What Might the Buddha's Life Teach Us About Compassion in Psychotherapy?

Reflections from a Pilgrimage through India and Nepal

Raimundo Soto

Psychologist, Chile

www.naturalezacompasiva.com

Abstract

Compassion Focused Therapy (CFT) acknowledges Buddhist psychology among its influences (Gilbert & Van Gordon, 2023). This poster combines photographs and reflections from a pilgrimage through India and Nepal during september 2026, to explore what the Buddha's life might teach us about cultivating compassion in psychotherapy. The journey was inspired by *Old Path White Clouds*, Vietnamese Zen master Thich Nhat Hanh's retelling of the Buddha's life (1991).

Eight places frame reflections on early care, the search for a path, the limits of excessive effort, awakening, teaching, community, inclusion and loss. Encounters with poverty also raise questions about the wish to help, discernment and the limits of compassionate action. Together, these experiences bring a clinician's perspective to the Buddha's life as a human story of developing and expressing compassion. They invite CFT practitioners to consider how psychotherapy can support compassionate qualities and skills while attending to bodily needs, relationships and the communities that sustain care.



1. Beginning within relationships

Maya Devi Temple, Lumbini, Nepal

Buddhist accounts describe the death of the Buddha's mother shortly after his birth and his upbringing by her sister, Mahāpajāpatī. His birthplace evokes the vulnerability of early life and circumstances no child chooses.

In psychotherapy, recognising these unchosen beginnings can soften blame and open questions about the care a person has received and may still need.



2. Searching for a path

Kapilavastu, Nepal

Leaving family life and the role expected of him, the future Buddha began a search for a response to suffering. This involved uncertainty, learning from teachers and exploring unfamiliar possibilities.

A familiar therapeutic question emerges. How can people find their own direction while acknowledging attachments, responsibilities and the effects of their choices on others? His departure opens reflection on change within a life that remains connected to others.

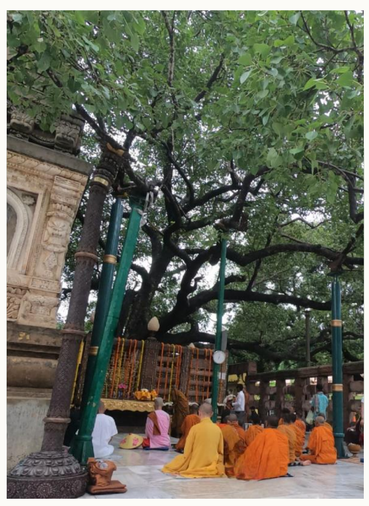


3. When effort becomes harmful

Pragbodhi Cave, India

This cave is associated with the severe austerities the Buddha practised before his awakening. Abandoning self-mortification marked a turn towards the Middle Way.

The episode prompts attention to self-criticism and excessive effort in personal development. Working towards change requires sensitivity to bodily needs and discernment about when an approach has become harmful. Revising that approach can itself be an expression of wisdom and care.

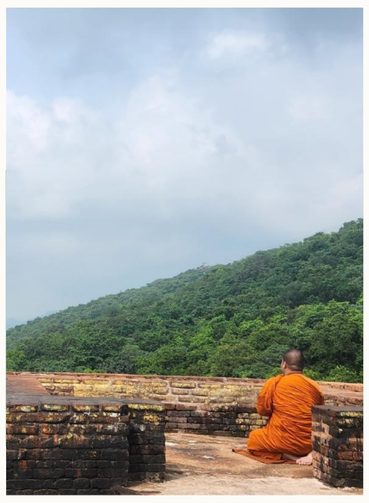


4. Awakening to human potential

Mahabodhi Temple, Bodh Gaya, India

Following his turn towards the Middle Way, the Buddha attained awakening, understood in Buddhism as liberation from suffering. His story brings profound possibilities for wisdom and compassion into view.

Alongside relieving distress, CFT seeks to cultivate compassionate qualities and skills (Gilbert, 2020). What conditions help these capacities develop in clients and therapists, and how might psychotherapy help sustain them?

