

The Great Compassion and Fraternity in Mahāyāna Buddhist Traditions

Ven. Dr. Dhammadīpa Sak (Fa Yao 法曜)
Chuang Yen Monastery

Buddhism appeared in India 2,600 years ago as a “moral revolution.” It inverted the accepted values and transferred the center of interest from the world without to the world within. To the Buddha himself, creed and ritual and caste were among the things that did not really matter. Buddha’s great discovery was that of the human person—the person behind the differences of creed and circumstance, of social and political status. The cultivation of Great Compassion, as one example, had the same moral task, which he had to fulfill without help from others.

Claritas: Journal of Dialogue and Culture, Vol. 4, No. 2 (October 2015)
88–94 © 2015

Because Catholicism and Buddhism share the same aim—peace and greatness in humanity—the Great Compassion’s emphasis on the nonjudgmental and on removing the notion of races, hostilities, sexism, sexual orientations, and even the concept of nationalism and so forth, can benefit us all, whether we are from the East or the West. Thus today I would like to share my understanding of the Great Compassion with you.

The Great Compassion is one of the important qualities of the Buddha, and it forms the basis of all perfections (*pāramitās*). It is a chief aspiration for Mahāyāna practitioners to carry on their faith to save sentient beings and to carry on the Buddhist messages from one life to another life with passion. The Great Compassion contains several important concepts in relation to human beings regardless of their race, ethnicity, economic status, gender, and so forth; and it calls us to treat everyone as their own sister or brother. Therefore, this paper tries to establish the connection between the “Great Compassion” as a perfection of the Buddha and the importance of “fraternity” for humanity today.

The Great Compassion in Relation to Perfections (Pāramitās)

The Great Compassion is one of the important qualities of the Buddha and it forms the basis of all perfections (*pāramitās*). In the Theravāda tradition, ten perfections are mentioned.¹ As to Mahāyāna, six perfections² are enumerated. It is important to note

1. They are generosity (*dāna*), morality (*sīla*), renunciation (*nekkhama*), wisdom (*paññā*), energy (*vīriya*), forbearance (*khanti*), truthfulness (*sacca*), resolution (*adhiṭṭhāna*), loving-kindness (*metta*) and equanimity (*upekkhā*).

2. Six of them are generosity (*dāna*; 檀波羅蜜), morality (*sīla*; 尸羅波羅蜜), forbearance (*kṣanti*; 忍辱波羅蜜), energy (*vīriya*; 精進波羅蜜), meditative absorption (*dhyāna*; 禪波羅蜜) and wisdom (*prajñā*; 般若波羅蜜).

that in both cases the perfections consist of those noble qualities not spoiled by craving, pride, and wrong view. They are founded on the Great Compassion and on skillful knowledge (*upāya kosalla nāna*) which is skill in seeking merit.

Take the perfection of meditative absorption (*samādhi*) as one example. According to *Mahāprajñāpāramitopadeśa Śāstra*, in a passage listing eighteen characteristic of the Mahāyāna perfection of meditative absorption (*dhyāna pāramitā*),³ the text attempts to prove that despite its ecstatic aspects and its periods of seclusion required by the practice, the Bodhisattva's meditation is an efficient method and integral part of the great being's messianic mission. To give an example, it is mentioned in the text:

Even if one has accomplished meditative absorption (*samādhi*), out of compassion to sentient beings, he is not satisfied with various types of beautiful mental meditative states as internal dharma and not satisfied with unpleasant things [like contemplation on] impurity as an external dharma. Having contemplated in such a way, he gives rise to Great Compassionate mind and vows "I will teach sentient beings to have internal beautiful meditative concentration and to be away from [temptation] in order to achieve happiness from impurity [meditation], based on those wonderful absorption, gradually one gains the happiness from the Buddha's path."⁴

This statement clearly indicates that the Bodhisattva practices meditation in order to teach the inner bliss of absorption (*dhyāna*) to those beings attached to exterior pleasure.⁵ The Bodhisattva practices "*dhyāna* which does not forsake the living beings" and "in meditative absorption (*dhyāna*) he always generates thoughts of Great Compassion."⁶ It is the same principle applied to all the perfections without fail in order to generate Great Compassion for the sake of other human beings.

