

# The Buddhist Perspective on Compassion

By Ven. Master Hsing Yun

Compassion seems to be the very first term that comes to mind when the word "Buddhism" is mentioned. Surely, it is a commonly used term, but if we dwell further into its meaning, we uncover something that is not understood by many. The Buddhist Tripiṭaka and Twelve Canons may seem very complex, but one sole meaning lies behind it all -- compassion. Bodhisattvahood in Mahāyāna Buddhism in particular, focuses on the spirit of compassion. According to the *Prajñāpāramitā Sūtra*, sentient beings are the cause for a Bodhisattva to give rise to great compassion, while great compassion is the cause for the development of Bodhi Mind, and Bodhi Mind is the cause for the attainment of Buddhahood. Upon seeing the suffering experienced by all beings, if a Bodhisattva does not feel compassion, or aspire to reach Buddhahood and relieve all beings from suffering, then the journey to the Bodhi path cannot be complete. Therefore, compassion is the prerequisite for Buddhahood to a Bodhisattva.

## I. The meaning and definitions of compassion

Most of us know what compassion is, and most of us practice compassion, but not many possess an in-depth understanding of the actual meaning that lies behind it. When a man is convicted for destroying public property or causing harm upon others, some people will use compassion as an excuse to forgive him. However, by doing so is merely turning a blind eye to his unacceptable behavior, and it is not compassion at all. One might then ask, what is the real meaning of compassion? Some say compassion is love, but many impure forms of love cause nothing but pain and suffering. Compassion is purified love. It is a kind of service offered out of selflessness and wisdom; it is a form of contribution made without expecting anything in return; it is sacrifice made out of resolve; and it is a combination of love, wisdom, resolve, and generosity.

Compassion is like medicine that cures the body of all illnesses; it is a pure stream of water that cleanses and comforts a wounded heart. Compassion is a ferry that carries us through the breaking waves in the vast ocean of rebirth. It keeps us from drowning in the ocean of desire. Compassion is like light that dispels darkness and illuminates the truth. Compassion brings hope to our future in this world. Compassion is like a shelter that offers comfort and strength at times of hardship and deprivation. Compassion is like a companion that gives us support and courage to achieve any goal that we set forth. Compassion is like a Maṇi pearl that clears our visions, shines

through illusions, turn complexity into simplicity, and transform chaos into peace.

Compassion is an endless source of energy that puts life into all beings in this world. It is what makes life worth living. Without compassion, a luxuriously decorated home will still be like an icebox. Without compassion, a company will find it difficult to keep a position filled even if it is a highly paid job. Without compassion, family will be like strangers who have no desire to associate with each other.

The following are some categories of compassion:

### **i. Passive and active compassion**

In a jail, no guards have any experience in executing a death sentence, yet a date of execution has been set. As everyone feels that they should be compassionate, no one offered to carry out the job. As a result, the warden had to apply through the judiciary for four military police from the Ministry of National Defense to execute the prisoner. Who was the compassionate one? Was it those guards or the military police? Those guards exhibited passive compassion while the four military police displayed active compassion, because they executed one prisoner to keep society in order. Therefore, true compassion is of great benevolence, courage, loyalty and justice. Showing compassion to one man and putting the lives of many at risk is not true compassion, it is merely a moment's kindness.

### **ii. Enthusiastic and silent compassion**

A large number of people responded enthusiastically to the emergency relief programs after the September 11 attack in America. Some gave blood, some donated money, and some send cards for the victims. This is called compassion with enthusiasm. When the media keeps up to date broadcasting about disasters and tragedies, causing the whole community to participate in the rescue mission, this is also compassion with enthusiasm.

Although enthusiasm is important, silent compassion is also needed. It is about helping those who have been forgotten by the world. Many people in remote areas living in poverty; broken families need support to carry on; and the disabled people need as much help as those affected by natural disasters.

### **iii. Direct and indirect compassion**

When we help the needy by offering our money or energy, it is called direct compassion. If someone makes a lot of money but does not help others with it, and someone else gives it away on his behalf, this is called indirect compassion. Although merit can still be accumulated through indirect compassion, the joy and experience of personally practicing good deeds is still much more enjoyable and worthwhile.

