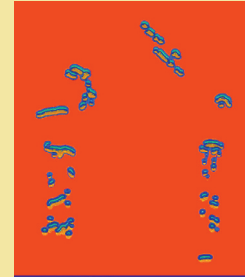




## *Lovingkindness and Compassion:*

### **the fundamental practices of realization**

In this reflective article, excerpted from *The Three Essentials of Buddhist Practice*, **Master Yin Shun** explains how the attainment of enlightenment cannot be reached through rational experience alone, but rather through a harmonious merging of wisdom, with lovingkindness and compassion for all.



**O** riginal translation by Tan Jia

Edited by Xianyang Carl Jerome

As followers of Mahayana Buddhism, it is important that we fully understand that lovingkindness and compassion are the essence of the Mahayana path. In bodhisattva practice, it is written: “The core of Buddhism is nothing but great compassion and lovingkindness.”

Mahayana scriptures are both unanimous and emphatic in declaring that these two practices are the very heart of Buddhism. Without them there are neither Buddhas nor bodhisattvas. Without lovingkindness and compassion, there would be no Buddhadharmas.

The development and maintenance of lovingkindness and compassion were fundamental aspirations of the Buddha himself. When we examine his biography we see evidence of this in nearly every aspect of his life and work.

The Buddha was motivated to seek the truth after watching the suffering of men and animals as they labored and lived under the blazing Indian sun: local farmers working in the fields, persevering despite hunger, thirst and exhaustion; exhausted buffaloes, injured by their yokes, being whipped into productivity, their blood dripping onto the earth. Farmers tilling the land and birds diving into the freshly turned soil to eat insects, maggots and the worms that fed on the blood tainted earth.

**S**hakyamuni was greatly anguished by what he saw. He realized that all beings suffered without exception, including himself. His great empathy led him to understand how others felt under this burden as well. It was his bodhisattva attitude that led him to take all sentient beings into consideration with great compassion as he weighed the problem of suffering and sought a way to alleviate it. When at last, under the bodhi tree, he attained enlightenment and understood the truth of life, he immediately began his travels along the banks of the Ganges River. His aim? To enlighten all suffering beings by turning the dharma wheel.

If we look in to the past lives of the Buddha as recorded in *Jakata* (stories of the Buddha’s previous lives), they too are filled with altruism, lovingkindness and compassion. Throughout those stories, bodhisattvas practiced the paramitas and upon achieving a state of perfection, they became Buddhas. Hence, the practice and goal of the Mahayana teaching – the practice of bodhisattvas and the attainment of Buddhahood – are a self-contained, self-perpetuating loop of conditioned causality. In other words, they are both a source for and a result of minds and actions comprised of and engaged in continuous lovingkindness and compassion, without which there would be no Mahayana teaching.

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### **The Origin of Lovingkindness and Compassion**

The foundation of the Buddhadharma is lovingkindness and compassion. In some ways, this is not unlike benevolence in Chinese culture or universal love in Christianity. Free from the belief in a creator god, though, the Buddhadharma is able to probe directly into the origin of lovingkindness and compassion, completely and thoroughly embodying it. According to the dharma, the manifestation of lovingkindness and compassion is a natural response of empathetic feelings resulting from the interaction of our various faculties.

From conditioned causation, we realize that all things on earth including all matter, mind and lives, are interdependent and not independent of each other. The manifestation of individual and independent activities existing in reality is the result of a combination of causes and conditions that are tied together just as knots are tied in a net. Activities that appear to be independent and individual are in actuality dependent. Without these very specific relational conditions they would not exist. The world and everything in it, all living things, all living beings, are formed in this way. Developing and understanding this correlation of conditional causation in all things leads us to form a compassionate view of life. This view embraces a selfless perspective, a perspective of mutual help, of accepting and returning kindness. In other words, this view of life is based on lovingkindness and compassion.

In terms of the present life, humans cannot survive without society. Besides relationships within families, we depend upon each other for everything – from clothes and food, housing and medications, agricultural and industrial products, everything is grown or manufactured and then transported via complex commercial system upon which we are dependent. Our acquisition of knowledge and skills, our success in study and career all depend on the support of teachers and friends. Governments provide us

with a social order, community structure, and security. Without the interaction of all these correlated causes and conditions, we would not have even a moment of peace and harmony.