Mahāyānists stress the importance of Great Compassion and tirelessly practice the perfections to attain Buddhahood. If a Mahāyānist—who vows to forsake enlightenment for himself—should so desire, he or she can carry Great Compassion from one life to another life in order to achieve the perfections needed to benefit beings whenever they are born. The idealism of the perfections accompanied with Great Compassion form the major practices of Mahāyāna Buddhism.

The Great Compassion in Relation to the Bodhisattva

When the Buddha had not yet attained Buddhahood, he existed as Sumedha, the hermit in one of his past lives. Sumedha was so accomplished in spiritual attainments at the time he met Buddha Dīpankara that he could achieve his own liberation, should he so desire. Nevertheless as a powerful being endowed with Great Compassion, he bore personal suffering in the circle of life-and-death (*samsāra*) for the long duration of four incalculable aeons (*asaṅkhyeyya*) and a hundred thousand aeons to fulfill the

3. *Prajñāpāramitopadeśa śāstra*, (*Taisho* 25, no. 1509, p. 187, c15–18).

4. *Mahāprajñāpāramitopadeśa śāstra*, (*Taisho* 25, no. 1509, p. 187, c19–25).

5. *Taisho* 25.187c.

6. *Taisho* 25.188a6–7.

perfections in order to liberate suffering beings. This inspiring legend has been passed down to Mahāyāna Buddhism.

Given this story, it is commonly accepted that a Bodhisattva should develop immense compassion for all beings, close or distant, as if they were all his or her own children. Without discriminating between friend and foe, the Bodhisattva should look upon all sentient beings as poor sufferers in the circle of life-and-death (*samsāra*), where they are burning with the fires of craving, hatred, and ignorance, with the fires of birth, aging, death, grief, lamentation, pain, distress, and despair. Contemplating thus, the Bodhisattva should develop vigorous compassion for them. One's compassion should be so great as to enable one to go to the rescue of all beings from *samsāra*, even to the point of sacrificing one's life.⁷

Besides the legend of the previous life of the Buddha, there are numerous Bodhisattvas mentioned in Mahāyāna literatures. These great Bodhisattvas include Avalokiteśvara, Mañjuśrī, Maitriya, Samantabhadra Bodhisattvas. They all are understood as great Bodhisattvas who live in different galaxies carrying their Great Compassion and working on their perfections to save beings from their ignorance. Their existence greatly inspires us to be better persons, and at times people seek their mercy and compassion to lessen human misery. Buddhists worship them, asking for forgiveness or favors. Each of the great Bodhisattvas has different salient features, but none of them can be exempt from possessing the virtue of Great Compassion.

The Great Compassion in Relation to the Buddha

It is said that the Buddha, the founder of Buddhism, is different from Arahats, the perfect Noble Person who completely cut off re-birth. Along with Great Compassion and the three bases of mindfulness,⁸ were “the eighteen exclusive qualities” of the Buddha. These qualities likely had an apocryphal function to distinguish the Buddha from other liberated individuals, like Arahats depicted in Śrāvakayāna, although they are found individually in the early scriptures as well.

The concept of the Buddha in early Buddhism has two aspects: the human identity and the superhuman character. On the basis of the human elements of the Buddha, the Sarvāstivādins and Pāli Buddhism formulated their concept of the Buddha as a human being. On the other hand, the Mahāsāṃghikas conceived a transcendental Buddha on the basis of the superhuman or divine powers because they faithfully accepted whatever was said in the *sūtras* as truth. Nevertheless, tradition believes the Buddha is different from Arahats, having the qualities of Great Compassion and the three bases of mindfulness.⁹

The notion of the Three Bodies of the Buddha, though different sects of Buddhism might have different interpretations even during the era of BCE, seemingly has ten powers, four kinds of integrity, three foundations of mindfulness, and Great Compassion. They are the fruits of the immeasurable merit accumulated during three incalculable aeons (*Asaṃkhyeya kalapas*) and are accepted by all Buddhist traditions.

