

True Self, Contemplation, and Compassion

Across Four Traditions: Buddhism, Islam, Hinduism, and Judaism

LECTURE HANDOUT

These four traditions do not mean exactly the same thing by "true self" or "the heart," yet each points to a deeper human center that becomes visible through contemplation and shows itself in compassion. In different ways, each tradition teaches that interior life is not an escape from the world — it is the source of wiser and more merciful action in it.

Buddhism

Buddhism teaches *anattā* (non-self): the ego is not an independent or permanent essence, and suffering arises from grasping what cannot be held. Contemplation — especially through mindfulness and insight meditation — is a disciplined practice that loosens attachment and gradually awakens compassion for all sentient beings. The *bodhisattva* ideal makes this connection explicit: one who has glimpsed awakening turns back toward the world in selfless compassion (*karuṇā*). In this view, the deepest "self" is not a fixed ego but the awakened capacity to see clearly and to respond with loving-kindness (*mettā*).

Islam

Islam centers the spiritual life on remembrance of God (*dhikr*), especially through the five daily prayers and Sufi contemplative practice. The *qalb* (heart) is not self-sufficient; it becomes receptive and luminous when turned toward Allah, *al-Raḥmān al-Raḥīm* — the Compassionate, the Merciful. Contemplation in Islam is therefore not self-invention but surrender (*islām*), and compassion flows outward from a heart softened and aligned with divine mercy. For Sufi teachers, the heart polished by remembrance begins to reflect God's own mercy into the world.

Hinduism

In Hindu thought — particularly the school of *Advaita Vedānta*, though other schools (*Vīśiṣṭādvaita*, *Dvaita*) hold related but distinct views — the deepest self is *Ātman*, and contemplative practice seeks direct realization of its identity with *Brahman*, the ultimate reality underlying all existence. The "true self" lies hidden beneath ego, ignorance (*avidyā*), and ordinary identity. Compassion follows from this vision because the person who perceives unity beyond illusion (*māyā*) cannot remain indifferent to suffering; to harm another is, in some sense, to harm oneself.

Judaism

Judaism teaches that human beings are made *b'tselem Elohim* — in the image of God (Gen. 1:27) — which grounds human dignity and calls each person to justice, mercy, and moral responsibility. Contemplative traditions (Hasidism, mussar, and Kabbalistic *hitbonenut*) link inward life closely to covenantal practice: knowing God leads to loving one's neighbor and working to repair the world (*tikkun olam*). Distinctively, the deepest human point is not divinization of the self, but living faithfully as a bearer of God's image — a profoundly relational and ethical vocation.

Tradition	The "Deeper Self"	Contemplative Path	Source of Compassion	Distinctive Accent
Buddhism	Awakened awareness (beyond fixed ego)	Mindfulness; insight meditation	Seeing no boundary between self and other	Awakening from illusion of self
Islam	The purified heart (<i>qalb</i>)	Prayer; <i>dhikr</i> ; Sufi practice	Heart aligned with divine mercy	Surrender; receptivity to God
Hinduism	Ātman (identity with Brahman)	Meditation; <i>jñāna</i> ; yoga paths	Perceiving unity beneath all difference	Realization of the deepest self
Judaism	Bearer of God's image (<i>tselem</i>)	Torah; prayer; <i>hitbonenut</i> ; mussar	Covenant: love of God → love of neighbor	Ethics and action in the world

SHARED THEMES & KEY TENSIONS

All four traditions link inward transformation to outward compassion, though they describe the deepest reality differently and arrive by different roads. None treats contemplation as a retreat from life; each frames it as the condition that makes genuine action possible. The key tensions worth holding together: *Is the deepest self discovered, dissolved, or given? Does compassion arise from seeing identity with others, or from receiving a mercy that overflows? Is the goal transformation of the self, or faithful action despite its limits?*

Buddhism – Awakening from illusion

Islam – Surrender to divine mercy

Hinduism – Realization of the deepest self

Judaism – Imaging God through just action

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What do these traditions mean by the "deepest" part of the human person – and how much do those meanings actually overlap?
2. How does contemplative practice lead to compassion in each tradition? Is the connection logical, experiential, or both?
3. Where do these traditions seem most similar, and where do they differ most sharply? Are the differences merely linguistic or genuinely substantive?
4. Does compassion arise from discovering what is already there within us, or from being transformed by God or reality from outside?
5. What is left out when we focus only on the "contemplative" strand of each tradition? How do ritual, law, and community shape the picture?
6. Which tradition's language of the heart or self seems most accessible to your students – and what does that accessibility reveal about their own assumptions?