Today, all the disparate parts of our world are more interdependent than ever. The ideologies and economies are all more closely linked than ever before. The well-being of all species, from the tiniest insect to the largest animal, are all connected and each exists in direct or indirect relationship to our destiny and happiness.

Since human beings and all other living things are so intimately related, it is natural for us to feel empathy for each other – empathy is based on a realization that we all share something in common. This intimate concern leads us to want to practice lovingkindness and compassion so that we may bring happiness to others and eradicate suffering for all.

From the perspective of the continuous flow of life in three periods, all sentient beings have been closely related to us from beginningless time. They have shared intimate lives with us as our parents, siblings, spouses and children. We owe gratitude to all sentient beings and so a bodhisattva considers all sentient beings as their parents and siblings. In the Buddha's mind, all sentient beings were just like Rahula, his own son. This realization of the connection between all sentient beings reaches beyond family, nationality and humankind. It is beyond any shared profession, social status, racial distinction, or religious affiliation. It comes from our expanded and continuous relationship between the self and other. Understanding this, we are natural inclined to be altruistic (offer lovingkindness) and helpful (compassionate) to all sentient beings as our way of showing gratitude to them. Lovingkindness and compassion are, in fact, the manifestation of the law of conditional causation in the form of empathy and concern.

From the impartial nature of conditional causation, we can see that all things are interrelated and infinitely divergent. None exists independently or solitarily. The ultimate meaning of the law of conditional causation lies in the nature of no-self, which leads us to understand the impartially in all things that are inherent in the dharma. This universal impartiality does not belong to a god but is the universal nature of each instance of conditional causation. Understanding the law of conditional causation from this perspective, we then advance from complementary concern to non-discriminatory equality.

Mahayana Buddhism teaches not only that the Buddha and all sentient beings are equal, but also that all sentient beings have the potential to become a buddha. This idea arises quite organically and logically from the belief that all beings are equal. In this state of universal equality, it is natural to feel great compassion for all beings, as they all have the same nature as we do. As long as sentient beings suffer, are ignorant, and lost, as long as they have not attained enlightenment, we suffer. This is why the practice of lovingkindness and compassion continues to endless time. It is the path to saving all sentient beings, setting them free from suffering.

All sentient beings, humans in particular, should act altruistically not only because of the common realization of mutual dependence as indicated in conditional causation, but also because of an intuitive sense of shared happiness. Whether it is for ourselves or for others, we desire equality and peace for all. This

may not fathom it; but an intuitive awareness of this sense reappears through our distorted and delusive mind. This is the source of lovingkindness and compassion. The spirit of lovingkindness and compassion is therefore a natural manifestation of the human mind towards the truth of all things.

### **The Mind and Practice of Lovingkindness and Compassion.**

Lovingkindness and compassion are the foundation of Buddhism and the essence of Bodhisattva practice. Every move and every action of the bodhisattva are the expression of and the motivation for lovingkindness and compassion. Because of this, the Bodhisattva is never free. He is not free to do what his heart desires, but only what all sentient beings need as he is driven by his lovingkindness and compassion from deep down. For the benefits of other sentient beings, his actions are altruistic and self-sacrificing.

The lovingkindness and compassion of a bodhisattva are embodied in the four heavenly abodes. They are lovingkindness, compassion, sympathetic joy and equanimity. Lovingkindness is defined as offering benefits, peace and happiness to all sentient beings in this world and beyond. Compassion is to act to relieve the sufferings of all beings so that they may be exempted from rebirth and death. Sympathetic joy is the joy of sharing with those sentient beings who have been released from suffering and have found happiness. Equanimity is when we treat friends and foes alike without weighing their response to our own actions.

On the other hand, if we act towards others with a mind bent on generating gratitude or hatred towards us we will only develop either attachments or aversions. If we are attached to the effect our behavior generates we

will be inclined to like those who greet us with gratitude and dislike those who greet us with hostility or hatred. The bodhisattva path is to practice no-self, non-attachment, equanimity,

## THE LOVINGKINDNESS AND COMPASSION OF A BODHISATTVA ARE EMBODIED IN THE FOUR HEAVENLY ABODES.

is not God's calling, but the disclosure of the nature of conditional causation. We may not realize it, but neither can we depart from it. Due to our ignorance, delusion and limitation, we

doing what is right without regard for the outcome or response from others.

