

Loving Kindness and Compassion in Daily Life: A Buddhist Perspective- Audrey E. Kitagawa

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Most religious traditions promulgate behaviors that are meant to express our caring for each other as a form of implementing social justice of the highest order in daily life. Everyone wants to be treated fairly and reasonably because our sense of justice preserves and enhances our personal and collective dignity, which comes from an inherent recognition that our lives are sacred, and as such, should never be degraded. To be in relationship with others in a manner that is respectful, just, and dignified, presupposes that these qualities are developed within ourselves first so we can then have the capability to convey and share them with others.

The Five Precepts

In order to cultivate these inner qualities there are many guidelines, teachings and instructions to help aspirants along the way. For many adherents, there are fundamental principles for living that are considered core to the conduct of one's life. For example, the Ten Commandments mentioned in Exodus and Deuteronomy of the Old Testament, and the Five Pillars of Islam which are considered moral codes pertaining to Allah.

Buddhists also have a code of conduct for all lay persons that are known as the Five Precepts. There are other precepts as well, depending on which sect of Buddhism one follows, and precepts for monks, as distinguished from lay persons. The five precepts considered basic to Buddhism of all sects are to:

1. abstain from killing
2. abstain from stealing
3. abstain from lying
4. abstain from sexual misconduct
5. abstain from intoxicants

These precepts are meant to create harmony within the individual through the cultivation of inner discipline that becomes the foundation for living a spiritually centered life. The cultivation of inner discipline is seen as self training to live as Buddha lived. In turn, the individual helps to become a vehicle of cultivating harmony within

the larger community within which he lives by refraining from behaviors which can cause conflict and unhappiness for himself and others.

The Law of Karma, Merit, and Reincarnation

The journey to discipline one's inner life to abstain from acts that are proscribed can be the journey of one's entire lifetime. Hand in hand with the precepts are certain concepts fundamental to Buddhism that serve as reinforcements to the practitioner to adhere to the precepts. One important concept is the Law of Karma. It posits that one's actions bear consequences that are similar to the wholesomeness or unwholesomeness of one's actions. In short, what we sow we reap. It therefore serves as a reminder that one should be careful to plant good seeds, or have good actions so that the harvest can bear good fruits that bring happiness and peace into one's life and the lives of others.

The other concept is that of merit^[1] and its beneficial cumulative effect. One's meritorious actions result in consequences favorable to one's self and the beneficiaries of one's meritorious actions. As one accumulates more and more merit through actions that are loving, kind, compassionate, and selfless, the greater the reservoir of positive outcomes that can help one move through life. Merit ultimately contributes to one's spiritual liberation.

The third concept is that of reincarnation. Rebirth provides the opportunity to work through the consequences (karma) of one's actions not only in this present life, but in previous lives, as well as future lives. The process of identifying high lamas and masters who have been reborn to perpetuate the teachings of Buddhism are an integral part of Tibetan Buddhism. There are several references to reincarnation expounded by Lord Buddha where he revealed how karma works, and gave many examples of the effects of karma from one's past life upon one's present life. Reincarnation is also an integral part of Hinduism, which preceded Buddhism by several centuries. Lord Buddha was born into a Hindu family, and the influence of Hinduism on Buddhism can be noted even today where pilgrims can see Shiva lingams^[2] at several sacred sites where Lord Buddha visited.

The Three Doorways to Action

The three doorways to action are the mind, (thought), speech and physical action. In having right thoughts, adherents are encouraged to refrain from negative, hateful, harmful thoughts that arise out of fear, anger, jealousy, resentment, or any number of challenges and interactions that are encountered daily within ourselves and with others. Thoughts are considered to be powerful generators of speech and physical action, so many of the teachings and practices are designed to help adherents purify their minds through meditation, mindfulness exercises, and a number of purification rituals and ceremonies.

In right speech one is encouraged to speak in a warm, friendly and gentle manner, and refrain from lying, participating in slander, malicious gossip, idle chatter, and hurtful, harmful words.

