

15. Sustainability and Social Issues in Management  
Competitive Session

**Augmenting the Limitations of Organizational Compassion with Wisdom and  
Power: Insights from Bhutan**

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**Abstract:** *Compassionate organizational practices emphasizing human dignity and wellbeing within the workplace have been identified as underpinning a great number of organizational benefits. These include enhanced employee engagement, commitment, loyalty, trust and productivity, along with reduced absenteeism and turnover. Drawing upon insights on administrative compassion in Bhutan, I suggest that it is a folly to single out compassion on its own as the source of positive organizational outcomes. I argue that additional qualities of phronesis or wisdom and understanding of the workings of power are equally crucial. Indeed, without these additional attributes, compassion can be sentimental and misguided, indicating a lack of judgment that increases suffering.*

**Keywords:** organizational compassion, positive organizational scholarship, power

**PAPER TEXT** – At the turn of the millennium compassion emerged as the focus of serious academic theorizing in organizational studies under the banner of Positive Organizational Scholarship (POS) (Frost, 1999; Frost, Dutton, Worline, & Wilson, 2000). An organizational counterpart to positive psychology, POS is concerned with positive characteristics that help realize human potential within the context of management and organizational studies (Berstein, 2003; Caza & Caza, 2008).

The benefits of organizational compassion identified by research include boosting organizational trust, pride, connection, motivation, and commitment (Dutton, Lilius, & Kanov, 2007; Frost et al., 2000; Lilius et al., 2008) fostering coworker bonding and support towards others in need (Simpson, Cunha, & Rego, 2014) and facilitating post-trauma healing (Dutton, Frost, Worline, Lilius, & Kanov, 2002; Lilius, Worline, Dutton, Kanov, & Maitlis, 2011; Powley & Cameron, 2006). Recognition of these organizational benefits has bolstered growing interest in organizational compassion (for overviews see Dutton, Workman, & Hardin, 2014; Lilius, Kanov, Dutton, Worline, & Maitlis, 2012; Rynes, Bartunek, Dutton, & Margolis, 2012; Simpson, Clegg, & Pitsis, 2014a).

Despite these benefits, recent research has critiqued the POS literature on organizational compassion as overlooking the power dynamics and potential for negative outcomes inherent in any relational process (Simpson, Clegg, & Cunha, 2013; Simpson, Clegg, & Freeder, 2013; Simpson, Clegg, & Pitsis, 2014b). The enthusiastic mainstream discourse on the organizational benefits of compassion has glossed over an extensive body of work in philosophy, literature, and academic

research indicating the limits of compassion (Simpson, Clegg, Lopez, et al., 2014). As an example, Aristotle (350 BCE/1992) defined virtue as the golden mean between the vices of deficiency and excess (Bagozzi, 2003). Hence, if compassion is the mean then its deficiency would be the vice of callousness, and its excess the vices of pity or “bleeding heart” sentimentality (Hinman, 2013, p. 268). Failure to recognize and account for the negative aspects of compassion indicates a lack of reflexivity and critical reasoning, so crucial for good academic scholarship and virtuous organizational practice.

The mainstream discourse has additionally overlooked insights on compassion from other cultural traditions. Generally, western theories and concepts of management dominate curriculums, textbooks and journal publications (Check-Teck, 2010; Muniapan, 2008). POS has been specifically critiqued as promoting emotions that are “positive” within the western context but “negative” in other cultural settings (Fineman, 2006). Globalization has led to further questioning of the universality of management theories and recognition that corporate and regional cultures are not homogeneous in their logics and epistemologies (Maruyama, 1994). Scholars have responded by exploring historical management concepts from texts rooted in regional cultural heritages (Check-Teck, 2010; Gopinath, 1998; Kumar & Rao, 1996). While these ancient texts proscribe practices for effectively governing a kingdom state, they are increasingly being reinterpreted within the context of corporate management (Alexander & Buckingham, 2011; Chamola, 2007; Garde, 2006; Muniapan, 2008).

Aware of these critiques, in October 2012 I enthusiastically accepted an invitation to visit the Kingdom of Bhutan, as an opportunity to explore a state where compassion is propounded a guiding principle of public administration. Bhutan is one of the world’s only two states where Buddhism is the official religion. Hence, considering that Buddhism holds compassion as one of its primary ethics, Bhutan provides an ideal setting for investigating the ideal of compassionate governance. *The Constitution of The Kingdom of Bhutan* (2008, p. 20) directs: “The State shall strive to create conditions that will enable the true and sustainable development of a good and compassionate society rooted in Buddhist ethos and universal human values”.

