

## Compassion – waters of compassion from three sources

A resume of some of the main Buddhist notions of compassion for the Thirteenth Annual Symposium of the Muhyiddin Ibn 'Arabi Society.

by Kenneth Holmes

*[Ken Holmes](#), from over twenty five years experience of studying and practising Buddhism, speaks here of three stages of development of compassion, corresponding to three depths of awareness of the nature of existence.*

*The first form is the compassion felt as a response to the witnessing of tangible physical or mental pain commonly recognised as suffering – the pain of hunger, poverty, sickness, loneliness, aggression and so on. This first form is like rainwater, irregular, with times of deluge and other times of drought.*

*The second form comes from an awareness of the nature of impermanence and the laws of causality. It can involve feeling for those who are, at present at least, happy; and also feeling for the oppressor as well as the oppressed, on account of the future suffering being stored up. Like water in a well, this form of compassion is constantly available because it is founded in the recognition of an ever present malaise.*

*The third form is the compassion of those who have realised Buddha nature. This is the compassion which views the limited from the limitless. Its clarity reveals the confusion dominating the minds of all those still in ignorance, who do not realise their oneness with the ultimate transcendent nature and who hence seek happiness in limited fantasies. Compassion wells naturally from Buddha nature, like spring water gushing forth from the depths of the earth.*

### Introduction

The subject of this symposium is both an easy and a difficult one for a Buddhist speaker. Easy because compassion lies at the very heart of the Buddhist doctrine<sup>[1]</sup>: no other topic could be more relevant. Indeed, at a symposium on compassion we held in Scotland, a Jewish speaker even remarked that we had loaded the dice somewhat by choosing a very Buddhist topic; "had it been on justice," he said, "I would have been much more in my element" — and the Buddhists would have had a harder task. But, on another hand, this is a difficult subject to cover in the limited space of a paper, because all the Buddha's 45 years of teachings was an elaboration of the art of compassion *in practice*. To portray faithfully what compassion means to a Buddhist would take days and months rather than an hour. My personal feeling, after twenty-five years of studying and practicing Buddhism, is one of just beginning to savour the depth of the vision of compassion that the Buddha must have had.

One is born more self-centred than compassionate. It is instinctive to defend oneself, at the expense of others. This reflex extends the notion of self, with age, to identify it with family and friends; sometimes race and country too. Striving for "I" and "mine", "us" and "ours" is the source of so many ills. Compassion completely changes these priorities. It reverses the polarity of one's striving because, through it, one cares primarily for the well-being of others — rather than oneself or the extended self — and dedicates one's resources to the weal of the

world. This is the way not only to worldly harmony but also to enlightenment. The Buddha said:

Through striving for themselves, they end up in worldly misery,  
Through caring for others, they become Buddhas.  
Consider carefully the difference between these two.

The real transformation of one's life from the natural reflexes of egocentricity into a poem of compassion, is neither an obvious nor an easy one. It seems to involve an often difficult evolution in almost every domain of one's being. Compassion is indeed a deceptively easy word.

The title of this particular analysis of Buddhist compassion evokes the idea of water. We often compare compassion to water and to the water element[2]. In the footnote I mention some detail of the water element — both for its interest and as a small but sincere homage to that remarkable man Dom Sylvester Houédard, whose sparkling intelligence absorbed and cross-fertilised religious and scientific notions from many sources. In brief, the water element is the power of relationship, of connection, of cohesion, of union. It is, by consequence, the power of fluidity and lubrication; enabling that which was rigid and abrasive to become smooth and workable. With water, a desert can become a fertile paradise. With compassion, the tremendous potential of the human heart can be realised. Without it, it remains a desert, graced only by an occasional oasis.

Before presenting the three aqueous analogies, let us situate compassion in Buddhist philosophy. It forms part of a well-defined threesome[3]: love, compassion and enlightenment[4].