In good actions, one should demonstrate kindness towards others, be generous, follow the Five Precepts, and the teachings. Lord Buddha stressed that the actual observance of his teachings was the greatest way for adherents to show reverence to him.[3]

The Buddha declared, "By birth one is not an outcast, by birth one is not a Brahmin; by deeds is one an outcast, by deeds is one a Brahmin." [4] The aspect of the trajectory and quality of one's life is therefore based upon one's own actions, so the individual is called upon to take responsibility for his own thoughts, speech and conduct.

Lord Buddha is said to have given over 84,000 teachings. One of the great sutras[5] recited by many Buddhists is the Maha[6] Mangala[7] Sutra which captures many of the actions which one should seek to undertake in life. The Maha Mangala Sutra begins with Lord Buddha being respectfully approached by a divine being at Jeta Grove who asks Lord Buddha to expound on the supreme blessings in life. Lord Buddha responded:

Not to associate with the foolish (those who are wicked in speech, thought and action), but to associate with the wise; and to honor those who are worthy of honor — this is a great blessing;

To reside in a suitable locality where pious people who have done meritorious actions in the past are around, and to set oneself on the right path —this is a great blessing;

To have much learning, to be skillful, well-trained in discipline, and to be of good speech —this is a great blessing;

To support one's mother and father, to cherish one's wife and children, and to be engaged in peaceful occupation —this is a great blessing;

To be generous in giving, to be righteous in conduct, to help one's relatives, and to be blameless in action — this is a great blessing;

To abhor evil and abstain from evil deeds, to refrain from intoxicants, and to be steadfast in virtue — this is a great blessing;

To be respectful, humble, contented and grateful; and to listen to the Path (Dharma[8]) on due occasions —this is a great blessing;

To be patient and amenable, to associate with Holy people and to participate in discussions on the Dharma on due occasions — this is a great blessing;

To have self-restraint, a holy and chaste life, the perception of the Noble Truths[9] and the realization of Nirvana -this is a great blessing;

To have a mind unruffled by the vagaries of fortune, from sorrow freed, from defilements cleansed, from fear liberated — this is a great blessing;

Those who thus abide, ever remain invincible, in happiness established.

These are great blessings.

Loving Kindness And Compassion

In the diligent observance of the Five Precepts, the awareness of the Law of Karma, the concepts of merit and reincarnation, and mindfulness of the three doorways to action, the heart deepens in compassion, and becomes a source of actions that increasingly expresses loving kindness towards oneself and others.

Loving kindness, (in Pali, *metta*, in Sanskrit, *maîtri*), and compassion (in both Pali and Sanskrit, *karuna*), are considered to be two of the Four Sublime States, or *Brahmavihara*. The other two sublime states are empathetic joy, (rejoicing in the virtues and happiness of others), and equanimity, (a tranquil state of mind that can be maintained in the face of gain or loss with detachment).

In *The Essence of the Heart Sutra*, His Holiness the Dalai Lama wrote,

"According to Buddhism, compassion is an aspiration, a state of mind, wanting others to be free from suffering. It's not passive -- it's not empathy alone – but rather an empathetic altruism that actively strives to free others from suffering. Genuine compassion must have both wisdom and loving kindness. That is to say, one must understand the nature of the suffering from which we wish to free others (this is wisdom), and one must experience deep intimacy and empathy with other sentient beings (this is loving kindness)."

Loving kindness and compassion play such an important role in the Buddhist approach to spirituality that we can say that a genuine practice of the Dharma is actually based on the development of these qualities. The teachings always emphasize that, unless we practice and integrate these qualities into our everyday lives, it will be impossible to attain to enlightenment.[10]

Nanamoli Thera in her article, "The Practice of Loving Kindness (Metta) As Taught By The Buddha In The Pali Canon," writes that loving kindness "...has the mode of friendliness for its characteristic. Its natural function is to promote friendliness. It is manifested as the disappearance of ill-will. Its footing is seeing with kindness. When it

succeeds it eliminates ill-will. When it fails it degenerates into selfish affectionate desire."