#### **iv. Substantial and insignificant compassion**

When we offer selfless help to society, or help the needy with an impartial mind, then it is substantial compassion. On the other hand, a small praise or favour, although insignificant, may lead to great effects. Therefore, the insignificant will eventually become something substantial.

#### **v. Instant and persisting compassion**

A thought of compassion is something that arises instantly, while the compassion and mercy of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas exist persistently. Although persistent compassion is difficult to maintain, instant compassion is still a great achievement.

There was a man who would stop at nothing in doing evil. One day, he came to a halt right before he was about to step on a spider. A single moment of compassion made him decide to leave the little creature in peace by stepping around it, so the spider's life was saved. After he died, he fell into hell for all the evil deeds he had done. As he was being tortured in hell, the thread of a spider web lowered from the sky. This was the result of his momentary compassion for the spider, which gave him the chance to escape from hell. He hung onto the thread desperately and started climbing upwards, but when he looked down, he saw many beings also trying to take the same route. Fearing that all this weight might cause the thread to snap, which will take away his only chance to get out of hell, he started to stomp on those who were below him. As he did this, the thin thread snapped, bringing him back to the endless abyss of suffering. A single thought of compassion allowed an extremely evil man a chance to be saved, but without a truly compassionate mind, hell was still inevitable to him.

#### **vi. Related and unrelated compassion**

Related compassion refers to the help we offer to our relatives, friends or those we are acquainted with. Unrelated compassion is the kindness we show to strangers out of the hope of relieving them from their suffering. Related compassion is much easier to achieve compared to unrelated compassion. However, with an impartial mind, one will feel equal love and concern for all living beings.

#### **vii. Sentient and Non-sentient compassion**

When we give others joy, happiness, convenience or emotional warmth, we are exhibiting sentient compassion. Although it may seem merciless when parents punish their children, or when teachers punish students, they are in fact showing insentient compassion. Sentient compassion is like spring sun or summer rain, while insentient compassion is like winter frost and ice. Both of these are essential to the life of a plant. The subduing effect of love and strictness of integrity are all different kinds of compassion.

### **viii. Compassion with and without expecting for return**

Some people conduct helping others and expect for something in return. When we eliminate such expectations, all we hope to achieve is to help others and nothing else.

A man asked Ch'an Master Chao Chou, "Will someone as well practiced and compassionate as you are be affected by delusion?"

"To be honest, I am troubled by many." Answered Chao Chou.

"Why do you still have so much delusion?"

"Because you do, therefore I do, too. If I were to be free from delusion, then how can the two of us interact with each other?"

"Will someone as well practiced and compassionate as you are be reborn in hell?" asked the man once again.

"Of course I will!"

"Why is that so?"

"Because if I don't go to hell, who will be there to save all beings like you who have fallen in hell?"

A mind that puts all beings before oneself is one of true compassion, just like that of a Buddha or Bodhisattva.

### **ix. Compassion with clinging and compassion without clinging**

Compassion with clinging refers to a person continuing to cling to the good deeds he has done, and his attachment to himself being the compassionate one as well as the beneficiary of his compassion. For example, Emperor Wu of Liang Dynasty asked Bodhidharma the First Patriarch of Zen school, "I have helped print sutras, construct temples and encouraged people to become ordained. How meritorious am I?" He was showing compassion with appearance. The *Diamond Sutra* talks about the absence of lakṣaṇa [1] of self, human beings, sentient beings or a soul. It is also talking about the absolute compassion that is free from lakṣaṇa, where there is no concept of giver, receiver or the object being given or received. Thus the notion of compassion is non-existent, as it is now an act of kindness carried out without the notion of selfness or mind.

### **x. Momentary and eternal compassion**

Compassion can be practiced commonly, but most of these are like the morning dew that only exists momentarily. Such is called momentary compassion. The compassion of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas are accumulated from many previous lives. Their tireless effort in helping all beings is eternal compassion. One of the three unachievable tasks by a Buddha is their being unable to

relieve all living beings, because there are countless living beings in this world, therefore a mind with eternal compassion is required. Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva has delayed his Buddhahood until hell is emptied. This is eternal compassion.

In addition, depending on ordinary people or enlightened saints, there are three levels of compassion.

1. Compassion exhibited by sentient beings. This is an ordinary being who offers his love to his family or friends only. This type of compassion is not impartial and is restricted.