Love is defined as *a longing for every being to achieve happiness*. The entire focus of love is happiness[5]. Love comes from an awareness of others and a participation in the intimacy of their existence. It is through this openness towards the joys and miseries of another being that a natural response of love wells in the heart. Because one starts to care for the quality of experience of another, there grows a concern for that person's well-being and a practical application of one's own time and resources to bringing happiness into his or her life. In ordinary existence, this may involve buying flowers for a friend, giving a few friendly words of encouragement or counsel, ensuring an education for one's children and making a pleasant home, buying the dog a bone, giving to charities etc.

Buddhism takes this limited love and extends it, step by step, until it embraces all living beings. Universal love — an almost impossible target — would be a deep care, longing for them all to be happy, through cherishing each and every one of them as dearly as a mother loves her only child.

**Compassion**, on the contrary, is focussed on suffering. It is defined as *longing for each and every being to be free from suffering*. It is inevitably more mature than love, being a consequence of it. One's heart may open into the loving care described above, which may trigger many actions intended to bring happiness into other's lives. But there is a stumbling-block: mind's magnetic pull towards suffering. Someone may have money, friends, an agreeable life etc. — hundreds of reasons to be happy — but just one suffering amidst all that — say a toothache — sucks in mind's attention. The tooth-sufferer, forgetting the 99% of his life which is working well, is torpedoed by the 1% that is not and feels miserable. Who has

not encountered the uphill struggle of trying to "cheer up" someone very upset, by reminding him or her of all the good things in life? Compassion is concerned with ridding others of their sufferings, so that they can really be happy. Universal compassion is an awareness of all the sufferings that beset human and other beings, evoking a heartfelt longing to dedicate one's existence to the eradication of misery.

The third step — the natural consequence of love and compassion — is called **bodhicitta**, which we can say, for simplicity, means dedication to enlightenment[6]. Let us assume that one is bursting to the brim with a longing to bring others happiness and dedicated to ending their miseries. But what can one do in practice? One can feed the hungry, clothe the destitute and so forth. These are primary and absolutely necessary acts of compassion. But their effects are short-term and limited. The real spread of happiness and elimination of suffering happens through the liberation of the mind. A hot meal brings hours of benefit. Clothes may last for years. But advice which brings a new way of coping with life may last a whole lifetime. Furthermore, food and material benefits do not guarantee happiness. It is a cliché, but nevertheless true, that the poorer countries of the world can often boast more joy per minute per person than the richer ones. How to bring wisdom to the minds of others? First find it oneself. The example of this for Buddhists is, of course, the Buddha. With only a begging-bowl and a simple robe as resources, his accomplishment enlightened his own mind and, via his teachings, has brought wisdom to the minds of hundreds of millions of people over 2,600 years. His enlightenment consisted of totally integrating his mind with the transcendent perfection which is the timeless backdrop of all existence. To *liberate oneself into omniscient perfection, for the benefit of all beings*, is the definition of bodhicitta and the goal of mahayana Buddhists.

Buddhist training envisages three stages of development of compassion, corresponding to three depths of awareness of the nature of existence:

- compassion with sentient beings as its frame of reference
- compassion with the nature of phenomena as its frame of reference
- compassion without a conceptual frame of reference.

In this paper, they will be compared respectively to rainwater, well water and spring water.

### **1. Gathering water from the rain of compassion**

Buddhist scriptures say that no being — not even the most rapacious animal — is completely without some degree of love and compassion. We all have some. But how to transform that limited and occasional compassion into limitless, universal compassion? Buddhism offers very practical ways of working systematically on such a transformation, through carefully structured meditations which enable one both to understand the reflexes of the human psyche and to modify them. As we shall see below, the main thrust of these meditations lies in finding the compassion which is already present in one's heart and carefully nurturing it until it becomes a blazing fire.

The practical starting-point works with the compassion one feels as a response to *manifest suffering*, known in Buddhist scriptures as *suffering as suffering*[7]. This unwieldy term simply refers to the tangible physical or mental pain commonly recognised as suffering: hunger, thirst, poverty, sickness, old age, loneliness, aggression, frustrated desire — the list is

endless. In every case, something spoils the quality of life and is *obviously* a suffering. The other two forms of suffering, by contrast, will only be evident to a trained mind.

