



Compassion

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Geshe la: I am happy to be here to talk about some of the aspects of Buddhism that I have studied over the past twenty-four years. Buddhism is one of the oldest religions. It is based upon the teachings that came from a human being who lived in the seventh century, BC, The Buddha.

Since these teachings came from a living human being, it is entirely about human beings. It is totally related to human problems and experiences. This offers hope for the survival of human beings on this planet. The Buddha taught, two levels of teachings: Theravada and Mahayana. There are many different aspects of Buddhist teachings. Today I would like to discuss compassion.

Compassion is the most important element of Buddhist teachings, particularly the Mahayana teachings. The very purpose of the Mahayana teachings and its practices are purely for the well being of every sentient being. Its practice should be motivated, or influenced by compassion.

What is compassion? How can an individual generate it? According to Buddhism, compassion doesn't refer to merely a feeling of pity, or mercy. Rather, it refers to a sense of universal responsibility. A wish to work for the benefit of every living being by means of alleviating their sufferings and bringing them to temporary and ultimate happiness. Compassion is the root cause of Bodhicitta (the mind of enlightenment). Compassion is important because every living being, including the smallest insects, have innate arising feelings of happiness and not wanting unhappiness. Every living being has a right to overcome suffering and to seek happiness.

Compassion is the key element, or factor, that brings universal and individual happiness.

We can bring happiness to ourselves, as well as others, by utilizing compassion as an instrument, or tool. Compassion helps us to alleviate the negative thoughts and disturbing emotions that are so disruptive to the development of calmness of mind. Compassion helps to build a healthy, positive, and wholesome attitude. It is very clear that we cannot act in a positive manner when our mind is totally invaded by negative thoughts and disturbing emotions

Cultivating compassion within oneself provides the possibilities to bring happiness to everybody, including ourselves. Compassion is the source of happiness and courage. It builds a sense of deep respect for life and all living beings. This respect enables us to abstain from all kinds of harmful actions toward others. Harmful actions include any action that harms another's body, life, possessions, friends, or relations. Abstaining from harmful action refers to abstaining from 10 negative actions: Three from body: Killing, stealing, sexual misconduct. Four from speech: Lying, divisiveness, harsh words, idle gossip. Three from mind: Covetousness, harmful thoughts, and wrong views.

In order to fully develop compassion it is important to understand what is meant by 'suffering'. Buddhism presents three levels of suffering: The suffering of pain, the suffering of change, and the suffering of pervasive conditioning. The suffering of pain is easy for our ordinary human mind to understand. We can see it as suffering in our ordinary sense, so I'll not say any more about the first level of suffering.

The second type is more difficult to understand as suffering. The suffering of change means that all our experiences of pleasure and happiness inevitably change into experiences of unhappiness. All our worldly pleasure and happiness will not last long. This means that every worldly pleasure is the beginnings of new suffering. This second type of suffering is experienced by every living being without exception. Therefore, our feelings of attachment to sense pleasures is meaningless. Malicious toward other people, such as those who are successful in a material way is also meaningless because sooner or later those people have to undergo the suffering of change.

The third type, the suffering of pervasive conditioning shows that since our physical body is impelled by contaminated karma and delusions, the physical body is the source of the arising of various kinds of physical and mental pain and suffering. As long as we live in this imperfect life and body there is no room for true peace and happiness.

Compassion is concern for the happiness of all beings. Concern for all those who are undergoing any of these three sufferings. This is called genuine compassion because it is being concerned for the happiness of every being without exception, without making any distinctions between friends, relatives and enemies. This compassion is genuine because it is not influenced by attachment, the light of this compassion reaches to every being.

We'll stop here, any questions?

Student: Are there specific practices for cultivating this compassion?

Geshe la: Yes. First and foremost is to understand the three types of suffering. Based upon this understanding and the feelings of empathy experienced due to this understanding, one can choose either of two methods of practice for the cultivation of compassion. First is the practice of seven fold cause and effect which is intensively explained in the text of Maitreya Buddha. Second, is the practice of exchanging oneself with others. This training practice is widely explained by the Shantideva text called "A Guide to the Bodhisattvas Way of Life".

Student: Geshe la, is it possible for a person to realize a sense of non-duality through the exchanging practice?

Geshe la: Yes, one can realize a sense of non-duality through the exchanging practice complemented by realization of emptiness and the clear nature of mind.

Student: You speak of elevating suffering. Does this mean that there is value to suffering?

Geshe la: Yes, there is value in suffering. First, because suffering offers an opportunity to reach nirvana. It offers the opportunity to cultivate compassion. Second, as Milarepa said, "Suffering has no other value but that it can be purified by practice of Dharma". This is the value of suffering. My personal feeling is that through suffering, we human beings can learn so many things. This seems to me to be the value of suffering.