The paper is structured as follows: Initially I describe the cultural context of Bhutan as a State that has traditionally been administrated on the principle of compassion. The specific focus of my analysis narrows down to a description of semiotic images of compassion as traditionally signified

within the Dzong (state-religious fortress-monasteries). Analysis reveals the importance of recognizing the limits of compassion and cultivating it in conjunction with virtues of wisdom and power. The implications of this analysis for further academic research and the challenges of realizing it in organizational practice are also discussed.

### **Compassion and Gross National Happiness**

Over the past half a century, Bhutan has attempted to amalgamate modernity and tradition through a government emphasis on modernization efforts in education, health, and economic development, along with synchronic efforts in ecological and cultural preservation. In contrast to highlighting Gross Domestic Product as a measure of national performance, in 1972 the King of Bhutan declared an official policy objective of increasing the nation's Gross National Happiness (GNH) by building an economy that serves, rather than supersedes, the country's spiritual values (Bates, 2009). Scholars associate Bhutan's focus on GNH as a direct expression of the Buddhist principle of compassion (McDonald, 2003). Tashi (2011, p. 19) writes "GNH, besides fostering a compassionate point of view or feeling for others, is also about compassionate engaged action".

During my 14-day visit to Bhutan, I engaged in discussions on compassionate governance with administrators, employees, and monks. I also kept a journal and studied any literature I could access. However, it was my eyes (and camera), resting upon the semiotic imagery adorning the 12 Dzongs I visited that provided the most valuable insight. The Dzong are state-religious fortress-monasteries, which continue to function as district administrative and cultural-religious centres in each district of Bhutan. Dujardin (2000, p. 153) explains the prominent role the Dzong continues to play within Bhutanese society, not just as "relatively dead" relicts of a heroic feudal past as in the European castle, but as living monuments of the present, where they continue to fulfil the same political-administrative and religious functions for which they were designed and constructed. Dujardin (2000, pp. 151-152) further argues that in addition to serving primary political and religious functions, "the monastery-fortress may well be approached as a 'propelling' monument, a culture magnet and vehicle of cultural transfer in contemporary Bhutan".

A defining feature of the Dzong, and Bhutanese architecture generally, is the ornamentation of wooden surfaces such as windows, doors and beams with floral, animal, and religious motifs in

traditional colours and patterns. Observation of this semiotic imagery of compassion adorning most monasteries and Dzongs provided insight into the Bhutanese perspective of administrative compassion. In most instances *Chenrezi* “Bodhisattva of Compassion”, was not represented alone, but as triad of personalities that additionally included *Jampelyang* “Bodhisattva of Wisdom” and *Chana Dorjee* “Bodhisattva of Power”. Once this observation was noted early on in my visit, it served as the basis for further discussions through the remainder of my trip. I quickly learned that according to Bhutanese tradition neither Compassion, Wisdom nor Power can be complete or beneficial in their effects without the other two (Ura, 2004). Compassion without Wisdom is merely sentimentalism. Compassion without Power cannot lead to active responding to elevate the suffering of others. Therefore, Compassion, Wisdom, and Power need to be cultivated together in order to benefit oneself and society. Artistically, the three Bodhisattvas were arranged in different configurations. While some illustrations had Compassion as the central figure, in other depictions it was Wisdom, flanked by Compassion and Power, or Power flanked by Wisdom and Compassion (see Figures 1, 2, and 3).

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Insert Figure 1 about here

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The idea conveyed with Wisdom as the central figure is that Wisdom without Compassion leads to arrogance. Similarly, Wisdom without Power will not lead to any practical application of the learning. Wisdom must be cultivated with Compassion and Power to be of benefit to oneself or others.

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Insert Figure 2 about here

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A third configuration had Power as the central figure flanked by Wisdom and Compassion. The idea illustrated here is that Power without Compassion can be self-serving and exploitative. Similarly, Power without Wisdom will be destructive. In summary, Compassion, Wisdom, and Power should not be cultivated in isolation of each other.