What is compassion in the face of such suffering? It means reacting in a way which moves the heart but does not blind the mind. Although *com-passion* means feeling-with, Buddhist compassion might be better called *pro-passion*, feeling-for. For compassion to be felt, the suffering of another being has to penetrate the many defence mechanisms erected by instinctive self-centredness. Yet to feel compassion for another does not mean that one should oneself also become "infected" by the other's misery: there is no point whatsoever in augmenting the huge quantity of suffering already in the universe. The Buddhist model of compassion involves feeling deeply *for* others, without suffering oneself. When the feeling of another's pain penetrates the shell of one's awareness, it is transmuted, by compassion, from something base into something noble. There is a well-known image of the Buddha being assailed by the darts and arrows of the negative forces of this world. As the pointed weapons enter his aura, they become beautiful flowers.

What is the touchstone of mature compassion which enables this transformation? Wisdom. A clear mind. By *understanding clearly* what is taking place in someone else, one's heart is moved by compassion and one's mind knows what, if anything, can be done to alleviate the suffering, without causing pain elsewhere in the universe. For that, a knowledge of the mechanisms of cause-and-effect is crucial: not to mention an understanding of the way everyone and everything in the universe is inter-related.

The actual training in compassion is twofold: cultivating the *inspiration* and perfecting the *application*:

- the first involves bringing one's spiritual motivation to maturity and uses many meditations which employ reason to examine the many ethical aspects of human responsibility and which also mobilise the imagination, emotions and feelings, to align the habits of the heart with the logic of the mind.
- the second involves making all one's life a practical expression of this pure motivation. It brings the first five *paramita*[8] to perfection, and is a vast set of topics far beyond the scope of this paper[9], which will mainly deal with compassion as the state of mind inspiring the right sort of action towards others.

A great blaze starts from a small flame. I recently watched a documentary in which a Kenyan tribesman made fire by first rotating a stick in a hole in another stick, which enabled some dry moss to smoulder, which in turn was brought into flame to light kindling, which eventually gave the cooking fire. It involved a careful nurturing of the heat as it developed through each stage — and a lot of blowing. The initial spark of compassion which one seeks out in meditation is the limited feeling of loving care and compassion that one can readily feel by thinking about one's nearest and dearest. This spark is skilfully nurtured by various skilful techniques, over however long a period of time it takes, until it has become a real limitless care for each and every sentient being, a true blaze of compassion which roars so fiercely that it consumes everything in its path as fuel.

The initial work with one's feelings is very important in this process, as the intellect alone is considered to be an inadequate tool for developing compassion, which needs to come more from the heart than the head. The wisdom, so important to mature compassion, is a warm-hearted wisdom, not a cold, dry wisdom. The meditations on compassion are beautiful ones,

because they really transform and illuminate one's whole being. At the beginning one has some friends, perhaps a few enemies and millions of people about whom one feels more or less indifferent. At the end, one cares for each and every living being more dearly than one ever cared for any single person before. All self-interest, bias towards friends and enemies, must go. One needs to meditate "...until the tears flow from one's eyes and the hairs stand up on one's head.." Unfortunately, there is not the time here to enter into the practical details of these contemplations. However, a few random points may be of interest to note:

- Some people are a little reluctant to embark on the journey of universal compassion because they fear that it involves renouncing the limited love they feel for their close ones: like going from the warm into the cold. On the contrary, the tenderness and care that one may feel for just one other human is, as we have seen, a starting-point from which something infinitely warmer, more liberated and more sensitive can develop. It is more like going from a room with a stuffy gas fire into a landscape warmed by the sun.
- Buddhist contemplations on compassion involve reflections on reincarnation. One cultivates the notion that every single being has been, at one point or another in innumerable past lives, one's closest of friends; one's greatest benefactor[10]. This cannot be proved but that is not too important, at this stage. True or untrue, the idea bears great fruits. By seriously developing such an attitude, one starts to see others in a totally different light. Everyone becomes a long-lost friend.
- compassion needs to be developed as much towards evil people and oppressors as towards the mild and the oppressed. Considering the long-term spiritual journey of others, i.e. thinking in terms of hundreds of lifetimes, one views even the worst evil-doers of this world ...*as a mother would look on her only child, in the grip of a delirious fever, who is beating her and saying bad things*. A loving mother, in such a case, feels even more love and compassion for the child than she would in the normal course of events. Thus, when witnessing a bully beating another person, a Buddhist should feel not only compassion for the person beaten (who is perhaps reaping the result of his own misdoing in past lives and thereby "wiping the slate clean") but also for the beater (who is suffering from a terrible mind and creating future misery for himself, through the power of cause-and-effect).
- one constantly needs to universalise experience. Thus, one's thoughts and prayers of compassion for, say, an acquaintance suffering from cancer, ought not to become stuck with that person only. Having prayed for him or her for a while, one then considers everyone else suffering from cancer, then everyone sick in that country etc., until one's contemplations embrace every human and every animal suffering throughout the universe. One develops the habit of making each specific instance of suffering a doorway which leads one's thoughts back to a prayerful concern for all suffering, everywhere.
- Concern for *all sentient beings* includes oneself. Personal mental or physical pain is a powerful starting-point for comprehending what is happening in others. This having been said, one is not obliged to pass through a certain suffering to qualify in compassion towards that suffering.

There are many fascinating points concerned with this *practical* development of compassion, as a motivation, in the face of manifest suffering. They could fill pages. If the *motivation* is mature, pure and wise, the *actions* of compassion which flow from it will automatically be good. It is virtually impossible to simply define compassionate action, in vacuo. For instance, as we have seen quite dramatically in the past decade, although "it is good to give to the

poor", food aid can actually create a dependency culture which incites populations to perpetuate their poverty. A wise man will always find a good solution. An idiot with a rule-book can wreak havoc.

The development of this first aspect of compassion is the subject of years of dialogue between a Buddhist and his or her teacher, during which time the mentor will draw upon many useful sources, especially the mahayana scriptures and the oral tradition of the Buddhist lineage. It will be the foundation for the other two aspects of compassion, which are a deepening and widening of it due to the wisdom that emerges through meditation. Its importance cannot be over-stressed because, without the very real changes it brings into a human being, the other two forms of compassion cannot emerge, and the journey to enlightenment is impossible. Although one can savour the other two forms of compassion intellectually [from that point of view they are by far and away the most interesting], that would be somewhat like spending one's time in a stuffy room with maps and never setting foot on a real journey. One never gains the experience of the *homme de terrain*, who recognises the odours of each corner of the forest or who has felt the warmth of the Himalayan sun on his face.

The first type of compassion, which we might call reactive compassion is, like rainfall, irregular. There are times of deluge and times of drought. "Compassion-fatigue" is well known to those of us who work in the charity field, as is compassionlessness. Reactive compassion is irregular because it is based upon the sporadic exposure one has with other people's tangible suffering.

## **2. Drawing water from compassion's well**

The second level of compassion emerges as a result of awareness of the second of the three sorts of suffering, called *suffering through change*. Whereas manifest suffering is something tangible for most observers, this form of suffering is only recognised by those aware of the nature of impermanence and the laws of causality. It is a more constant form of compassion because it is founded in the recognition of a malaise which is ever-present. However, it is a much less obvious aspect of compassion because it involves feeling for those who are — at present and to all intents and purposes — happy, not suffering.

Why feel compassion for the seemingly happy? Because what they are doing now will inevitably cause suffering (for themselves) later. There are several reasons why this might be the case:

- Ignorance of short-term cause-and-effect. In my mind, this is the "child wolfing chocolates" suffering. I picture the little scallywag as he discovers a huge box of creamy chocolates, his fingers and mouth covered in the brown and sticky mess, as he devours one after the other. He is happy; ecstatic even. Yet, it is sure that, in an hour's time, he will be green and puking, wishing never to see another chocolate in his life. In general, a lack of life experience causes one to take the seemingly attractive option, through either ignoring or not realising its consequences.

