when experienced, compassion overwhelms selfish concerns and motivates altruistic behaviour.

Cultivating compassion

It has long been assumed that selfishness, greed, and competitiveness lie at the core of human behaviour. It takes little imagination to see how these assumptions have guided most realms of human affairs, from policy making to media portrayals of social life. But recent scientific findings show that compassion is deeply rooted in our brains, our bodies, and in the most basic ways we communicate. Neuroscience studies suggest that the brain structures involved in positive emotions like compassion are subject to changes brought about by environmental input. What's more, a sense of compassion fosters compassionate behaviour and helps shape the lessons we teach our children. A landmark study of altruism by sociologists Pearl and Samuel Oliner found that children who have compassionate parents tend to be more altruistic.

Simply realising this, however, is not enough; we must also make room for our compassionate impulses to flourish. Research provides ample evidence to show what we can gain from more compassionate relationships, schools, hospitals, workplaces, and other institutions. They do more than make us reconsider our assumptions about human nature. They offer a blueprint for a more compassionate world.

Compassion— A pair of shoes at a time

Toby Tanser of Manhattan runs to help others.

He heads Shoe4Africa an organisation that began in 1995 as an informal effort to send running shoes to Kenyan athletes who couldn't afford proper footwear. In the years since, it has grown into a charity raising thousands of dollars to build a public children's hospital in the city of Eldoret, Kenya. Tanser says via email, "I think that for a long time in my life I did not realise how blessed and lucky I was to be born with things I took for granted; like food on the table, water than ran clean from a tap, healthcare that was free. I went through life as a 'taker' – taking from society, feeling a sense of entitlement to do so, and believing that problems were too big for me to solve, or even attempt to make any difference. I felt that was not my job in life, so leave it to others. Then I took a trip to Africa..."



PHOTO: COURTESY: TOBY TANSER

Toby Tanser, head of Shoe4Africa, laying the foundation stone of a children's hospital in Kenya.



Getting into the head of benefactors

The purpose of helping others might be the same for the super rich and people with limited means, research shows. Jen Shang, formerly faculty at the Centre of Philanthropy at Indiana University in an interview last year said, "Millionaires and donors of modest means alike begin their philanthropic journey with the same purpose--- fulfilling human potential. Millionaires might then think about setting up foundations to fulfil this purpose on a large scale, while a donor with modest means might help an African child through individual sponsorship."

Love thy neighbour

All major religions tell us that compassion compels us to dethrone the egotism, self-preoccupation and selfishness that hold us back from the divine and put ourselves in the place of another. These traditions have also pointed out that it is not sufficient to confine our benevolence to those we find congenial – to our own ethnic, national or ideological group. We must have what an ancient Chinese sage called *jian ai*---"concern for everybody."

Dr Najma Khan Majlis, professor, department of Islamic History and Culture at University of Dhaka says,