8. *Abhidharma Mahāvibhāṣa*, (*Taisho* 27, no. 1545, p. 160, b19–c1).

9. *Ibid.*, (*Taisho* 27, no. 1545, p. 160, b19–c1).

7. *Vicittasārābhivamsa* (1992) p. 2.

It is believed that all the Buddhas have to collect merit, and it is only those who vow to attain the Buddhahood who exclusively possess the Great Compassion. Some literatures of non-Mahāyāna (i.e. Śrāvakayāna) offer certain reasons why the Great Compassion is purely associated with the Buddha and Bodhisattva per se. For example, the *Abhidharmakośabhāṣya* of Vasubandhu gives five reasons why the compassion of the Buddha is termed “Great Compassion,” but both the *Abhidharmaṅgaprakaraṇa Śāsanaśāstra* and the *Abhidharma Nyāyānusāra Śāstra* of Saṅghabhadra list only four reasons. Hence, with regards to the Buddha, the Great Compassion as understood from Vibhāṣā (expositor) tradition, can be considered to have at least four aspects:

- (1) The merits of the Buddha are great.
- (2) It arises for the benefit and protection of all sentient beings.
- (3) It arises out of his compassion towards all sentient beings.
- (4) It operates with a pure mind, equally and continuously directed towards sentient beings.¹⁰

The Differences between Compassion and the Great Compassion

There is much discussion in the Buddhist literature on the difference between compassion and Great Compassion. Although this issue still needs to be explored with skill in the old languages, here I list the differences from the Sārvāstivāda’s Abhidharma exposition called *Abhidharma Mahāvibhāṣā*:¹¹

10. Ibid., (*Taisho* 27, no. 1545, p. 428, a5–13).

11. Ibid., (*Taisho* 27, no. 1545, p. 160, b7–19).

1. With respect to its nature: Ordinary compassion is the absence of hatred, whereas Great Compassion is the absence of ignorance.
2. With respect to its scope: Ordinary compassion takes the form of ordinary suffering, whereas Great Compassion takes the form of a threefold suffering.
3. With respect to its object: Ordinary compassion is concerned with the beings of the Kāmadhātu (desire realms) only, whereas Great Compassion is concerned with beings of the three realms.
4. With respect to its level (*bhūmi*): Ordinary compassion is at the level of the ten *dhyānas* (absorptions), whereas Great Compassion is at the level of the fourth *dhyāna* only.
5. With respect to its support: Ordinary compassion arises in Śrāvakas, Pratyekabuddhas, and Buddhas as well as in ordinary people (*prthagjana*), whereas Great Compassion arises only in Buddhas.
6. With respect to its acquisition: Ordinary compassion is achieved through detachment from the desire realm and their *dhyānas* (absorption states), whereas Great Compassion is achieved through detachment from the *bhavāgra* only.
7. With respect to saving (others): Ordinary compassion only arouses sympathy for the act of liberating (others), whereas Great Compassion not only gives rise to sympathy, but also accomplishes the act of liberating.
8. With respect to compassion: Ordinary compassion is partial compassion, for it sympathizes only with beings who are suffering, whereas Great Compassion is turned towards all beings equally.

In sum, Great Compassion has the quality of the absence of ignorance, not just the harmful mind and hatred. As for the compassionate mindset, those who have Great Compassion are also focused on the beings in three realms. The Great Compassion can be achieved at four or above four meditative absorptions (*dhyaṇas*), and it is not shared with other kinds of noble beings like the Śrāvakas. Most importantly, Great Compassion has the prominent feature of not only giving rise to sympathy for the act of liberating others, but it also accomplishes the act of liberating. Lastly, Great Compassion is not turned towards some beings—those who suffer—but towards all beings equally.