There are many examples of this type of suffering — a person spending a fortune rashly, rather than investing it; humankind destroying its environment for short-term material benefits and so on and so forth. One text says, "For one night of pleasure, eighteen years of responsibility!"

- ignorance of long-term cause-and-effect, especially over the span of several lifetimes. This causes one to act for this life's interests rather than those of the next. A Buddhist example might be that of a hunter or fisherman who, for sportive pleasure, brings pain and death to other forms of life, not knowing the agonies he himself will experience as a consequence of his acts in the next lives. More generally, most major religions urge one to use this life to follow a moral code and spiritual path which will be the cause for happiness in the next life. Yet most people's lives are focussed upon pleasure now and shy away from contemplating mortality and what happens after death.
- investing oneself emotionally and psychologically in something transient, as though it were permanent. Perhaps the most striking example of this would be lovers filling each others' minds with illusions of an eternal continuation of their feelings, when the very cause of their infatuation lies in the newness of encounter.

Physical prowess, reputation, job status, winning esteem in the eyes of others — many things can bring joy when they work yet incommensurate misery once they have passed. This may seem a pessimistic way of viewing things, but the world is full of lives scarred by failed romance, lost status, beauty gone, disillusioned intellects and the like. It is often only when approaching death that one can look back frankly and draw up the balance-sheet of life, revealing where all one's physical, emotional and intellectual energy was spent, day after day, year after year. The people in whom one's hopes were placed have died or changed. The places are no longer the same. The ideologies have lost their punch. The family has grown up and become friendly strangers. One's body — pampered with all sorts of food, clothes and goodies — is a painful enemy soon to be buried.

These examples reveal something to be basically at fault with human life-management. Everyone wants to be happy; no one wants to suffer. Most of life's efforts are centred around the pursuit of happiness — for oneself and one's dear ones — and the avoidance of suffering. It all involves a great deal of work. Yet true happiness, as a result of those efforts, is rare indeed, and short-lived, whereas suffering predominates. However, this is a fact most people try to avoid facing. The "brave face" most people place on life is, in fact, a mask of lies. Psychologists, doctors, therapists and priests soon become aware of the pains and tensions that lie beneath the surface of seemingly-pleasant everyday life.

To Buddhist eyes, the above lays bare a fundamental ignorance of the laws of cause and effect. Most people, in their quest for happiness, *must* be pressing the wrong buttons, since they rarely obtain the result for which they hope. To obtain happiness — as a result — one needs to create its causes. To avoid suffering, one needs to annihilate its causes. It is as frustrating for someone with eyes of wisdom, which understand causality, to observe as it would be for a doctor to watch a sick person going to the medicine cabinet and taking the wrong product: one that will make things worse. Or, more precisely, one that seems to alleviate the situation in the short term but which in fact aggravates it in the long term.

It is not that happiness is unattainable. That is the rub. A human mind can be happy, peaceful, satisfied, illuminated, inspired, in harmony etc. But, for that, one needs to know the processes of causality which engender happiness. The Buddha taught these as the 10 main virtues<sup>[11]</sup>: the foundation of Buddhist ethics. Some examples would be that long life and health comes from nurturing the lives of others; that wealth comes from generosity; that sexual harmony comes from ethical purity; that good friends come from reconciling those at odds etc. These are results that emerge over a period of lifetimes rather than years. Thus, the happinesses and sufferings of this life are considered to be mainly the consequence of one's good or bad

actions, respectively, in the previous one. Likewise, this life is the seeding ground for the future.

Thus the rich man (in whichever sense — wealthy, healthy, wise, befriended) is reaping the benefits of skilful action in past lives. If he uses his assets selfishly (for personal happiness now), he is not only depriving others but also destroying the possibility of his own wealth in the next life; obtaining exactly the opposite result to the one he really wants. If he uses them altruistically, it is beneficial for everyone.

