

## *Genuine Compassion*

I REALLY ADMIRE bees' sense of common responsibility. When you watch a beehive, you see that those small insects come from far away, take a few seconds' rest, go inside, and then hurriedly fly away. They are faithful to their responsibility. Although sometimes individual bees fight, basically there is a strong sense of unity and cooperation. We human beings are supposed to be much more advanced, but sometimes we lag behind even small insects.

We are social animals. If we were by nature solitary, there would be no towns or cities. Because of our nature, we have to live in a cooperative setting. People who have no sense of responsibility for the society or the common good are acting against human nature. For human survival, we need genuine cooperation, based on the sense of brotherhood and sisterhood. Friends make us feel secure. Without friends, we feel a great loneliness. Sometimes, there is no proper person with whom we can communicate and share affection, so we prefer an animal, such as a dog or a cat. This shows that even those people who lose their trusted friends need someone to communicate and share affection with. I myself like my wristwatch, even though it never shows me any affection! In order to get mental satisfaction, as a human being, it is best to love another human being, and, if that is not possible, then some animal. If you show sincere affection, you will receive a response, and you will feel satisfaction. We all need friends.

There are different approaches to friendship. At times we may think that we need money and power to have friends, but that is not correct. When our fortune is intact, those kinds of friends may appear [128] loyal, but when our fortune disappears, they will leave us. They are not true friends; they are friends of money or power. Alcohol is another unreliable friend. If you drink too much, you may collapse. Even your dreams will be unpleasant.

But there are other kinds of friends who, no matter what the situation, remain true. When our fortunes rise, even without friends, we can manage. But when they go down, we need true friends. In order to make genuine friends, we ourselves must create an environment that is pleasant. If we just have a lot of anger, not many people will be drawn close to us. Compassion or altruism draws friends. It is very simple.

All of the world's religions emphasize the importance of compassion, love, and forgiveness. Each may have a different interpretation, but, broadly speaking, everyone bases their understanding on the basis of brotherhood, sisterhood, and compassion. Those who believe in God usually see their love for their fellow human beings as an expression of their love for God. But if someone says, "I love God," and does not show sincere love towards his fellow human beings, I think that is not following God's teaching. Many religions emphasize forgiveness. Love and compassion are the basis of true forgiveness. Without them, it is difficult to develop forgiveness.

Love and compassion are basic human qualities. From a Buddhist point of view, love is an attitude of wanting to help other sentient beings enjoy happiness, and compassion is the wish for other sentient beings to be free from suffering. Compassion is not a selfish attitude, such as, "These are my friends, and therefore I want them to be free of suffering." Genuine compassion can be extended even towards one's enemies, because the very basis for generating compassion is seeing suffering in other living creatures, and that includes your enemies. When you see that your enemies are suffering, you are able to develop genuine compassion even towards those who have injured you.

Usual compassion and love give rise to a very close feeling, but it is essentially attachment. With usual love, as long as the other person appears to you as beautiful or good, love remains, but as soon as he or she appears to you as less beautiful or good, your love completely changes. Even though someone appears to you as a dear friend and you love him very much, the



next morning the situation may completely change. Even though he is the same person, he feels more like [129] an enemy. Instead of feeling compassion and love, you now feel hostility. With genuine love and compassion, another person's appearance or behavior has no effect on your attitude.

Real compassion comes from seeing the other's suffering. You feel a sense of responsibility, and you want to do something for him or her. There are three types of compassion. The first is a spontaneous wish for other sentient beings to be free of suffering. You find their suffering unbearable and you wish to relieve them of it. The second is not just a wish for their well-being, but a real sense of responsibility, a commitment to relieve their suffering and remove them from their undesirable circumstances. This type of compassion is reinforced by the realization that all sentient beings are impermanent, but because they grasp at the permanence of their identity, they experience confusion and suffering. A genuine sense of compassion generates a spontaneous sense of responsibility to work for the benefit of others, encouraging us to take this responsibility upon ourselves. The third type of compassion is reinforced by the wisdom that although all sentient beings have interdependent natures and no inherent existence, they still grasp at the existence of inherent nature. Compassion accompanied by such an insight is the highest level of compassion.

In order to cultivate and develop genuine compassion within yourself, you need to identify the nature of suffering and the state of suffering that sentient beings are in. Because you want sentient beings to be free from their suffering, first of all you have to identify what suffering is. When Buddha taught the Four Noble Truths, he spoke of three types of suffering: suffering that is obvious and acute, like physical pain; the suffering of change, such as pleasurable experiences that have the potential to turn into suffering; and pervasive suffering, which is the basic fact of conditioned existence. To cultivate compassion, first of all, you have to reflect on suffering and identify suffering as suffering. When reflecting in depth on the nature of suffering, it is always beneficial to search for an alternative—to see whether it is possible to ever get rid of suffering. If there is no way out, just reflecting on suffering will make you feel depressed, and that is not helpful. If there is no possibility of getting rid of the suffering, then it is better to not think about it at all. [130]

After describing the origin of suffering, the Buddha spoke of the cessation of suffering and the path that leads to the cessation. When you realize that it *is* possible to eliminate the root that gives rise to suffering, that awareness will increase your determination to identify and reflect on suffering at all different levels, and that will inspire you to seek liberation.