Further, according to the *Mahāyāna Sūtra of Mind Ground Contemplation* 《大乘本生心地觀經》 translated by Master Prajñā¹² (般若三藏) (around 789 CE) the concept of Great Compassion is taken as the body of “all sentient beings,” which is the same as my body that gives rise to the Great Compassionate mind.”¹³ This powerful realization is often connected with the importance of associating with good friends, referring mostly to Bodhisattvas and the Buddhas, without limiting oneself to any good teacher. Without good guidance, it is extremely difficult for one to be liberated from life and death, and getting the most valuable treasure.

The popular phrase relating to the Great Compassion that is found in Chinese commentary and literature is “Great Compassion without Separation from One Another” (同體大悲). Through

12. He is an Indian monk from ancient northwest India of Kapiśa or Kashmir (present day Bagram, Afghanistan, north of Kabul) who arrived in China in the ninth century. In 789, Prajñā translated *Da Hua Yan Zhang Zhe Wen Fo Na Luo Yan Li Jing* (大華嚴長者問佛那羅延力經). In 790, Prajñā was given the title “Tripitaka Master” and the royal purple *kasaya*, given only by the emperor to certain highly esteemed monks.

13. *Taisho* 03, no. 159, p. 311, c12–20.

clear understanding of the teachings of the Buddha, accompanied by removing the abler (能緣) and object (能緣) of meditation, a person will be capable of establishing the egalitarian state of mind wherein “Great Compassion without Separation from One Another” is fully developed.¹⁴ A Bodhisattva who has fully developed Great Compassion will feel constantly a sympathy even to beings who are evil or born in unfortunate realms of worlds.¹⁵

Great Compassion and Fraternity

The salient features of Great Compassion appear to me as not merely “alleviating the suffering of others,” but doing so without the separation of others (同體) and accompanied by no distinction between living beings (不起眾生相). We who are living in society today sometimes fail to help each other. People are infatuated with “things,” with greed and craving, jealousy and hatred embedded in our hearts. It is only through believing in the value of Great Compassion that we can modify this condition. In turn, Great Compassion suffuses us with great joy when sentient beings are liberated from suffering. Thus, we appreciate those who share their wisdom and knowledge with us based in fraternity and companionship. Furthermore, this beautiful Great Compassion infuses us with the wonderful quality of forbearance in sympathy with those who are hostile and cruel to us. The unity of the human and the divine mind is so wonderful it can certainly be called the “doctrine of the equality of all men and women.”

Thus, the phenomenon of the Buddha who passed down his teachings to perfect persons such as Arahats on earth and

14. *Taisho* 20, no. 1088, p. 216, c25–27.

15. *Commentary to the Humane King Sūtra*, (*Taisho* 33, no. 1708, p. 425, a2–3).

Bodhisattvas mainly staying in other galaxies, can be understood as a kind of moral revolution. No one equal to the Buddha had ever emphatically reminded us that none of us have the unchanging soul called “I.” A self is nothing but the ever-changing five aggregates bombarded from time to time with new information and theories. These pieces of information and theories mold our patterns of behavior and thought which in Buddhism are termed as “views” (*dṛṣṭi*). Whether the view is good or bad, it may restrict us and egoistically lead us to grasp this illusionary information or view as defining ourselves. The stronger and the longer one grasps those views, the harder they are to release. Only through understanding that there is “non-self,” and by softening it with compassion, can one weaken the grasping onto one’s own views. The doctrine of non-self—enabling wisdom and compassion—loosens our bonds to ego-centered views and enables us to act toward others with mutual respect and listening hearts. This can form a model of humanity able to live fraternity and express it in solidarity.

Hatred can never co-exist with compassion in our mind. Compassion does not only subdue hatred and hostility, but also eradicates a harmful and vengeful mind. If Buddhism is regarded as a moral revolution, as Professor Francis Anderson laid out,¹⁶ the idealism of Great Compassion surely brings forth the idea of fraternity or brotherhood/sisterhood of men and women. What message is better than to cherish every human being regardless of their

16. Louis Francis Anderson, *The Religion of the Soul* (Whitefish, Mt: Kessinger Publishing, 2010), 4: “The moral revolution known as Buddhism, the religious revolution, known as Christianity, the political revolution of which France was the standard bearer, and the economic revolution, in the midst of which we are struggling, and the end of which is not yet.”

beliefs and culture, and to vow to alleviate their sufferings and misunderstanding with forbearance everywhere and in any realm of life?