2. Compassion exhibited by śrāvaka [2] and pratyeka [3]. They believe that all phenomena arise and disappear according to different causes and conditions. Therefore, they follow respond to sentient beings according to what is needed.

3. Compassion exhibited by Buddhas. The Buddha treats all being equally. Therefore, he vows to help all living beings in this world, related or unrelated.

Compassion cannot be challenged, not even by evil. What is Buddha mind? It is a mind that exhibits kindness, compassion, joy and generosity. This also provides a guideline to whether we do or do not possess the mind of a Buddha. With the four immeasurable states of mind, we possess a mind similar to a Buddha's mind.

## II. The beneficiaries and discipline of compassion

The twentieth century is an era of civilization and technological advancement, but an even greater invention of this time is communication. How do we ensure good communication between one another? The only way to build good personal relationships is by practicing compassion.

While compassion is important, without wisdom by its side, setbacks and negative effects can be caused. Sometimes the misuse of compassion can cause over-tolerance, while the over-suppression of compassion causes it not to be shown when it is needed most. Sometimes a ruthless act can be done out of compassion, and an act that seems compassionate is not true compassion at all. Therefore, compassion without wisdom is like a one-winged bird or a one-wheel cart, where no destination can be reached and no goals achieved.

Over-tolerance is shown when parents give their children too much pocket money for improper use, not punishing their children when they need to be taught a lesson. If we give our money to evil doers, this is not true compassion, either. An example of over-suppression of compassion arises when one lacks the courage to stand out for justice. The evil doer will be left free to roam around and cause more harm. When we see others working hard to establish an educational institution to nurture talents, if we spread rumours to destroy its reputation on top of refusing to offer it any support, then this is not compassion at its work. A ruthless act done out of compassion is like killing one evil man to save thousands of innocent lives. Although killing is not an act of

compassion, if it is done to save even more lives, it then becomes a great act of compassion.

There were these three Taoist priests who, after completing their Tao, were receiving offerings. The youngest was seen sitting in the center while the more senior priests sat on his sides. Many wondered why he was able to excel the two other senior priests, and there was a story behind all this.

In order to strengthen their practice, the three priests traveled to different places together. One night, they stopped at a house whose owner was a widow with seven children. On the next morning, the youngest priest said to the other two,

"I have decided to stay behind, the two of you please keep going."

The two of them left in anger, thinking that this useless man had decided to give up his practice for a woman. Since she was still young and it would be difficult to raise all seven children on her own, the widow offered to marry this young priest. But the priest replied,

"Your husband has only passed away recently. Out of respect for him, you should remain in mourning for three years."

Three years later, the widow made the same offer again, but the young priest said to her,

"I do not wish to dishonor your husband. Therefore I, too, should mourn for him for the next three years."

Another three years later, the same offer was made once again, and he made a suggestion for the both of them to mourn for the widow's husband for another three years before they think about marriage. Nine years passed altogether, and all seven children were now fully grown up. Seeing that his goal has been accomplished, the priest continued his journey in search for Tao.

Although at first it seemed like the youngest priest had become the prisoner of his desires, it was actually his compassion that allowed him to be the most highly practiced Taoist priest in the end. Therefore, he was allowed the central seat during the offering ceremony.

King Prasenajit's Queen Jasmine of India always dressed simply and never drank. One day, she got dressed up and asked the King to sit down at a table filled with delicacy and wine. Although happy at seeing this, the King asked what had prompted his queen to start drinking. The queen answered,

"Your Majesty, we may never have the chance to eat such beautiful food after today. Therefore, I have decided to enjoy the last of it with my king."

"Why is this so?"

"I heard that the chef has offended Your Majesty, and he will be sentenced to death soon." Said the queen. This reminded the King that when he returned from hunting yesterday, the chef did not

serve him fast enough, which caused the king to get angry and decided to sentence him to death. He realized that the chef was innocent, so he called off this order. Queen Jasmine was willing to violate the precept so that she could save the life of an innocent man. This was compassion shown out of self-sacrifice and concern for others.

Lying may be a violation of precept, but a lie made out of good intention is sometimes regarded as compassion. For example, a doctor may cover up the truth from a patient who is suffering from terminal illness, or an ordinary man lying to bandits to save the life of another. All of these are acts of compassion.