There are shorter-term examples too. The lover who demands affection, through jealousy, is probably sabotaging the possibility of a longer-term and deepening relationship with his or her partner. The general pattern is always one of destroying long-term good for the sake of short-term happiness. It is encouraged by ignoring impermanence; the fact that everything changes; everyone changes. The greatest impermanence is death yet few people live in the light of truly appreciating their mortality.

This second sort of compassion observes the fragility of human happiness, which is mainly based upon the senses and emotions, and sees how, again and again, people are their own worst enemies, through ignorance of the causal processes they are triggering. If there is a widespread mismanagement of personal happiness on this material, worldly level, it is little compared with the non-management of the human spiritual potential. Contemplation, meditation, prayer, philosophical awakening — are these not the keys to an ever-deepening happiness? Those fortunate few who have used these keys to unlock the door of their true potential, drink from the constant waters of the well of truth. Their prayers and meditations are like bore-holes which tap into that vast underground lake of timeless nectar.

But those who drink the sweetness of its waters become aware of the acidity of all other waters. Knowledge of truth unmasks illusions; it blows away the hypnotic eerie mists of delusion's hermeneutics of hope. The truthful cannot but observe the folly of their fellow humans, whilst often becoming themselves, at one and the same time, slightly eccentric in the eyes of the world. Milarepa, the enlightened Tibetan hermit, told village folk, "You think I am mad yet I think you are mad". The recognition of the world's insanity needs to be managed with tremendous sensitivity. It should deepen love and compassion, drawing one closer to one and all. It should not bring arrogance and insensitivity. As pride is one of the greatest dangers on the spiritual path[12], humility is the indispensable companion to compassion.

### **3. Waters springing from compassion's depths**

The third aspect of suffering, and hence the source of the third type of compassion, is *suffering through existing or inherent suffering*. This is the suffering which inevitably results from the very fact of having a human[13] body, feelings and mind, should it be solely the sufferings experienced through being born, ageing and dying. Furthermore, existing as one does is a suffering, when compared with living as one could do, in the enlightenment and body of light of a Buddha.

The description of the five main stages of the spiritual journey[14], which takes one from ordinariness to total enlightenment, reveals layer after layer of darkness dropping away and the corresponding emergence of qualities useful to oneself and others. It is a vast and magnificent journey, of which few people have taken even the first steps. The liberation, clarity of mind, compassion for others, spiritual skills, breadth of universal vision and so forth

which this journey bestows transforms the everyday world into paradise[15], for the mystic, yet at the same time revealing most people's experience of it to be pale and painfully limited.

This third sort of suffering is only really comprehended by those who have made a definitive breakthrough[16] into the presence of the timeless, transcendent truth, which Buddhists call *buddha*[17] *nature* or *voidness*. Just as a sleeper awakening from dream realises how totally his mind was immersed in illusion, so does the mind, released into its true nature, realise the extent of the illusions which dominated it while it was still in ignorance of the ultimate transcendent nature — the universal bliss of which is the substratum of everything. This true and awakened nature was, is and always shall be, perfect, at peace, radiant with every quality, and in particular, aglow with natural, spontaneous compassion. This is the compassion of omniscience, which views the limited from the limitless, the world's agitation from perfect peace. Its clarity reveals the confusion dominating the minds of all sorts of beings in millions of vast and varied universes of existence, throughout time, as well as the fact that all beings are, at all times, at one with the transcendent nature *but do not realise it* and hence seek their happiness in limited fantasies.

There are many powerful examples[18] in Buddhist scriptures to show this co-existence of perfection and ignorance: a jewel covered in mud, a future king in the womb of a pauper, honey surrounded by angry bees, a treasure buried beneath a beggar's hovel etc. That such magnificent perfection remains unrecognised and unexploited, and beings live instead in tremendous spiritual poverty, is the ground for the greatest, sometimes called "unbearable", compassion.