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Insert Figure 3 about here

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Another image that was commonly depicted was that of a tiger (or a bull in some instances), with a chain attached to a collar around its neck that is being led by a man. Here the symbolism of the tiger (or bull) represents power, the chain represents wisdom, and the man, compassion. To achieve

wellbeing and prosperity in society, power must be exercised with wisdom, in accordance with the ideal of compassion.

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Insert Figure 4 about here

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The Bhutanese Buddhist view, [also represented in Tibetan Buddhist art as the deities Avalokeshvara compassion, Manjushri wisdom and Vajrapani power (Beer, 1999)], demonstrates positive awareness of the limits of compassion by emphasizing that without wisdom and power, practices of compassion will have negative outcomes or be impossible to enact.

### **Discussion**

The observations described above indicate that the State of Bhutan, with its rich Buddhist heritage, views compassion as a guiding principle of its public administration yet it also acknowledges the limits of compassion along with the necessity of augmenting it with wisdom and power. Aristotelian thought similarly suggests that the limitations of specific virtues can be counteracted through the cultivation of other complimentary virtues, wherein the value of each virtue in the cluster compensates for the other virtue's weaknesses. The insights derived from Bhutan suggest that we can narrow down the virtues of wisdom and power as compensating for the limitations of compassion. Correspondingly, compassion compensates for the weaknesses of wisdom and power. In contrast, acknowledgement of the limits of compassion is mostly absent in the organizational compassion literature (Dutton & Workman, 2011; Rynes et al., 2012). In the discussion that follows, rather than emphasizing the interdependencies of each of these three virtues, I will focus on the limitations of compassion and how without wisdom and power, organisations cannot adequately respond to suffering.

### **Wisdom and Compassion**

#### *Compassion as antithetical to wise organizational practices*

Philosophers from Plato (1992), to Spinoza (1996), to Kant (1996) and Nietzsche (1966, 1997, 1998, 2002) have dismissed compassion as antithetical to wisdom, viewing it as emotional and irrational and therefore as a questionable guide for ethical behaviour. These philosophers further argue that compassion discourages individual efforts for wellbeing; undermines their personal agency,

dignity, and self-worth; and overemphasizes the importance of material possessions. Kant (1996) and Nietzsche (1999) add that compassion expands suffering by contagion, from one to two or more.

Within the domain of administrative practice, a similar critique was advanced by Thompson (1975), who argued that compassionate administration is unfair and unjust and is an expression of favouritism and partisanship rather than the due process that comes from following organizational policies. Support for this view can be found in Klein, Highberger, and Shaw's (1995) research indicating that compassion leads to decisions that conflict with justice. In summary, compassion alone appears insufficient in assuring positive outcomes for givers and receivers in organizational relations. Unless augmented by wise judgment, compassion can generate sentimentality and unfairness.

*Defending compassion – by implicitly incorporating wisdom*

In contrast to the centuries of criticism that compassion is a poor guide for ethical action due to its perceived irrationality, the scholars who will be discussed next describe compassion as involving reasoning processes. While these scholars see this reasoning as part of the process of compassion, the position I argue is that reasoning represents a separate virtue – wisdom. I suggest that the scholars discussed below have implicitly acknowledged that wisdom must be cultivated along with compassion in order for compassion to be beneficial.

Drawing from Aristotle (2006), Nussbaum (2003) defends compassion against arguments denouncing it as sentimental and unreasonable by arguing that the “structure of compassion” (p. 304) involves several “cognitive elements” (p. 321) or “judgments”. These concern: (1) *size* or the seriousness of the suffering another experiences; (2) *nondesert* where the suffering was not brought upon the individual by any personal fault; (3) the *judgment of similar possibilities* wherein the predicament of the suffering person is identified as a condition that could be one's own, and (4) *eudemonic judgment* wherein the suffering person is an important part of one's own life goals and objectives (Nussbaum, 2013).

Nussbaum's (2003) judgments are limited to the perspective of the “giver” of compassion. In contrast within the context of management and organisations Dutton et al. (2014) develop the idea of appraisals as involving mutual sensemaking wherein “both the sufferer and the focal actor seek to comprehend the situation and their roles in relation to it and each other” (p. 285). For the giver,

sensemaking can involve both perspective-taking and appraising, two processes, which have a moderating, effect upon each other. It can additionally comprise evaluating the past and future consequences of compassion responding initiatives. For the receiver it can include developing attributions regarding the giver's motives for providing support. A similar idea is presented by Simpson et al. (2014b, p. 475) who describe a process of *mutual assessments* of members' compassion worthiness as legitimate receiver(s) and giver(s) as inherent in compassion relations. The assessments Simpson et al. describe involve four characteristics each for both the receiver and the giver in compassion relations.