One day, a pheasant ran to a Buddhist monk in the forest and hid underneath his robe. Shortly after that, a hunter came and asked the monk if he had seen a pheasant nearby. In order to save the pheasant's life, the monk lied and told him, "no." Although lying is not an act of compassion, when it is done to save a life, the spirit of a Bodhisattva has been shown, where kindness and compassion is shown to the lives of all.

What does not seem like compassion is in fact true compassion. On the other hand, what seems like compassion is in fact not compassion. Somebody once bought a piranha and set it free in a river. Although it seemed like he was practicing compassion, it caused the piranha to eat up other fish and animals in the water. Is this true compassion? Some believe that compassion is to set lives free, but if you choose an undesirable environment to set lives free, it would only cause more lives to be lost. Many people buy tortoises and set them free in ponds, but the result is the tortoises eating up all the fish inside the pond. What seemed a compassionate act is in fact ruthless. Setting lives free can even provide business opportunities for hunters, who catch animals for you to buy and set free. Would you say this is compassion?

Today's society suffers from much violence and cruelty, and the best remedy for this is compassion. There is a Buddhist saying, "Just listen to the sounds of abattoirs at night if you want to picture any torment caused by weapons." These killing acts represent the trace of cruelty that flows from human nature. They cover up our compassion like gray clouds in the sky. If we do not see anything wrong in killing the lives of animals, then wars will one day be regarded as an ordinary event in life.

The migratory birds that pass through southern Taiwan each year risk their lives against hunters. Taiwan never treated these guests in a friendly manner. Instead, its people kill these creatures just to satisfy their selfish desires.

There are two points that must be remembered when practicing compassion:

i. The concept of benefit for oneself and others. When we put ourselves in others' shoes, we will give rise to compassion. There was a man who hunted animals for many years. One day, he got lost in the jungle and was caught by cannibals. He finally knew what it feels like to be hung

on a stick and cooked on fire. A famous ancient Chinese poem has a good message that lies behind it. Living beings are all parts of one, and all possess the Buddha nature. What gives us the right to kill and eat them just because they are different from us in form? If we find happiness out of causing pain in other beings, then we do not need a judge to determine our faults. If we cannot feel the pain in other beings, then we are not even half an animal.

ii. The concept of equality for friends and foes. We are all parts of the same world, while showing care and concern for our family, we should also treat enemies and foes with equality and kindness. This is the only way to eliminate our hatred and give rise to compassion. In ancient China, people used to leave food scraps around for rats so that they do not starve to death; and extinguish lamps for moths so that they do not get burnt. Even rats will receive love and care in front of compassion.

### **III. The power and value of compassion**

Compassion in Buddhism is more than just smile and praises. It can also be exhibited in the form of wisdom and integrity. The statue of a chubby, smiling Buddha, Maitreya Buddha, is seen at the mountain gate of Buddhist temples. He represents a reforming force of compassion. After entering the gate, a figure dressed in armour, holding a sistrum is found. He is Skanda, a guardian of the heavenly realm, whose compassion is displayed in the form of subduing power which helps destruct our delusions. Love and encouragement can help people improve, but some people only learn their lessons under the power of strict discipline. The warm spring breeze and summer rain helps life grow, but the harsh winter snow also helps life to mature.

Master Kongyei of Japan used to travel to different places to spread Buddhism. During one of his travels in the woods, he was trapped by a group of bandits who threatened to rob him. Tears could be seen on the Master's face, which caused the bandits to laugh,

"What a cowardly monk!"

"I am crying for you. For someone so young and strong like you not to do something helpful to society but robbing people's money, hell will inevitably be your final destination. Therefore, I am crying for you." These words echoed in the bandits' hearts. They were so touched by the Master's compassion that they became his followers. Even the untamable heart will subdue to compassion whose power is indestructible and unsurpassed.

One night, when Ch'an Master Heng-shun was meditating in the Buddha hall, a thief sneaked in and stole a bag of rice that was placed on the table. As he was about to leave, Heng-shun yelled: "Stop," causing the thief to freeze. Heng-shun then said,

"You are not going to leave without thanking the Buddha for this bag of rice, are you?"

"Oh, er...Thank you," the thief said inattentively and left. A while later, the thief was caught.