Buddha nature is the Buddhist term for the deepest of all states [19]. Compassion wells naturally from it. Unlike even the second form of compassion, described above, which requires some effort, albeit that of thinking and meditating, this is effortless. Within it, thoughts are fetters. Thus it can be compared to the torrent of water which gushes naturally from the depths of the earth, breaking through the rocks to fill rivers and streams of compassion on all other levels. Unlike the well water of compassion, it does not require the bucket of concepts to be lowered by the rope of contemplation into the well of peace.

How to attain this spontaneous, effortless compassion? One cannot leap into it. A newborn baby cannot suddenly have the muscular suppleness of a great athlete or the chess-skills of a Karpov. Their seemingly effortless skills are the end-result of a training requiring much effort. Their spontaneity is the result of careful and attentive mindfulness. Thus, the normal Buddhist vision of a Buddha's enlightenment sees it as the end result of hundreds of lifetimes of training, involving a constant increase of altruistic goodness and consolidation of meditative skills and suppleness. However, the spiritual path, for all its complexity and duration, is no more than what is necessary to remove confusion and reveal what was always there. It is the rectification of an error, not the creation of perfection. It washes the mud from the jewel, digs up the treasure from beneath the hovel, rescues the honey from the bees — but it does not need to make the jewel, to create the treasure or to make the honey.

All along the way to enlightenment, Buddhists rely upon the skilful guidance of those more experienced. One needs not only their practical guidance but also the *blessing* that comes through the tradition that they embody. Far from meaning something wishy-washy, this strange word *blessing* means the real power that is transmitted through a living spiritual lineage. Like a ray of sun which pierces through the clouds to warm the body, this is the preview of the vastness and depth of what is to come.

Being in the company of the spiritually accomplished enables one to share in their vision of compassion; their vision of reality. One learns, among other things, to shed one's personal narrow-mindedness and prejudices in the light of their experienced impartiality.

This element of personal guidance plays a central role in the tradition of Buddhism to which I belong and it has become hard to imagine life without it. Compassion is a two-way process. It unlocks a door between the enlightened buddha essence, within oneself, and the infinite vastness of the universe, the buddha essence outwith oneself. Something flows both ways. The outer world — called the field of compassion — is a very special mirror in which one learns to see the full extent of one's own true face, discovered in all the millions of faces and millions of situations. Given time, the persona-based mentality that one has at first will be gradually erased by the power of compassion, and life will become increasingly a dialogue between a growing depth of peaceful wisdom, within, and the infinite universe, without. When this dialogue is fully resolved, and the inner face and the outer face are both fully known as one face, there is enlightenment. Compassion is the motor force of every Buddha's enlightenment. Compassion is the end result; compassion is enlightenment.

## Notes

1. In the Sutra Discussing Avalokitesvara's Realisation, the Buddha says:

"If there were one thing which could be placed in the palm of one's hand (to represent) all the Buddha's qualities, what would it be? Great compassion."

2. There are considered to be 5 *elements* or *aspects* in any material situation. These universal factors bear the names of earth, water, fire, wind and space. Behind these everyday analogies lie 5 complex notions, of great interest to a scientific mind. *Earth* is the material aspect, in terms of mass, matter, resistance. *Water* is the bonding, or gravity, which exists between particles of matter and between physical entities of all sorts. *Fire* is the release of energy contained within bonded matter. This implicitly involves a change of state and a using-up of what has been stored. Fire is energy. *Wind* is movement. *Space* is the constant factor which provides the dimensioning for the first four, inconstant, elements to operate. One cannot help but think of the importance of mass-energy-movement relationships and mass-gravity-energy-movement relationships of modern physics. For 2,500 years, the 5 elements have been the foundation for the Buddhist study of matter. When combined with a study of *consciousness*, the sixth main element, one has a precious working model for studying the principal facets of mind and matter, and their interdependence.

3. These three are respectively *maitri*, *karuna* and *bodhicitta* in Sanskrit.

4. Not the total enlightenment of a Buddha, the end result, but a progressive evolution towards it (see note 5 below).

5. The Sanskrit word *sukha* translated here as happiness, conveys a range of ideas from well-being, through happiness to bliss or ecstasy.