The above discussions implicitly incorporate wisdom into analyses of compassion relations. I argue that it would be much more honest and beneficial for organizational theory to explicitly recognize the limitations of compassion and to emphasise the importance of compensating for these limitations through the cultivation of the Aristotelian notion of phronetic wisdom (Antonacopoulou, 2010; Flyvbjerg, 2006; Flyvbjerg, Landman, & Schram, 2012). *Phronesis* is practical wisdom or experienced ethical discernment, applied as good actions or *praxis* as a way of living. Phronesis is contrasted with *techne* or technical or instrumental knowledge, applied in *poiesis* or production. In the wake of corporate scandals and the financial crisis there have been calls for a greater emphasis on phronesis in management learning, decision-making and leadership, with a lesser emphasis on *techne* (Clegg, Jarvis, & Pitsis, 2013; Jarvis & Amann, 2011; Rego, Cunha, & Clegg, 2012). The linking of phronesis to *praxis* or action illustrates the relationship between wisdom and power (the power to make decisions and get things done). Within the context of compassion relations power is expressed in the giving or refusing to give support, as well as the power to receive or refuse to accept support offered.

The relationship between wisdom or truth and power has been discussed at length by social scientists concerned with domination and control over agents both through decisions made and not made (described as the first and second dimensions of power), as well as through determining other people's thoughts, desires and perceived needs (the third dimension) (Lukes, 1974). Truth and power thereby exist in a recursive relationship of mutual constitution and domination (Foucault, 1984). As a method for reflecting upon and exposing domination by the assumptions of accepted truth-power claims, phronesis is invaluable tool of freedom for the researcher and the management practitioner



(Clegg, Flyvbjerg, & Haugaard, 2014). Next we will further analyse of compassion as it relates to power. Our analysis involves consideration of both a single dimensional or agency view of power as it relates to compassion – as well as a multidimensional relational view of power-compassion relations (Clegg, 1989).

### **Power and Compassion**

#### *Compassion dependent on personal power*

Power has been described by Clegg, Courpasson and Phillips (2006, pp. 2, 3) as “the central concept in the social sciences” and “the core of organizational achievement”. While frequently theorised merely as a title or position, power is much more, encompassing all social relations that mould the unfolding or inhibition of capabilities, choices, and change (Knights & Roberts, 1982), including compassion relations (Simpson, Clegg, & Freeder, 2013; Simpson, Clegg, Lopez, et al., 2014; Simpson, Clegg, & Pitsis, 2014a, 2014b). Power has many dimensions and levels of analysis (Clegg, 1989; Haugaard, 2012). At the individual level, power can be equated with personal strength and courage. Compassion is dependent upon power to be applied in action. Drawing on Nietzsche’s (1968) notion of a *will to power*, the philosopher Tillich (1952, p. 27) explains that “courage is the power of life to affirm itself” in the face of life’s many ambiguities, “while the negation of life because of its negativity is an expression of cowardice”. For Aristotle (2006), courage is the first amongst virtues, giving possibility to the expression of other virtues such as compassion. The famous *bystander effect*, which says that the likelihood of an individual helping a person in an emergency decreases as the number of bystanders increases (Darley & Latane, 1968), reveals that compassionate actions require courage to be different by breaking out from the norms of an informal group.

Being compassionate takes courage because strong identification with another’s suffering can generate a sense of sentimental hopelessness and overwhelmed, described as moral distress (Halifax, 2011). A symptom of such overwhelm is compassion fatigue, emotional and physical exhaustion which is a typical experience for people in organizations who perform emotional labour such as those in the caring professions (Hochschild, 1983). It is also found in those who play the role of the workplace toxic handler – taking on other’s emotional distress on account of compassionless organizational practices (Frost, 2003).