After admitting to the police what he had done, the police took him to the temple and questioned the Master,

"Did this man steal anything from the temple?"

"No, he did not." Answered the Master.

"Master, you don't have to cover for him. He has already admitted his crime."

"Well, he did take a bag of rice from the temple, but he was only borrowing it from the Buddha because he said 'Thank you' before he left." The thief was very grateful to the Master for defending him. After he served his sentence, he ordained under Ch'an Master Heng-shun.

How great is the power of compassion? Different people rely on different kinds of power. For example, a child would rely on crying as his power. When his parents refuse to take him to some place full of fun, he would keep crying until his parents change their mind. Some women gain control of their husbands by acting like a spoiled child. A king relies on his authority while an Arhat [4] relies on diligence as his power. Buddha and Bodhisattvas use compassion as their power to help all sentient beings conquer their problems and achieve enlightenment.)

Sakyamuni Buddha, the founder of Buddhism, relinquished a comfortable life and power of a king, yet he was still able to conquer the whole Indian nations not with weapons or force but with a compassionate mind. The evil Devadatta yielded to the Buddha for his great compassion. A wild elephant becomes docile upon seeing the compassionate Buddha. The savage Angulimala abandoned his killing rampage when he felt the Buddha's compassion. Therefore, the most powerful force in this world is not weapons or authority, but compassion. The compassionate Buddha gave people a secure and joyful spiritual home, and now his concept of compassion will continue to lead the world to a happy and bright future.

In our daily life, we continue to be troubled by greed, hatred, arrogance and fear, causing our lives to be in constant chaos. How do we deal with these problems? A compassionate mind can dissolve all these greed, hatred, arrogance and fear. When someone feels seduced, if he uses his compassionate eyes to regard the opposite sex as his mother or sister, then his mind will become peaceful. If we always remind ourselves of the importance of giving, which would make it easier for the lives of many people, then greed will not arise. When we feel hatred in our mind, try to visualize the Buddha's images and his compassion will naturally flow into our heart, which will extinguish the fire of anger. Compassion and endurance are the best remedies to hatred and arrogance.

Once Master Meng Chuang got on a boat to cross the river. After the boat departed, a soldier armed with a sword and a whip came running and yelling for the boat to return so he could get on. All the passengers objected to the idea because the boat had already left the shore, only Master Meng Chuang made a request to the boatman to turn around for the soldier, since it was still not far

from shore. Seeing it was a request made by a monk, the boatman kindly obliged.

The soldier saw Master Meng Chuang sitting on the boat as he got on, so he whipped him on the head and said,

"Get up! I want this seat."

The Master got up silently with his head bleeding. No body said a word throughout the whole journey. When they reached the other side, Master Meng Chuang quietly washed the blood of his face by the river. The soldier suddenly felt ashamed for what he had done, so he sincerely apologized to the Master, who replied calmly,

"It is alright, traveling makes our heart rough."

What subdued the rudeness and arrogance of this soldier? It was the power of compassion. Compassion transforms hatred into peace, and violence into harmony. The power of compassion is so persuasive and moving that even the rocks nod in agreement, and the hearts of bandits will be softened.)

#### **IV. The practice and completion of compassion**

Compassion is more than just theory; it is rather a practice to be carried out as part of our bodily actions. Confucius showed his compassion by offering his education to any kind of people indiscriminately. Du Fu, one of the several renowned poets in Tang Dynasty, aspired to become the owner of thousands of luxurious houses, so that he could provide shelter and comfort to the homeless. This is also a form of compassion.

Meng Chang Jun, a famous Chinese politician two thousand years ago, kept his door open to as many as three thousand people. His compassion for the poor won himself many friends. Ch'an Master Guei-shan Lin-yo said to his disciples upon his deathbed,

"I have no desire to seek rebirth in the Western Pure Land or as a human being. I resolve to come back as a buffalo so that I can serve this world."

The Master's belief in serving all sentient beings before becoming an elite in Buddhism is a form of compassion.

