

## Buddhist Virtue of Compassion and loving kindness

### *Gotama the Buddha*

*The Gotama Buddha is the most dynamic personality we know of, who lived and worked upon earth. He was a rational moralist, whose compassion for all living beings and whose devotion to their needs seem to have been boundless. The most striking feature about the Buddha is an almost unique combination of a cool scientific head and the profound sympathy of a warm and loving heart. This perhaps is the reason why the life of the Buddha has universal appeal. His teaching is clear and simple and in close harmony with modern ideas. It is, beyond all dispute, the achievement of one of the most penetrating intellects the world has ever seen. The path the Buddha showed us is the only path humanity must tread if it is to escape stress and suffering.*

- **Moni Bagchee**
- **(Adapted from) *Our Buddha***

The goal of the Buddha's teaching is freedom from stress, mental anguish and suffering. This goal is achieved through the practice of mindfulness meditation based on a strong foundation of compassion and loving kindness. Many are aware of the benefits of mindfulness meditation for wellness and stress relief. Programs are now available nationwide where mindfulness as taught by the Buddha is used for stress reduction. Many of these are based on a training program developed by Dr. Jon Kabat-Zinn, 20 years ago, at the University of Massachusetts Medical Centre. But often the strong foundation of compassion and loving kindness required for the success of the program is overlooked. At times people forget that before one seeks freedom from suffering one must ensure that one does not cause suffering to others. It would be ironic for one to wish for freedom from suffering and happiness for self while causing suffering to others.

The Buddha is often referred to as the Compassionate One. This is how the great poet Rarinranath Tagore describes the Buddha's compassion.

*“May my heart lend its ear to every cry of pain,  
as the lotus bares its heart to drink the morning sun.  
Let not the fierce sun dry one tear of pain,  
before I have wiped it off from the sufferer's eye.  
But let each burning human tear  
drop on my heart and there remain,  
nor ever be brushed off until the pain  
That caused it is removed.”*

What then did the Buddha teach that led to his recognition as the Compassionate One. First the Buddha set aside all man made boundaries of gender, caste/creed and religion. The Buddhist goal of freedom from suffering is available to all persons irrespective of their creed, gender or religious beliefs. Then he made sure that He taught by example. I will high light some of the radical changes the Buddha made in society over 2500 years ago. They are as applicable now as they were at the time of the Buddha, for these are timeless Truths.

## **1. Equality to all castes and creeds**

The first radical change the Buddha made was to denounce the degrading cast system that existed in India. At the time of the Buddha there existed four distinct castes or creeds in India. The Brahmins, who considered themselves as the chosen ones of the creator God Brahma, and as such the nobility, treated the low caste Chandalas with enormous disrespect and cruelty. In the Vasala Sutta the Buddha said:

*By birth is not one an outcast  
By birth is not one a Brahmin (noble man)  
By deed is one an outcast  
By deed is one a Brahmin (noble man)."*

In summary the Buddha said that it is not by birth that one was considered to be a gentlemen or a lady it is by his conduct and mode of behaviour. By treating all persons with fairness and respect, by opening His Holy Order to all persons irrespective of their caste or creed, by appointing both the high caste and the low caste to positions of honour in His Noble Order, over 2500 years ago the Buddha promoted equality to all of humanity. As such by giving persons of all castes and creeds equality we have in the teachings of the Buddha compassion and loving kindness to all persons.

## **2. Equality to Women**

The second radical change he made was the freedom and religious equality he gave women. At the time of the Buddha women were often treated as objects, created for the pleasure of men. At that time the Brahmin lawgiver was Manu, whose code of law was the most anti-feminist literature one could find. Manu deprived women of their religious rights and spiritual life<sup>1</sup>. Women were prohibited from reading the Vedas (religious scriptures). A woman could not attain heaven through her own merit. She could reach heaven only through explicit obedience to her husband. Manu elaborated the myth that all women were sinful and prone to evil. He said, "Neither shame nor decorum nor honesty nor timidity is the cause of a woman's chastity, it is but the want of a suitor alone. She

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1. Information taken from "The Position of Women in Buddhism", a research paper presented at the University of Western Australia by Dr. Dewaraja.

should therefore be kept under constant vigilance; and the best way to do it is to keep her occupied in the endless task of motherhood and domestic duties so she has no time to make mischief." Against this backdrop, the Buddha consoled the distraught King Pasenadi Kosala at the birth of his daughter by saying, "*A female child may prove even better than a male offspring*".