Spinoza (1996) saw this type of “unmanly compassion” (p. 68) as springing from “bondage” or “man’s lack of power to moderate and restrain the effects” (p. 113). Despite pointing out similar concerns, Nietzsche (1968, pp. 198-199) also distinguished a higher compassion, the “*more manly* brother of compassion” (Nietzsche, 1997, p. 79), a compassion of strength. For Nietzsche (2002, p. 67) such compassion was expressed at an emotional distance. According to Cartwright (1984), distance saves the recipient of compassion from the humiliation of knowing that they are the object of someone’s charity, thereby preserving their dignity by protecting them from developing a sense of dependency. Distance also allows the giver anonymity eliminating the weakness of bragging and minimizing sentimental attachments (Pullen & Simpson, 2009). Swanton (2011) argues that Nietzsche advocates a mature generosity that contrasts with the vices of unhealthy compassion rooted in selfishness and self-sacrificing charity. A related idea here is for a person to have the courage to withdraw compassionate support when they know it is unsustainable, or has become overly emotional and might lead to further distress for all involved (Lilius et al., 2011). Compassion takes courage—to respond, withdraw and receive or refuse compassionate support, which will be considered next.

#### *Compassion as powerlessness*

While compassion can be viewed dependent on personal power and courage, paradoxically, it can also be perceived as a sign of weakness. Research also indicates that peer groups or subordinates sometimes view compassionate behaviour on the part of their friend or manager as indicating powerlessness, weakness and sentimentality (Georges, 2011; Martino, 2000). Compassion may lead to avoiding issues such as personal struggles or failing in their work position rather than helping people return to strong performance or to replacing them if required.

The famous Milgram obedience experiments revealed that feelings of compassion could create a sense of obligation and obedience to an authority figure – and drive subordinates to inflict lethal shocks upon others rather than disobey the orders of the researcher. Milgram (1975, p. 151) observed, “It is a curious thing that a measure of compassion on the part of the subject, an unwillingness to ‘hurt’ the experimenter’s feelings, are part of the binding forces inhibiting disobedience”. Overall these negative considerations all relate to the giver. However, compassion can also be a negative experience for the person who receives compassion.

*Organizational compassion as domination power*

The relationship between compassion and power has thus far been mainly analysed from the perspective of the giver, leaving the receiver's perspective yet to be considered. For the receiver, personal power or courage might be exercised in maintaining dignity as a recipient of compassionate support. Compassion can be experienced as patronizing and belittling as if the giver is imposing to highlight a receiver's vulnerabilities (Clark, 1987, 1997). Or it can feel as if it is being offered with the aim of engendering the receiver's sense of obligation and indebtedness, an interest in an enhanced public image, or for the collection of public funds (Richter & Norman, 2010). In her research, Clark (1997, p. 190) found that in such instances receivers sometimes assert their dignity with "strength and courage" by refusing the support, or accepting it on their own terms and conditions.

Compassionate support can further create a sense of dependency, indebtedness, and even emotional enslavement of the receiver towards the provider of help (Stirrat & Henkel, 1997; Szasz, 1998). The exceptionalism that characterizes compassion, where an individual or group is singled out for special care and attention, can also generate feelings of envy and jealousy in the receiver's peer group (Crisp, 2003; Frost et al., 2006). It can further generate a diminished sense of self-confidence, courage, self-trust, and healthy pride, along with feelings of personal shame and resentment towards the giver (Lupton, 2011). Research into the voluntourism industry, where people from first world countries travel to volunteer in developing countries, perhaps in an orphanage in Africa or Cambodia, have found that the attachments formed between the volunteers and the children, precipitate a sense of reabandonment in the children once the volunteer leaves, compounding the negative impacts of institutionalized care (Richter & Norman, 2010). Dependency upon others for compassionate support can also lead to the development of a victim mentality, with a diminished sense of personal agency and responsibility for one's personal wellbeing and happiness (Olasky, 1995). Compassion can also be experienced as patronizing and as infringing upon a receiver's personal freedom and thereby as a cause for moral rage (Acorn, 2004). The latter can eventuate when a giver, who pities a suffering person and believes they know better than them as to where their best interests lie, imposes "compassion" upon an unwilling recipient.