The major objectives of practicing with lovingkindness and compassion are to bring happiness to others and eradicate misery. People who are jealous and unhappy when they see others happy and content, or who are vengeful, who bear strong feelings of love and hate—it is hard for them to practice impartiality, unselfish lovingkindness and compassion. The true bodhi mind is a combination of the four qualities: lovingkindness, compassion, sympathetic joy and equanimity.

The possession of these qualities alone is not enough; they must be solidified by practice. Without practice they are only mere thinking. By practicing the four all-embracing virtues we make our lovingkindness and compassion real and thus benefit other beings. The four embracing virtues are actions that serve as the bridge between the conceptual and practical application of practice in the world. They are: giving, offering things material and immaterial; words of love; beneficial acts for the public; and working with others.

Giving can be in the form of monetary assistance, labor or even the sacrifice of our lives. They are all considered material offerings. A dharma offering is to give Buddhist teachings through words that can lead peoples' minds towards goodness and away from evil. For people who are troubled, perplexed, down or in pain, a bodhisattva will use the correct teachings of the Buddha to guide them to the truth. He will use expedient methods that are pertinent to protect and help the person in need. This is called fearless offering. These three kinds of offerings sum up all acts of altruism. Without these offerings lovingkindness and compassion would have no significance.

Offerings need also to be accompanied by words of love, beneficial acts for the public and working with others in order to realize our acts of altruism. Words of love are any words of concern. These may be kind words spoken gently or urgent scolding words with good

intentions that are true expressions arising from our lovingkindness and compassion. Words offered in these ways can be felt and gladly accepted by the listener. If we were to make the mistake of offering our help with a contemptuous, conceited attitude, they will be rejected. Even if they are accepted it will be with reluctance and aversion. If we make comments on people or issues, they should arise from our lovingkindness and compassion and be delivered with good intentions and constructive suggestions. Otherwise, people's aversions will cause misunderstandings and conflicts even if our suggestions are valid.

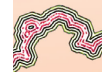
Altruistic conduct is for the benefit of the public welfare. As we perform charitable deeds, we must always bear this in mind.

Working with others in a cooperative manner means that though we will surely experience ups and downs together, we do so with equanimity, not allowing our own attachments or aversions to arise and impact our actions. At work and at play, we want to blend in and treat everyone equally. Such attitudes win over people's hearts and create greater peace and tranquility for everyone.

Bodhisattvas who want to practice lovingkindness and compassion for the benefit of others must do this tactfully and in balance with wisdom. Words of love, altruistic conduct and working cooperatively with others are effective ways of making offerings to others. They are essential characteristics of the actions of virtuous leaders, serving to benefit and unify all sentient beings. As honorable leaders, bodhisattvas guide not for the authority of leadership but for the salvation of all sentient beings.

Bodhisattvas realize that only through the practice of lovingkindness and compassion can they unite and benefit all sentient beings. The combination of the bodhi mind paired with the practice of lovingkindness and compassion are required of all bodhisattvas. The leadership skills and actions of bodhisattvas are not confined to

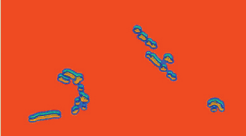
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the realm of politics, but are applicable in any social level or any profession. A bodhisattva who possesses the bodhi mind and who practices lovingkindness and compassion will always be an influential leader. An example of this was Vimalakirti who, as a lay Buddhist, became the central honored one among all other leaders for his possession of these qualities.

### Nurturing Lovingkindness and Compassion

All of sentient beings possess lovingkindness and compassion but this inherent virtue cannot always be expanded because we can't dissociate ourselves from our selfishness and narrow-mindedness. When mixed with other complexities the sentiments become what we call love. In "Ode to a Tiger," the ancient poet wrote:



*Respected like no other,  
No animal dares to enrage the tiger.  
But when it comes to his cubs,  
He walks and looks back at them with tender lovingkindness.*

## TREAT FRIENDS AND FOES ALIKE.

Tenderness and lovingkindness are inherent in all sentient beings, even the ferocious tiger, who though dreadfully feared by all others is a doting parent. However, lovingkindness and compassion are offered selectively. In practice though, bodhisattvas need to focus their attention on the expansion and purification of these qualities, lest they be distorted by selfishness and narrow-mindedness. Our practice should be concentrated on nurturing the ability to offer these qualities equally to all, just as we would nurture all the roots of a plant to guarantee its optimal growth and health. According to ancient arahats, there are two ways to nurture and sustain the mind of lovingkindness and compassion: (1) put ourselves into other's shoes and (2) treat friends and foes alike.

