



The Power of Unbearable Compassion

When we can no longer bear the suffering of sentient beings, says the **Seventeenth Karmapa**, we unleash our full potential to help others and ourselves

Practices of loving-kindness and compassion are indispensable elements of all religious traditions. These are qualities everyone can practice, regardless of their religious affiliation or ancestry. In fact, training to develop loving-kindness and compassion provides a bridge between all religions and all the many parts of our global society.

I am a Buddhist, but I still have to live my life as a member of the larger world community and take full part in society, where Buddhism is not the only spiritual tradition. There are many different forms of religion and spirituality, and there are also many different types of people, including those who are inclined toward religious or spiritual approaches and those who are not.

Since our world community is so very vast and diverse, it is important for us to respect the entire range of religious and spiritual traditions, not setting ourselves up as “opponents” of any other tradition. The way to accomplish happiness in the world is to do meaningful work in one’s own life, with a positive motivation that sees all people and all traditions as equal.

Humans are set apart from other types of sentient beings by their ability to naturally connect with sharp intelligence and with nonviolence, loving-kindness, and compassion. From the moment we are born, we are constantly chasing after happiness, thinking of ways we can become happy and free from suffering, and we actively try to bring those desires to fruition. The propensities toward loving-kindness, compassion, and nonviolence we display in following this quest for happiness demonstrate what makes human beings unique.

For any species of sentient being to continue existing, the

members of that species must have affection for each other and they must support each other. In order for our human community to survive, we must nurture and sustain connections of love, compassion, nonviolence, and altruism. These connections are what will allow us not only to survive, but to make our lives meaningful. If we concentrate on ensuring that these connections are present, that in itself will be enough.

All of the Buddha’s teachings are based on refraining from harming others and engaging in helping others. It is therefore of great importance for Buddhists to have these two principles as the ground of their practice. The roots of Buddhist practice are the attitudes of altruism and non-harm. In other words, the roots of Buddhist practice are loving-kindness and compassion.

Of these two qualities, compassion is foremost: in general, we develop loving-kindness by relying on compassion. In the beginning, therefore, compassion is more important. Our compassion must have a broad focus, not only including ourselves but all sentient beings.

Why must our compassion include all sentient beings? Because all sentient beings—oneself and others—want to be happy and free of suffering. This basic desire is the same for everyone. Nevertheless, most of the sentient beings we see experience only suffering; they cannot obtain happiness. Just as we have a desire to clear away the suffering in our own experience and to enjoy happiness, through meditating on compassion we come to see that all other beings have this desire as well. Other beings are not only worthy of our compassion, they are also what cause our meditation on compassion to be possible at all.

According to the Mahayana teachings of Buddhism, all sentient beings are our parents of the past, present, and future. This means that, of all sentient beings, some have been our

(Facing page) *Avalokitesvara–Chaturbhujā (4 hands)*
Tibet, Karma Kagyu lineage

parents in the past, some are our current parents, and some will be our parents in the future. There are no beings who are not, in the end, our parents. For this reason, all sentient beings have a connection of affection toward us. They have a connection of kindness toward us. But these affectionate and kind parents are trapped in a state of suffering, unable to actualize their desire for happiness. So it is crucial for us to begin meditating on compassion for them, in this very moment.

When we practice various kinds of meditations on compassion, it is not enough for us simply to feel a compassionate sensation in our minds. We must bring our meditation on compassion to the deepest level possible. To make our compassion as deep as possible, we must reflect on the suffering of sentient beings in all six realms of samsara, the wheel of cyclic existence. These sentient beings who are undergoing such intense suffering are the same beings who are our kind parents of the past, present, and future. In short, we are intimately connected with all of these sentient beings.

Therefore, since we are connected to all of these beings, it is possible for us to further our connection to them by bringing them benefit. The most excellent connection we could possibly make would be to cultivate the heart of compassion for them and to think of ways we can reduce their suffering. Reflecting on our connection to these beings, we must engender a level of compassion that cannot bear their suffering to endure any longer. This great, unbearable compassion is extremely important. Without it, we might be able to feel a compassionate sensation in our minds from time to time, but this sensation will not bring forth the full power of compassion. It cannot form the basis of a comprehensive practice.

On the other hand, once unbearable compassion takes birth in our hearts, we will immediately be compelled to altruistic action. We will automatically start thinking about how we can free sentient beings from suffering. Therefore, the way to develop altruism is through meditating on compassion. When our compassion becomes genuine and deep, our actions for the benefit of others will be effortless and free from doubt. That is why it is so crucial for us to deepen our practice of compassion until our compassion becomes unbearable.

Unlike our usual kind of compassion—meditating now and then on the general notion that sentient beings experience suffering—unbearable compassion penetrates and

moves our heart. If we were to see someone trapped in a raging fire, we would not hesitate to assist that person. Right then and there, we would immediately begin thinking of and engaging in ways to extract him or her from the fire. Similarly, with unbearable compassion, we witness the suffering of all sentient beings of the six realms and immediately seek ways to free them from that suffering. Not only do we genuinely try to free them from suffering, we are also completely willing to endure any obstacles we may encounter on our path to freeing them. We are unfazed by complications and doubts.

