



# Cultivating Compassion

PUNCH, THE MONKEY WHO WAS REJECTED BY HIS MOM. (HE'S DOING BETTER!) IMAGE CREDIT: ICHIKAWA CITY ZOO



Bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara in the Water-Moon Manifestation (Shuiyue Guanyin) Dated to 1168, Yale Art Gallery

# Buddhism: Compassion as a Practice

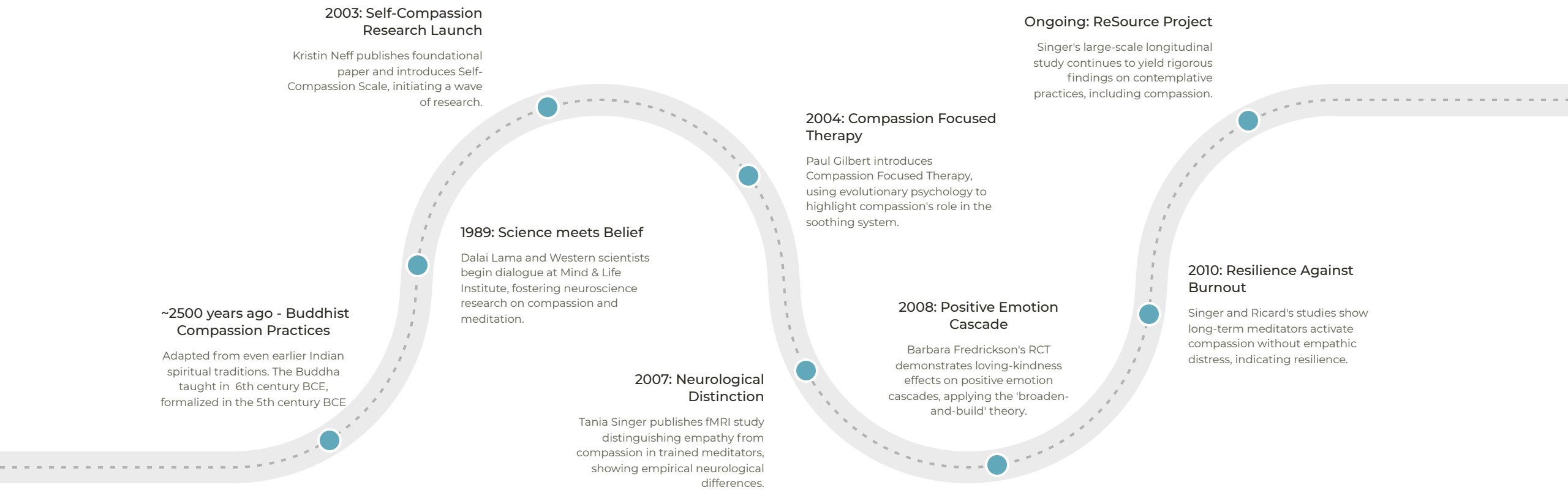
An ancient Buddhist practice, with roots over 2500 years old, focused on cultivating profound well-being.

- **Metta** (MET-tah): Loving-kindness - Active goodwill toward all beings, wishing for their happiness and wellbeing.
- **Karuna** (KAH-roo-nah): Compassion - The desire to alleviate suffering, moving from recognizing pain to actively wishing to relieve it.
- **Mudita** (moo-DEE-tah): Appreciative Joy - Delighting in others' happiness and success, the antidote to envy.
- **Upekkha** (oo-PEK-khah): Equanimity - Even-mindedness and balance, accepting while maintaining an open heart.

The practice typically progresses from oneself, (self compassion) to loved ones, then to neutral persons, difficult people, and ultimately to all beings without exception.

# Modern Science Meets Buddhist Tradition

Collaboration Made Scientific Validation Possible



## Empathy vs. Compassion

# Mind and Body: What Happens Inside

### Empathy

- Threat response activates: body tenses, heart rate rises
- Their distress lands in you: emotional contagion
- Mind narrows: urge to withdraw, look away, go numb
- Pain networks activate: anterior insula, anterior cingulate cortex

### Compassion

- Body softens: warmth, steadier breath
- Oxytocin and dopamine release: the “tend and befriend” response
- Mind opens: approach orientation, motivation to help
- Reward networks activate: ventral striatum — the same networks involved in parental love and social bonding



Practice Impact: Two weeks of daily practice reduces cortisol levels by up to 51%.

# The Practical Impact of Empathy and Compassion

Understanding the Differences in Outcomes

- **Drawbacks of Empathic Distress**

Can lead to less helping behavior, burnout, withdrawal, and emotional numbness when overwhelmed by suffering.

- **Benefits of Compassion**

Fosters positive emotions, reduces stress, enhances resilience, and promotes altruistic behavior.

- **Wider Reach of Compassion**

Less prone to bias than empathy, extending more readily across group boundaries.

- **Scalability of Compassion**

Can be applied to large groups or millions, unlike empathy which is individual.

- **Measurable Brain Changes**

As little as 7-14 hours of compassion practice can lead to measurable changes in the brain.

- **Sustainable Action**

Compassion, combined with reason, is a more reliable and sustainable approach for positive action than empathy alone.

# Cultivating Compassion: Exercise



Pair up, you will have two roles: **Speaker** and **Compassionate Listener**

Rounds: 4 minutes each, then switch

**Topic:** "A moment this week when I struggled — what happened, how I felt"

(Speaker: share from your own experience, choose your comfort level)

Listener: full presence, no words, no fixing — just warm attention  
If your mind wanders to advice or judgment, gently return to care

(Brief partner reflection after both rounds)



# Cultivating Compassion

## Mantras for Extending Compassion

*May you be happy.*

*May you be healthy.*

*May you be safe.*

*May you live with ease.*

*May you be free from suffering.*

*May you know you are not alone.*

# Cultivating Compassion

## Mantras for Self Compassion

*May I be kind to myself.*

*May I hold myself with gentleness.*

*May I know that I am enough.*

*May I find rest.*

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*If you are facing an issue:*

*This is a moment of suffering. Suffering is part of life. I am not alone in this.*