A passage in the *Avatamsaka Sūtra* (大方廣佛華嚴經) reads as follows: “Through the adornment of humility to accomplish forbearance and softness in mind, one attends to follow all types of Buddha’s teachings, trusting and paying great respect to good friends.” Yet, who are these good friends who stay with us if they are wise and learned? To answer this, just like what is said the *Dhammasaṅgaṇī* (*The Collection of the Law*): “Therein, what are admirable friends? To follow after, to frequent the company of, and associate with, such persons as have faith, are virtuous, learned, generous, and wise; to resort to and consort with them, to be devoted to them, enthusiastic about them, mixing with them.”

But what about those who provoke or even harm us—our “enemies?” The safeguard we have is through Great Compassion that cultivates the perfection of forbearance (*kṣanti pāramī*) to tolerate the acts of physical or verbal aggression by others without giving way to anger. The essence of Great Compassion is establishing equanimity or equality towards all persons, and forbearance serves as an antidote to anger when provoked by others.¹⁷ Therefore both combine together to enhance a “mind of non-aversion” (*adosa cetāsika*) and “beautifully calm the mind” (*sobhana cetāsika*) as prescribed in the Abhidharma tradition. The possibilities contained in this noble personality reach their summit in a beautiful fraternity and solidarity with humankind that unfolds to reveal a real truth.

Accordingly, when one understands the deep truth of suffering taught in the Four Noble Truths, one understands that all beings

17. *Vicittasārābhivamsa* (1991), 252.

face a great deal of despair, dissatisfaction, and worries. Having given rise to a deep compassionate mind toward all of them, one sees without any hostile ideas all human beings as the same with different cultures and beliefs. Hence, the concept of Great Compassion encourages and enriches our interreligious initiatives in the context of seeking peace and the flourishing of life for all, as in the Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*: “An attitude of openness in truth and in love must characterize the dialogue with the followers of non-Christian religions, in spite of various obstacles and difficulties, especially forms of fundamentalism on both sides” (no. 250).

Conclusion

The content of Great Compassion gives us not only a perspective on spiritual cultivation, but it also gives us a perspective on cultivating human relationships. It gives humanity a higher goal: to treat each person equally, and to have forbearance towards people who might misunderstand us. Treating persons of different religions, ethnicities, races, and genders equally requires tremendous patience and understanding. From the Great Compassion standpoint, no human being is perfect; and we are all bound to commit wrong deeds and possess wrong views due to craving, hatred, and ignorance. Only when one recognizes all human beings are capable of committing wrong deeds bodily, verbally or mentally, can one forgive and accept them as they are.

The ideal of the Great Compassion must not be restricted to the cultivation of the mind. It also guides us in our relationships that should be non-judgmental and caring, and should always be characterized by mutual respect. It tells us the importance of helping others and putting the Great Compassion into action with the

perfections. The images of the Great Compassionate Buddha, the Great Compassionate Bodhisattvas, and the Perfections are good and sound. They bestow upon us the model of harmony and peace between all living beings in the figure of the most perfect one and the most compassionate one.

Once Ven. Ānanda said to the Lord Buddha, “This is half of the holy life, Blessed One: admirable friendship, admirable companionship, admirable camaraderie.” But then the Buddha replied: “Don’t say that, Ānanda, don’t say that. Admirable friendship, admirable companionship, admirable camaraderie is actually the whole of the holy life.” (*SN* 45. 2). I think this famous statement proclaimed by the Buddha stands in full support of the value of fraternity!

Ven. Abbot Sak Dhammadipa (Fa Yao) received full ordination in Sri Lanka, as well as an MA in Buddhism and Pali from Kelaniya University. His PhD in Religious Studies is from Bristol University. He serves as abbot of the Temple of Enlightenment in the Bronx and is also in residence at Chuang Yen Monastery in Carmel, NY.