All sentient beings have basic compassion. Even people we would generally consider ill-tempered have compassion; they simply have not brought their basic compassion to a refined level. If ill-tempered people did not have any compassion at all, it would be impossible for them to develop compassion by practicing on the path. All beings have com-

passion, but their door to the mastery of compassion has thus far been locked. So even though it may seem that some people have no compassion whatsoever, everyone has at least a small

seed of compassion. That small seed can grow into great compassion; the potential we all have for great compassion can be made manifest.

Though the great, noble beings can let the full extent of their potential for compassion shine through, we ordinary beings cannot. Though we have the seed of compassion, we do not have the compassion we want. Precisely when we need compassion the most, we cannot access it; the door of our compassion is closed.

Even as we understand that loving-kindness and compassion are so important, we will also find it is quite difficult to fully and genuinely incorporate them into our experience. What prevents us from cultivating our heart of loving-kindness and compassion further is the mental afflictions, especially anger. Emotions such as anger inflict the greatest harm on our path to authentic compassion. For this reason, we must take an honest look at our emotions and ask ourselves, is this emotion benefiting me? Or is it of no benefit at all? We need to engage in a detailed, introspective analysis. If our investigation reveals that these negative emotions are of no benefit, the vital next step is for us to take a similar outlook toward our emotions altogether, all the time; we must see problems as problems, shortcomings as shortcomings.

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Let us consider the example of anger. The Buddhist teachings contain rich descriptions of the shortcomings of anger. They describe how anger and aggression produce a slew of unpleasant results, both in the immediate future and in future lifetimes. While some of those teachings might seem to apply only for those who actually believe in the existence of future lifetimes, the buddhadharma's descriptions of the shortcomings of anger are still relevant for those who do not hold this belief. When we become angry, our face changes and we take on a frightful appearance. We become unattractive to others; even those who are close to us find it difficult to be around us. Since anger in us instills fear in others, it greatly hinders our relationships.

When we clearly see the shortcomings of anger and the positive qualities of loving-kindness, our practice of loving-kindness and compassion becomes strong and we feel delighted about training in these qualities. When we are delighted about training in these qualities, we exert ourselves all the more strongly. When we exert ourselves more, the results we experience also become much more powerful. Being able to discern what is beneficial and what is faulty, therefore, is very important.

Without such discernment, our compassion can become susceptible to the same old habits. Perhaps, when trying to practice compassion, we are treated angrily by someone. We habitually respond by looking at that person in a negative light and resenting him or her. But if we have a deep understanding of the problematic aspects of our negative emotions, and can see them to be like illnesses, we will no longer see aggressors who harm us as bad in themselves. Rather, we will understand that these aggressors are not acting out of their own free will; they are afflicted by the illness of their own negative emotions. Once we are freed from resentment in this way, we are free to grow our loving-kindness and compassion limitlessly, without obstacles.

There are many other obstacles that can prevent our practice of compassion from reaching its full power. From among all of these adverse conditions, one of the foremost is jealousy. Jealousy can rob us of our freedom and interrupt loving relationships between people. Jealousy occurs when we cannot tolerate others being happier than we are. When we continually feel we need to have others below us and have no one equal to us, that is jealousy. When we are controlled

by jealousy, we only feel comfortable when others come to us for assistance; we only feel at ease when others are looking to us with hope. We cannot stand being in situations where others have something that we need.

Moreover, in this era many people in society feel that these manifestations of jealousy are justified. Many people seem to believe that when we have competitive attitudes toward others, and when we want to vie aggressively against others for some reward, this is not only acceptable but to be encouraged.

To make our compassion strong and to make our seed of compassion ripen, we need the path. When we enter the path of compassion, we begin to connect with the compassion we need in order to help others, and beyond that we begin to develop the compassion we need in order to attain enlightenment. We already have compassion, wisdom, and many other positive qualities, yet our mental afflictions are

far stronger than all of these most of the time.

It is as if the afflictions have locked all of our positive qualities away in a box. One day, we will open that box and all of our good qualities

will spring forth. We will see that we do not have to go looking for our compassion, trying to get it or buy it somewhere. It is not available for purchase anywhere in any case. What we will discover is that compassion is present in our minds spontaneously. At that point, a wealth of excellent qualities will become immediately available to us.

One of the ways that people in Tibet generate compassion is by visualizing the bodhisattva of compassion, Avalokiteshvara, and reciting his mantra, OM MANI PADME HUM. I have memories of my mother's mother from when I was young reciting the mantra of Avalokiteshvara all the time. Even though she was blind, she continued to recite mantras with great diligence. She always had a cheerful demeanor and smile, as if she didn't have any problems at all. She always maintained a graceful and dignified presence, and the gaze of her eyes was like that of a normal, seeing person. Such is the power of practicing loving-kindness and compassion. The great affection for and continual supplication to the bodhisattva of compassion was a binding force for our family. My grandmother passed it to my mother, and my mother passed it to me, and I am passing it to you, like an heirloom or an inheritance. My family was not wealthy in a material way, so this is what I have to offer as my main family heirloom. **BD**

With unbearable compassion we
are completely willing to endure any
obstacles we may encounter on our path
to freeing sentient beings.