Compassion arises from our desire to see the suffering of others alleviated, and speaks to an interior feeling of relating to others because we can identify with our own wish to be free from suffering whenever we experience it. Many acts of loving kindness spring from compassion for those who are suffering as evidenced by the multitude of humanitarian aid and services located around the world in communities large and small. Great outpourings of compassion and acts of loving kindness abound during disasters, but also take place in grass root movements such as the Charter for Compassion which was launched on November 12, 2009 through 75 global events.

The Charter for Compassion seeks to have compassion embraced globally as a value not only in thoughts, but also in action. The stated principle of compassion in the Charter states, "Compassion impels us to work tirelessly to alleviate the suffering of our fellow creatures, to dethrone ourselves from the centre of our world and put another there, and to honour the inviolable sanctity of every single human being, treating everybody, without exception, with absolute justice, equity and respect."

When we are moved by our hearts of compassion to serve others through acts of loving kindness, we deepen our capacity to be selfless. "In service are included boundless loving kindness, compassion and absolute selflessness which prompt man to be of service to others."^[11]

Conclusion

Ultimately, love is the foundation from which compassion and loving kindness arise, and it is what gives life meaning, and what makes life worth living. It is the resonant field of connectivity that lives within the sacred chamber of our own hearts, and will help us to overcome the obstacles and challenges in life which everyone must face along the way. Obstacles and challenges should not be feared, for in some mysterious ways they help to deepen ourselves as human beings, and help us to appreciate even more, all of the many beautiful people and attributes in our lives with which we are amply blessed. The power of love helps us to not only endure, but to reframe what may seem to be negative experiences to the positive and to come to the state of understanding that nothing in life is ever wasted, pointless, or meaningless. We should always remember that it is in the darkest of nights that the stars shine most brightly.

How shall I choose to express my love this day in my own thoughts, words and actions? Can I send a blessing from my heart to someone who may have created an offense within me? Can I say, "Thank you," and express my appreciation to someone who held that door open for me? Can I offer my seat on a crowded subway to someone who needs to sit down in that seat more than I do? Every moment that we live, we have myriad opportunities to share ourselves abundantly with those around us. In the conscious practice of meeting every opportunity with small and large acts of loving

kindness and compassion toward others our lives can become radiant beacons of love and hope to those we meet along life's journey of intertwining lives.

1. In Sanskrit *punya*, in Pāli *puñña*, merit is said to accumulate through one's good deeds or thoughts which carries throughout life and subsequent incarnations.

[2] Lingam in Sanskrit means "mark" and depicts the energy and power of Lord Shiva, one of three deities in the Hindu Trinity of Brahman, Vishnu and Shiva.

[3] *The Buddha And His Teachings*, Narada Mahathera, (Buddha Dharma Education Association, Inc., 1980), pg. X of Introduction

[4] *Ibid*, pg.232

[5] In Sanskrit, *sutra* means "thread," and this word was placed in the title to sermons given by Lord Buddha.

[6] In Sanskrit, *Maha* means "Great."

[7] In Pali, *Mangala* means "blessings" or "good fortune."

[8] A word most commonly used in Buddhism to mean the teachings of the Buddha.

[9] The Four Noble Truths expounded by Lord Buddha about the nature of life: 1. There is suffering, 2. There is causation to suffering, 3. There can be cessation to suffering, 4. There is a path to the cessation of suffering.

The path to the cessation of suffering is known as the Eightfold Path to Enlightenment, which can be achieved through right 1. intentions, 2. speech, 3. actions, 4. livelihood, 5. perception, 6. mindfulness, 7. effort, and 8. concentration.

[10] In Pali, (the language which Lord Buddha spoke), and Sanskrit, the word *bodhi* describes enlightenment, and means to have awakened and understood, a reference to the experience of Lord Buddha, who is said to have proclaimed to someone who inquired about the cause of his radiant countenance, "I am awake."

[11] *The Buddha And His Teachings*, Venerable Narada Mahathera, (Buddha Dharma Association, Inc., 1980), pg 544