An example of imposing “compassionate” support as a government or organizational policy was the “stolen generation” of Aboriginal Australian children who, between 1909 and 1969, were taken from their mothers at birth and adopted out to parents considered more qualified to raise them (Lecouteur & Augoustinos, 2001). Another example is the Magdalene asylums that operated as “shelters” for girls considered a cause of social degradation in Irish society (Mik-Meyer & Villadsen, 2013; Simpson, Clegg, Lopez, et al., 2014). In retrospect, both of these cases, apparently initiated with compassionate intentions, have been described as examples of “total institutions” (Clegg et al., 2006, p. 143). These considerations all highlight the fact that organizational compassion is inseparable from considerations of power and therefore must be guided by phronesis.

### **Conclusion**

My argument suggests that cultivating organizational compassion that actually benefits all parties concerned is dependent upon acknowledging the limitations of compassion. Further it requires augmenting the cultivation of compassion with phronesis that includes an understanding of the workings of power in compassion relations as well as the cultivation of personal courage and strength. Achieving a balance between compassion, wisdom and power is easier said than done, however, and is therefore an excellent topic for further research. Future research might also investigate if there are virtues that are additionally important as compliments to organizational compassion.

Bhutan could be a starting point for further research on how the values projected in the Dzong are assimilated, cultivated, and materialized as the lived experience of the Bhutanese people. The country’s GNH policy is one attempt at governance by a synergistic balance of compassion, wisdom and power, for the benefit of all. Yet, this attempt is also ridden with flaws stemming from abuse of domination power in the name of compassion. Bhutan is advertised in popular culture, the media, travel brochures, and academics with nostalgic imagery of an isolated, high, ancient, authentic, and uncorrupted Buddhist kingdom – the last Shangri-La, or a rediscovered Eden. Critics, however, hold that the dominant utopian narrative is highly mythologized (Schroeder, 2011) and ignores the ongoing tension between Bhutan’s aspiration to maintain its traditions while also pursuing development towards modernity (Brunet, Bauer, De Lacy, & Tshering, 2001). Mishra (2013) argues that Bhutan’s policy of GNH has guided international attention away from the coercive disenfranchisement of

Bhutan's 100,000 Hindu-Nepalese minority, which comprise about one sixth of the population. Although they have lived in Bhutan for several generations, in the 1980s all were declared illegal immigrants and forced to become refugees outside the country's borders (Duncan, 2013). As a population, they did not fit with Bhutan's effort to paternalistically (or maternalistically) construct and maintain a coherent national identity through a "one nation, one people" policy, emphasizing the preservation and practice of traditional Druka social and cultural norms of dress, architecture, and etiquette (Mishra, 2013). The interests of national happiness are thereby used to justify illiberal practices of compulsory dress codes, the proscription of traditional architectural motifs for all new constructions, and not least, the exile of a minority population (Bok, 2010; Potts, 2011). Critics additionally argue that measures of GNH are not nearly as reliable as Gross Domestic Product as a basis for government policy or international compassion for they rely upon subjective judgments of wellbeing, which may be arbitrarily defined by government in a manner that best serves its own interests (McCloskey, 2012).

Just as perceptions of Bhutan reflect highly romanticized narratives that seek to hide the messiness and contradictions behind its experiment with Buddhist democracy, so the representation of organizational compassion within dominant organizational discourse has been active in promoting a mythicized image of the benefits that result from organizational compassion while mostly failing to consider its limitations and negative aspects. Arguing that compassion is valuable because it provides organizational benefits presents compassion as *techne*, an instrumental technique of production or poiesis. Organizational compassion is valuable not just as a means to an end but as an in itself. To be applied as virtuous praxis, however, it must be guided by phronesis. In this paper I have sought to contribute to the cultivation of phronesis in organisational theory by pointing out the limitations of organizational compassion, while also offering hope for how those limitations can be addressed with an emphasis on additionally cultivating the complimentary virtues of personal strength and courage, as well as phronetic wisdom that includes an awareness of the workings of power.

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**Figure 1: The Bodhisattva of Compassion (centre) (flanked by the Bodhisattva of Wisdom [left], and the Bodhisattva of Power [right])**



**Figure 2: The Bodhisattva of Wisdom (centre) (flanked by the Bodhisattva of Compassion [left] and the Bodhisattva of Power [right])**



**Figure 3: The Bodhisattva of Power (centre) (flanked by the Bodhisattva of Wisdom [left], and the Bodhisattva of Compassion [right])**



Figure 4: Compassion (represented by a man, wisdom represented by a chain and power represented by a tiger)

