky jumps into your shoes at night.

- Jasper Tomkins, *The Sky Jumps into Your Shoes at Night*