

THE TEMENOS ACADEMY

"Karuna: Compassion"

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Source: Temenos Academy Review 16 (2013)

pp. 18-20

Published by The Temenos Academy

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www.temenosacademy.org

Karuna 'Compassion'*

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Karuna is a Sanskrit word that means compassion. Although it is explained mainly in the Bodhisattva or Mahayana scriptures, all Buddhist ideas are based upon it. Buddhist practice is primarily concerned on the one hand with helping others and on the other with avoiding bringing them harm. Thus, the excellent doctrine of the Buddha has its root in compassion and the Buddha, who teaches these doctrines, is also said to be born from compassion.

The Sangha or spiritual community are those who, practising the doctrine properly, help others to gain refuge from suffering. Thus, the main qualities of the spiritual community also stem from compassion. Consequently, the three refuges of a Buddhist—the Buddha, doctrine, and spiritual community—all have their root in compassion.

Moreover, in our daily lives we find that compassion is extremely relevant. We all want to be happy. One of the most important foundations for happiness is inner peace. And from my own limited experience I have found that the greatest inner tranquillity comes from the development of love and compassion.

The more we care for the happiness of others, the greater our own sense of well-being. Cultivating a close, warm-hearted feeling for others automatically puts the mind at ease. This helps remove whatever fears or insecurities we may have and gives us the strength to cope with any obstacle we encounter. It is the ultimate source of success in life. If we remember that it is not just ourselves but everyone who has to undergo suffering, this realistic perspective will increase our determination and capacity to overcome troubles. Indeed, with this attitude, each new obstacle can be seen as another valuable opportunity to improve our mind.

* This essay was contributed by H. H. the Dalai Lama in 1994 to a project, initially proposed by the late Ramchandra Gandhi, to compile an anthology of writings on the sacred words of the world's spiritual traditions. The project never reached completion, but it is planned to publish some of the individual pieces in this and subsequent issues of *TAR*. The editors are grateful to His Holiness and to the Office of Tibet, London, for permission in the present instance.

We must be clear about what we mean by compassion. True compassion is not just an emotional response, but a firm commitment founded on reason. Therefore, a truly compassionate attitude towards others does not change even if they behave negatively. Of course, developing this kind of compassion is not at all easy.

Whether people are beautiful and friendly or unattractive and disruptive, ultimately they are human beings, just like ourselves. Like us, they want happiness and do not want suffering. Moreover, their right to overcome suffering and be happy is equal to our own. Now when we recognize that all beings are equal in both their desire for happiness and their right to obtain it, we automatically feel an empathy and closeness towards them. Through acquainting our minds with this sense of universal altruism, we develop a feeling of responsibility for others: the wish to help them actively overcome their problems. This wish is not selective; it applies equally to all. As all human beings experience pleasure and pain, just as we do, there is no reason for discrimination among them or for altering our concern for them if they behave negatively.

It is within our power, given patience and time, to develop this kind of compassion. Of course, our self-centredness, our distinctive attachment to the feeling of an independent, self-existent I, works to inhibit our compassion. In fact, true compassion can be experienced only when this misconception of self is eliminated. But this does not mean that we cannot start and make progress now.

The greatest hindrances to compassion are anger and hatred. These extremely powerful emotions can overwhelm our entire mind. Nevertheless, they can be controlled. While it is true that anger brings extra energy, if we explore the nature of this energy, we discover that it is blind. This is because anger eclipses the best part of our brain: its rationality. So the energy of anger is almost always unreliable. It is possible, however, to develop an equally forceful but far more controlled energy with which to handle difficult situations.

This controlled energy comes not only from a compassionate attitude, but also from reason and patience. These are the powerful antidotes to anger. Unfortunately, many people misjudge these qualities as signs of weakness. I believe the opposite to be true. Compassion is by nature gentle, peaceful and soft, but it is also very powerful. It is those who easily lose their patience, who are insecure and unstable. Thus, for me, it is the arousal of anger that is a direct sign of weakness,

while compassion and patience are signs of inner strength. These are the positive emotions that can remove the self-centred motives that cause people to deceive and misuse one another. If you have a sincere and open heart, you naturally feel self-worth and confidence, and there is no need to be fearful of others.

Because we all share a wish for happiness and the need for love, we can consider anyone we meet as a brother or a sister. We do not need to become religious; nor do we need to believe in an ideology. I believe that at every level of society the key to a happier and more successful world is the growth of compassion.