The Buddha was the first religious teacher to form the order of the nuns, where the nuns, like the monks, were trained to reach the highest goal-enlightenment or awakening. He made it quite clear that women were as capable as men of attaining spiritual development. In His Noble Order the Buddha had two female chief disciples to help with His growing congregation of nuns, just as He had two male chief disciples to help with His monks. In the Sigalovada Sutta the Buddha taught the obligations of the wife to the husband and the obligations of the husband to the wife which would result in a happy marriage. The Buddha recognized that both spouses had an obligation towards the success of the union. By giving both men and women the opportunity to join the Holy Order and attain enlightenment, at a time when the main stream religion believed that women could only go to heaven through explicit obedience to her husband, we have in the teachings of the Buddha compassion and loving kindness to all persons.

### **3. Respect of all religions**

The Buddha also taught us to be respectful of the beliefs and faiths of others. It is seen that historically many religions have used violence, coercion and destruction to spread their religion. The Buddha said:

*"Insulting a religion of another,  
Is like looking up and spitting at heaven,  
Because you do not believe in heaven;  
The spittle comes back and soils your own face"*.

In the Anguttara Nikaya the Buddha said,

*"If you can find truth in any religion accept that truth"*

The Buddha's tolerance of other religions is captured beautifully by Emperor Asoka of India in the third century BC. In the twelfth rock edict the task of the missionaries is defined thus: *Beloved of the Gods (Emperor Asoka), honours both ascetics and the householders of all religions, and he honours them with gifts and honours of various kinds. But Beloved of the Gods, does not value gifts as much as he values this B that there should be growth in the essentials of all religions. Growth in essentials can be done in different ways, but all of them have as their root restraint in speech, that is, not praising one's own religion, or condemning the religion of others without good cause. And if there is cause for criticism, it should be done in a mild way. But it is better to honour other religions for this reason: by so doing, one's own religion benefits, and so do other*

*religions, while doing otherwise harms one's own religion and the religion of others. Who ever praises his own religion, due to excessive devotion, and condemns others with the thought 'Let me glorify my own religion' only harms his own religion. Therefore contact (between religions) is good. One should listen to and respect the doctrines professed by others. Beloved of the Gods desires that all should be well learned in the good doctrines of other religions*

Some world religions claim that the heavens are open only to those who profess their faith. All others, about 80% of the world population, are bound for eternal hell. The compassionate Buddha taught that the heavens are open to persons of all faiths, and that entrance is dependent not on faith or belief, but on righteousness. What is important is not that you are a Buddhist, but that you are a compassionate, loving, generous, and tolerant person.

Buddhism is a non-violent, compassionate religion, and throughout its peaceful existence of over 2500 years, not a drop of blood has been shed in the spread of the Buddha's Teaching. No mighty monarch has wielded his powerful sword to spread the teachings of the Buddha.

Many practicing Buddhist still maintain religious practices of their birth religion. By fostering understanding and respect for the faiths of others over 2500 years ago, the Buddha promoted compassion and loving-kindness to all of humanity.

#### **4. Compassion to all beings**

Most religions denounce the killing of man. The Buddha extended this compassion to all living beings. Seeing a religious leader lead 500 goats for an animal sacrifice to appease God, the Buddha carried a lame goat that was struggling to keep up and followed the herd of goats. He then approached the king who had ordered this animal sacrifice and offered himself in place of the animals by saying, "Surely if God can be appeased by animal, sacrifice how much happier will he be with a human sacrifice. Human life is considered to be more valuable than animal life. Spare these innocent goats and instead take my life." The Buddha then taught compassion to the king by saying,

*"All fear the rod,  
Life is dear to all.  
Feeling for others as for yourself  
You should neither slay,  
Nor cause others to slay."*

Following, understanding and accepting the teachings of the Buddha, Buddhists observe the first precept, "I undertake to observe the precept to abstain from destroying living beings." As Buddhists, we have been advised by the Buddha to refrain from killing any living being.

The king inspired by the Buddha's compassionate teaching gave up animal sacrifice and became a devotee of the Buddha.

One of the salient factors that weave its way throughout the Buddha's entire teachings is His infinite compassion and loving kindness for all living beings. A few years ago I had the opportunity to participate in a peace conference held in Winnipeg. I was overjoyed to find this quotation of the Buddha as found in the Dhammapada at the start of the program.