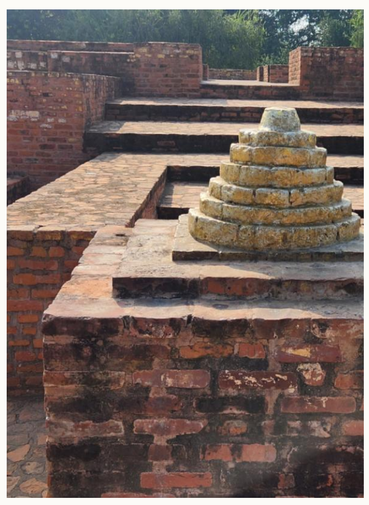


5. Deepening understanding

Vulture's Peak, Rajgir, India

This mountain retreat was a place of practice and teaching. Mahayana traditions associate it with teachings on emptiness, the understanding that phenomena lack a fixed, independent essence and arise through conditions and relationships.

How might understanding this interdependence support a compassionate mind? In dialogue with CFT, this invites reflection on how recognising our interconnected lives might deepen sensitivity to suffering and the commitment to alleviate it.



6. Sustaining practice together

Jetavana Monastery, Shravasti, India

The Buddha spent many rainy seasons at Jetavana, living among his disciples, teaching and receiving visitors. The monastery provided a lasting home for the sangha, the community of practitioners, where learning and practice became part of daily life.

Compassionate practice needs opportunities for renewal and support. For clients and therapists alike, continuity, shared learning and places of belonging can help sustain ways of relating that extend beyond individual sessions.

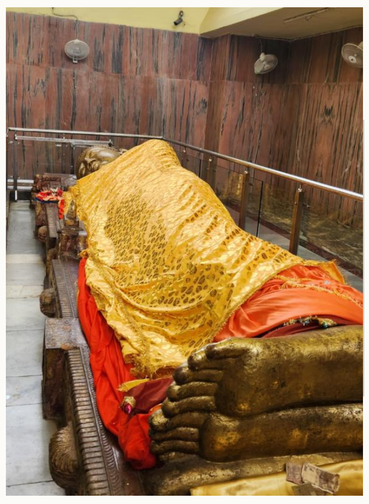


7. Widening the community

Vaishali, India

Buddhist accounts associate Vaishali with women's admission to monastic life, following the persistence of Mahāpajāpatī, the aunt who raised the Buddha, and other women.

Inclusion and equity call for openness to questioning prevailing paradigms, including those within psychotherapy. This episode highlights the courage needed to pursue structural change and the role of community in sustaining social transformation.



8. Facing loss and carrying on

Kushinagar, India

The farewell associated with Kesariya and the Buddha's final illness and death at Kushinagar foreground mortality and grief. His followers faced the task of continuing without their teacher.

Accompanying loss in psychotherapy involves acknowledging impermanence and making room for grief. It also means exploring how a relationship's influence continues to take shape through memories, practices and connections with others.

A question encountered along the journey

Encounters with poverty brought pain, the impulse to turn away, the wish to help and uncertainty about what would be useful. *How can we remain open to suffering when our capacity to respond feels so limited?* These experiences prompted reflection on listening, questioning assumptions and recognising the wider conditions shaping people's lives. Compassion calls for discerning where we can contribute, individually and with others, while acknowledging our limits and caring for ourselves to sustain that engagement.

Returning to psychotherapy

The Buddha's search, awakening and commitment to others offer a human story of cultivating compassion through wisdom, practice and community.

For CFT practitioners, these reflections highlight bodily care, discernment and relationships as supports for compassionate qualities and skills. They also invite inquiry into how understanding interdependence might deepen sensitivity to suffering and inform compassionate action in psychotherapy.

References

Gilbert, P. (2020). Compassion: From its evolution to a psychotherapy. *Frontiers in Psychology, 11*, 586161.

Gilbert, P., & Van Gordon, W. (2023). Compassion as a skill: A comparison of contemplative and evolution-based approaches. *Mindfulness, 14*, 2395–2416.

Thich Nhat Hanh (1991). *Old Path White Clouds: Walking in the Footsteps of the Buddha*. Parallax Press.

Scan for more photos, reflections and to stay in touch.