In Buddhism, there is a so-called "Bodhisattva of undergoing other people's suffering," who has resolved to bear the sufferings in place of living beings. Sakyamuni Buddha also exhibited such compassion in his past lives. He fed his own flesh to an eagle and offered his body as food to a tiger. The Buddha's compassionate acts were the manifestation of the "Bodhisattva of Substitution." In one of his lives, he was a dragon that observed the Five Precepts closely. One day, it was awoken from its sleep because many insects were biting into its body. Knowing that it would crush the insects if it rolled around, which will cause it to violate the precept of no killing, the dragon tried its

best to stay still despite of the horrible pain it was feeling. Although it was an animal, its compassion was greater than that of a human.

A hen will fight against the claws of an eagle until it drops just to protect its chickens. A special kind of viviparous venomous snake must slither over sharp bamboo openings to cut open its abdomen to give birth to its baby. These sacrificial acts are the compassion of a mother.

Once a multiple car crash occurred on a highway in Taiwan. When the rescuers tried to dismantle a car within which a crying baby could be heard, they found the baby safely clutched in the arms of its mother who was upon her final breaths. The mother struggled the following words, "please take care of my baby." Then she died. It was the power of compassion that kept the seriously wounded mother alive until she ensured the safety of her baby.

We must learn to appreciate and accept this compassion--omnipresent universe. If not, we can never truly appreciate the value of compassion even if the Buddha is right in front of us. Once a pious believer of Buddhism was trapped on the roof of his house during a flood. The water level continued to rise, and when it reached his feet, he started yelling for Kuan-Yin Bodhisattva's help. As he continued to scream, an indigenous man came in a canoe and said to him,

"Get on! Let me take you to some safe place."

"I don't need indigenous people to save me. I want Kuan-Yin to save me." Said the man arrogantly. The man in the canoe could not do anything but leave without him. The water continued to rise and reached his waist, so he yelled even harder,

"Kuan-Yin Bodhisattva, please come and help me!" A motorboat came out of nowhere and offering to carry him away.

"I hate technology and machines. I want Kuan-Yin to save me."

The motorboat, too, left without him. As water level reached his chest, he continued to yell out to Kuan Yin. Then an American man flying a helicopter came and dropped a ladder for him,

"You must get on now, otherwise it will be too late!"

"You are a foreigner. I don't like you." Once again he refused to be saved, and he was finally drowned. The man's deep faith in the Buddha allowed him to be reborn in the Western Pure Land. As soon as he saw Amitabha Buddha, he started to complain,

"I recited Kuan Yin Bodhisattva's name with the whole of my heart, and he never came to save me."

"When the water level reached your feet, Kuan Yin sent a canoe to save you. But you refused to get on because you dislike indigenous people. So Kuan Yin had to send a motorboat for you. Yet you still refused to get on because you hated technology and machines. When the water level reached your chest, Kuan Yin sent a helicopter to save you. Once again you refused to get on. Not

only were you ungrateful to Kuan Yin's kind intentions, but you were also (?) very picky. Then how can you be saved?

The sounds of streams mouth the word of Dharma throughout the cosmos; the appearance of mountains exhibit immeasurable dimensions of Buddha's wisdom. This universe is rich in life. Whichever isn't the manifestation of a Bodhisattva or his compassionate vows?

We learn to practice compassion like the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas. Not only should compassion be radiated through our hands, eyes, voice, facial expressions, smile, words and mind, so that compassion is a part of us, but we should also take one step further and make this world full of compassion. The clouds in the sky shield us from the harsh sunlight; mother nature smiles upon us through the flowers and trees that flourish on earth. If we further consider the benefits brought by non-sentient beings, every road, bridge, mountain and water can be compassionate to us.

There are four ways to practice compassion: generosity, praise and encouragement, good behavior and fellowship. Furthermore, it is a practice carried out with a hope of benefiting both oneself and others. Compassion is exhibited by treating others with equality, and regarding friends and foes with impartiality. In order to reach the supreme Buddhahood, one of ultimate compassion, we must vow to achieve a mind full of joy, gentleness, endurance, and find peace in kindness compassion, joy and generosity. Let us all aspire to be a compassionate person, to instill compassion into every family, society, nation and world. Then this universe will be full of love, and the human world full of compassion.

#### NOTE

[1] Lasting, dependent existence

[2] Sanskrit: "one who heard," "hearer." One who hears the Buddha's teachings and attain enlightenment.

[3] Sanskrit: "solitary awakened one." A self-enlightened Buddha.

[4] Sanskrit: "worthy one." One who is free from all craving and rebirth.