*“Hatred is not appeased by hatred  
Hatred is appeased by loving kindness  
This is an internal truth.”*

In the Dhammapada the Buddha also said:

*“Conquer anger by loving kindness  
Conquer evil by good  
Conquer the stingy by liberality  
Conquer the liar by truthfulness.”*

In the Metta Sutta the Buddha said,

*“As a mother protects her only child,  
Even at the risk of her own life,  
Let one cultivate boundless thoughts of loving kindness,  
Towards all living beings.”*

By helping murderers such as Angulimala, cannibals such as Alavaka, slave girls such as Punna, and destitutes such as Sopaka, over 2500 years ago the Buddha, through his boundless compassion, promoted peace and loving kindness to all of humanity. As such by using the civilizing effects of boundless compassion to all of humanity we have in the teachings of the Buddha compassion and loving kindness that is timeless.

Dr. Oscar Arias, former president of Costa Rica and Nobel Peace prize winner, gave some startling statistics in his speech, *Moral Governance and Public Service: Lessons from the Central American Experience* presented in Winnipeg, Canada in June, 1999. Four percent of the world's annual military budget would reduce world global illiteracy by half. Eight percent would stabilize the world population by 2015. Twelve percent would ensure the health care of the entire world population.

Over 2500 years ago the compassionate Buddha included “right livelihood” in the moral code of conduct of His followers. Not only are Buddhists to refrain from killing any living being, but they are instructed by the Buddha to refrain from any livelihood that includes the selling of animals for killing, the manufacture and sale of weapons and armaments used in warfare and destruction, the

manufacture and sale of drugs, alcohol, or any other product harmful to living beings, and the profiting from the exploitation of man such as through the practice of slavery. If the compassionate teachings of the Buddha were practised universally, we would not have had the slave trade and the resulting civil war in America, or apartheid in South Africa, and we would have solved the problem of world hunger and sickness, because the money spent on armaments could instead be channelled towards the betterment of humanity. As such, through foresight and boundless compassion, at a time when we did not have chemical warfare and lethal weapons that could wipe out an entire civilization the Buddha was recognized as the Compassionate One

The Buddha's teaching is direct, simple and easy to practice. One starts the practice of compassion and loving kindness through restraint. One refrains from speech or action that would harm others. One also incorporates the practice of loving kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy and equanimity in ones daily life.

I have introduced you today to some of the compassionate teachings of the Buddha. You will now experience the Buddha's compassion in action. For the next 15 minutes I will guide you in meditation on compassion and loving kindness.

Meditation on compassion helps both the person practising the meditation and the person towards whom it is directed. The practice of meditation at times of distress is easier for those who are already accustomed to daily meditation. However, distress and acute suffering is conducive to the initiation of meditation on compassion. Starting with compassion to a loved one as opposed to an unknown person also makes it easier for the beginner.

In generating compassion begin by recognizing that you do not want suffering and that you are deserving of happiness. Then recognize that, just like you, all other living beings do not want to suffer and are deserving of happiness.

Begin by visualising the person who is experiencing great suffering. For the first few minutes of meditation reflect on his or her suffering in an objective, analytical way. Reflect on his present situation and how he was before this occurrence. Reflect on all the missed opportunities resulting from this sickness and how much he enjoyed freedom from suffering.

Now relate that suffering to yourself by reflecting that this individual has the same capacity to experience pain, joy, happiness and suffering as you do. Reflect that he too feels and experiences sensations, just as you do. And that, just like you, he too wants happiness.

Then allow yourself to respond to his suffering naturally, with compassion. Try to experience a feeling of wanting to help the loved one, a strong feeling of wanting to relieve his suffering. Think how much you want this person to be free from

suffering. And then resolve that you will help this person to be free from suffering.

Finally, concentrate your mind on your resolution and simply generate thoughts of compassion and loving kindness. Direct your love, compassion and warmth towards him. Let the goodness that lies within you surface. Let it encompass your loved one. Encircle him with love and compassion and sustain this thought for the duration of the period of meditation.

Conclude your meditation by radiating compassion and loving kindness to all living beings by aspiring thus:

*In gladness and in safety,  
May all beings be at ease.  
Whatever living beings there may be;  
Whether they are weak or strong, omitting none,  
The great or the mighty, medium, short or small,  
The seen and the unseen,  
Those living near and far away,  
Those born and to be born  
May all beings be at ease!*

*Let none deceive another,  
Or despise a being in any state,  
Let none through anger or ill-will  
Wish harm upon another,  
Even as a mother protects with her life  
Her child, her only child,  
So with boundless heart  
Should one cherish all living beings;  
Radiating loving kindness over the world:  
Spreading upwards to the skies  
And downwards to the depths;  
Outwards and unbounded,  
Freed from hatred and ill-will.  
Whether standing or walking, seated or lying down  
Free from drowsiness,  
One should sustain this recollection.*

*(Adapted from the Metta Sutta)*

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