Put ourselves into other people's shoes? Or, what should we do if we were in their position? How should we handle any particular matter? Everyone is inclined to love and care for themselves. Since this is so, imagine what would occur if we could extend our thoughts and feelings about ourselves out towards others with the clarity and purity of emotion. In this case, we would treat everyone as if they were ourselves, and quite naturally lovingkindness and compassion for all others would emerge and grow.

The Dhammapada reminds us that "All sentient beings are afraid to die. Everyone fears the knife and the rod." By recognizing that our own feelings are not unique but are in fact held in common with all sentient beings, we can see that by extending our feelings outward we can cut a path to understanding how others feel. In doing this we see that we must neither kill nor use the rod. While this can expand our self-love and nurture our lovingkindness and compassion, alone it cannot lead us to achieve complete purification of the mind.

Treat friends and foes alike. All sentient beings may be classified in terms of their relation to us as intimates, neutrals or enemies. Aside from ourselves, nobody is more dear and intimate to us than our parents, spouses and children, so it is easy to offer them lovingkindness and compassion. On the other hand, it is most difficult to find in our hearts lovingkindness and compassion for our enemies and foes. An expedient way to nurture and sustain our lovingkindness and compassion is to start with offering these to our closest loved ones, then to extend outwards to include strangers and finally to include our enemies. We start with our family and friends, observing their suffering so

that we may eradicate it. We note their unhappiness so that we may provide them with happiness. In each case, we practice with the aim of feeling their happiness and suffering as if they were our own. This will encourage us to constantly want to bring happiness and relieve pain for them.

The next step is to extend our practice to those about whom we feel neutral, feeling neither gratitude nor resentment. As we observe in greater detail, we will begin to realize that they are all our benefactors. From time immemorial, who can say that they were not our parents and teachers at one time or another? Thus, we can practice lovingkindness and compassion toward them as if they were our benefactors and beloved family members.

When we can practice this with those about whom we feel neutral, we go a step further and practice it with regard to our enemies. They were and perhaps still are our enemies, but were they not nice to us before? Why must we concentrate on holding a grudge and not offering forgiveness? Besides, it is not in their character to incur hatred on us; but rather caused by prejudice, material attraction or their own vexation. As they are vicious and ignorant, we should take pity on them, forgive them and help them. Let us not hold grudges against them over some minor mistakes on their part.

Moreover, things can change between us and our loved ones and our enemies. If we do not treat our loved ones with the righteous teachings of the Buddha and kind-heartedness, we can become enemies. By the same token, if we treat our hostile enemies with the righteous teachings of the Buddha and kind-heartedness, we can turn them into our friends. Then,

why don't we practice lovingkindness and compassion toward our enemies by bringing them happiness and relieving them of their suffering? If we can expand our practice to even include our enemies, we have achieved the goal of treating friends and foes alike. Our kind-heartedness embraces everything. This is the kind of lovingkindness and compassion as taught in the Buddhadharmā. We should nurture it by sustaining and expanding it constantly. These are the expedient ways to practice lovingkindness and compassion.

### The Experience of Lovingkindness and Compassion

According to Mahayana Buddhism, lovingkindness and compassion and wisdom are not mutually exclusive. Even in the deluded stream of consciousness of humans, sense and sensibility are by no means isolated from each other. Instead, they complement each other to become different facets within the same stream of consciousness. In the process of purification, witnessing wisdom is analogous to implementing lovingkindness and compassion. Wisdom is not dry and cold reasoning, but a sincere embodiment of lovingkindness and compassion. The Buddha's perfect enlightenment is the ultimate attainment of supreme wisdom as well as the supreme realization of lovingkindness and compassion. If we practice Buddha's teachings without lovingkindness and compassion, we will fall prey to heresy. We will become practitioners of extreme arrogance.

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**Venerable Yin Shun** (1904-2005) is considered one of the greatest Chinese Buddhist intellectuals of the 20th century. Though he wrote more than fifty books, only one, *The Way to Buddhahood*, is available in English. It is thought to be a masterpiece of Chinese Mahayana Buddhism.

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