6. *Bodhi* comes from the same root as the word Buddha, and means enlightenment. *Citta* means mind, especially in the sense of mental determination/resolution. Bodhicitta can mean the resolution to achieve enlightenment (including all the practical work needed to bring that resolution to reality) but it can also mean the enlightened mind. Thus the term bodhicitta

applies both to the cause and to the result. This poses translation problems. The *bodhicitta* of an aspirant at the outset of the spiritual journey may be little more than a hope in the dark. One could call it a resolve for enlightenment. This is a very different mind from the *bodhicitta* — mind of enlightenment — of a Buddha, with its omniscience, light, compassion and power.

7. This is the first of three major forms of suffering; see below. The other two are *suffering through change* and *inherent suffering*.

8. Generosity, ethical conduct, forbearance, diligence and meditation. The sixth paramita is transcendental wisdom. These first five are sometimes referred to, collectively, as *skilful means* in Buddhist texts. The joint development of skilful means and wisdom, i.e. of all six paramita, is the very stuff of the journey to enlightenment. *Paramita* is a Sanskrit term meaning something like *transcendent perfection*, although literally it translates as *other shore*. For further information on each of the paramita, see Gampopa's "Gems of Dharma, Jewels of Freedom" (Altea, Scotland 1994), translated by the writer.

9. For a detailed analysis of *application bodhicitta*, and a full analysis of *inspiration bodhicitta*, see Gampopa's "Gems of Dharma, Jewels of Freedom".

10. In the scriptures, this "dearest person" is usually depicted as one's mother. It is interesting to note that this has sometimes proven a difficult concept to transport to the modern Western world, where a significant number of people harbour bad feelings towards their mothers.

11. Not to harm life, not to steal, not to engage in sexual impurity, not to lie, not to create disharmony among friends, not to speak harmfully, not to speak uselessly, not to crave, not to be malevolent and not to foster ignorance. Unlike the moral codes of revealed religions, these *don'ts* are pillars of morality not because they have been decreed as such but because of *their own nature*, i.e. one avoids acts which, in the short term, harm others and, in the long term, *through a natural process of cause and effect*, bring harm to their doer. Their opposites — to protect life, be generous etc. — bring well-being to others and happiness to the doer. There is no notion of an external rewarder or punisher.

12. Because it is far less easy to detect (for the person involved) than anger, passion, jealousy etc.

13. Or those of any form of sentient life — animal or other.

14. 1. *Stage of development*, in which one's worldly life is brought into harmony with one's moral values. 2. *Stage of inner unification*, in which one approaches ultimate voidness 3. *Stage of irreversible insight*, into the ultimate — relative enlightenment. 4. *Stage of consolidation of that insight* so that it exists in every facet of one's life. 5. *Total enlightenment*. For further information, see chapters 18 and 19 of Gampopa's "Gems of Dharma, Jewels of Freedom".

15. In fact, it always was paradise, but one's spiritual "eyes" were closed to it.

16. This corresponds to the third of the five main stages of the path to enlightenment (see previous note). One might compare this breakthrough to that of a bird, emerging from the limitations of its egg and experiencing the vastness of the sky. It has a true experience of the

nature of space, yet still has to grow up, learn to fly and discover the vastness and variety of all that space embraces.

17. *Buddha* is a word which comes from a root meaning both to *awaken* and to *come into plenitude*.

18. Especially the nine great examples in the fourth chapter of Maitreya's *mahayana uttara tantra sastra*. This exists in English as "The Changeless Nature", translated by the writer and Katia Holmes, published by K.D.D.L., Scotland.

19. Just as God is the starting point for theistic beliefs, and their way of defining the ultimate state of transcendence, buddha nature is the heart of Buddhist belief. The contemplative's encounter with buddha nature can often sound very similar to the theistic mystic's *oraison* of God. Philosophically, the biggest differences between the two lie in the concepts of creation and separate identity. Buddhists do not hold the ultimate state to have intentionally created existence. Buddhists aspire to become — totally — the ultimate state, which they see as their own ultimate identity, not the identity of another being.