After reflecting on the nature of suffering and feeling convinced that there is a path that leads to the cessation of suffering, then it is important to see that all sentient beings do not want suffering and do want happiness. Everyone has the right to be happy, to overcome suffering. When reflecting on ourselves, we find that we have a natural desire to be happy and to overcome suffering, and that this desire is just and valid. When we see that all living creatures have the natural right to be happy and overcome suffering and fulfill their wishes, we ourselves have a spontaneous feeling of self-worth.

The only difference between us and others is in number. We are just one individual among infinite others. No matter how important we are, we are just one sentient being, one single self, while others are infinite. But there is a close relationship of interdependence. Our suffering or happiness is very much related with others. That is also reality. Under these circumstances, if, in order to save one finger the other nine fingers are sacrificed, that is foolish. But if, in order to save nine fingers, one finger is sacrificed, it may be worth it. So you see the importance of others' rights and your own rights, and others' welfare and your own welfare. Because of numbers, the infinite numbers of others' rights and welfare naturally become most important. The welfare of others is important not only because of the sheer number, but also if you were to sacrifice the infinite others for your own happiness eventually you will lose. If you think more of others, taking care of others' rights and serving others, ultimately you will gain.

Not only when you are engaging in the meditative practices of the bodhisattva path is it harmful to sacrifice the welfare and happiness of infinite others for your own happiness, as it prevents you from making progress in the spiritual path, but if you were to sacrifice the benefit and welfare of infinite others for the sake of your own happiness and welfare in your daily life,

you are the one who ultimately will lose and suffer the consequences. [131]

If you want to be selfish, you should be selfish-with-wisdom, rather than with foolishness. If you help others with sincere motivation and sincere concern, that will bring you more fortune, more friends, more smiles, and more success. If you forget about others' rights and neglect others' welfare, ultimately you will be very lonely.

Even our enemy is very useful to us because, in order to practice compassion we need to practice tolerance, forgiveness, and patience, the antidotes to anger. In order to learn tolerance, forgiveness, and patience, we need someone to create some trouble. From this point of view, there is no need to feel anger towards the enemy or the person who creates the problem for us. In fact, we should feel gratitude for the opportunity he provides us. Regardless of whether he intended to benefit us, whenever we find anything that is helpful, we can utilize the opportunity. Of course one might argue that the enemy has no conscious intention to be of help, but on the contrary, has a strong conscious intention to cause harm, and therefore, anger is justified. This is true. We categorize someone as an enemy because he has the intention to harm us. Even if a surgeon has to amputate our limb, because surgeons do not generally have the intention to harm us, we don't classify them as our enemy. Since our enemy has the intention to be harmful to us, we classify and identify him as an enemy, and therefore we have this opportunity to practice patience and tolerance toward that person.

In order to practice compassion toward all living beings, it is important to be able to generate a genuine sense of patience and tolerance toward our enemies. In order to cultivate genuine patience toward our enemy, there are certain types of mental trainings. For instance, if you have been injured by gunfire, if you feel angry, you should analyze the situation and think, what is it that I am angry at? If I am angry at the thing that injured me, I should be angry at the direct cause of my injury, which is the bullet. If I should feel anger toward the ultimate cause of my injury, I should feel anger toward the anger within the person who shot at me. But that is not the case. I don't feel angry at the bullet or the other person's anger, I feel angry at the person, who is just the medium. Under different circumstances, that person could change into a good friend. [132]

As long as that negative emotion is there, it acts like an enemy. But when a positive motivation develops, that person becomes our friend. The person himself can be changed under different circumstances, dominated by different factors of the mind. So, logically speaking, if we are to feel anger toward the thing that harmed us, it is the anger within that person that we should feel angry at. So, just as we see how destructive is the anger generated within us, how it destroys our peace of mind, mental balance, and so forth, so it is in the case of the anger generated within the enemy's mind. It affects his mind and his happiness.

Therefore, when someone dominated by anger harms you, instead of feeling angry toward him, you should feel a sense of compassion and pity because that person is suffering himself. When you reflect in this way, it will help reduce the force of your anger. When you train your mind in this way, gradually you will be able to extend your compassion toward all living creatures, including your enemy.

I myself, as a Buddhist monk who is supposedly a practitioner— although my practice is very lazy and not at all satisfying to myself— even a lazy practitioner with not enough time, step by step, little by little, can change. I can change my own mental attitude, and it brings me some real joy and inner strength. Brothers and sisters, please think along these lines. If you feel you can practice at a certain point, please try to carry it out as a kind of experiment. As time goes on, you may get some benefit. But if you feel it isn't working, don't worry. Don't be concerned at all.

Compassion, or altruistic motivation, is really wonderful. Sometimes I feel a sense of wonder that we human beings can develop such altruism. It is really a precious source of inner strength, happiness, and future success.

\* \* \*

The Dalai Lama, "Genuine Compassion," in *Engaged Buddhist Reader*, ed. Arnold Kotler (Berkeley: Parallax Press, 1966), pp. 127-132.

Photo: HH the Dalai Lama at Kilauea Volcano, October 1980 photo by Chiu Leong.