

# The Practice of the Metta Sutta

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The *Metta Sutta*<sup>1</sup> has always been an important part of our practice, serving as both a customary ritual before discussion sessions and an integral part of our daily morning meditation. Yet, how much do we actually know about the *Metta Sutta*? Are we using it merely as a soothing background music, or do we fully meditate according to its texts, turning it into a true practice of loving-kindness?

Without the right approach, the *Metta Sutta* could just become background music, and even that is not guaranteed, as our minds may still wander with distractions while listening. To truly make the *Metta Sutta* a practice of loving-kindness, we must grasp the scripture's essence, change our fixed beliefs, perform corresponding visualization practices, and integrate its teachings into daily lives. I will now introduce seven essential aspects of practicing the *Metta Sutta*.

# I

## What Is Metta?

Metta, or loving-kindness, is the wish to bring happiness to other sentient beings. It is often accompanied by compassion—the desire to ease the suffering of others. However, there are certain obstacles we must overcome first. Many people struggle to cultivate loving-kindness or compassion because they feel disconnected or indifferent. Some may even harbor ill will or rejection towards certain beings, taking pleasure in their misfortunes. With such a mindset, it is impossible to foster loving-kindness.

Therefore, these obstacles must be addressed. To cultivate Metta, we need to establish connections with others. This will lead us to care about them, treat them kindly, and offer help when needed. We also have to expand our hearts to embrace all kinds of sentient beings. By doing so, we can truly develop a heart of loving-kindness towards all.

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<sup>1</sup> (Chinese: Ci jing 慈经) In Pali, the “Discourse on Loving-Kindness”; one of the best-loved and most frequently recited texts in the Buddhist world.

## II

### The Importance of Cultivating Metta

Some people believe they just need to mind their own business and wonder, “Why should I practice Metta towards strangers or wish them well? How would that benefit me and the world?”

The essence of Buddhist practice is cultivating the mind. By cultivating a loving-kindness mindset, we can overcome our inner indifference, hostility, and hatred, becoming warm and peaceful individuals who exude positive energy. Those with Metta are agreeable, which helps them to build good relationships and create a harmonious atmosphere.

Metta also acts as a source of merit. As shown in Nagarjuna’s *Precious Garland of Advice for a King*, “Even three times a day, offering three hundred cooking pots of food does not match a portion of the merit acquired in one instant of Metta. Devas and humans, even non humans, will protect you. You will have pleasures of the mind and the body. Poison and weapons will not harm you. Effortlessly you will attain your aims and be reborn in the form realm.” As shown by these verses, cultivating Metta can bring boundless merits.

Loving-kindness is also a driving force for altruism, enabling us to achieve the great compassion of buddhas and bodhisattvas. These enlightened beings possess two major qualities: the attainment of wisdom and the attainment of compassion. In the Seven-Point Cause and Effect Method for cultivating bodhicitta, Metta serves as a crucial foundation. Without Metta—without the desire for sentient beings to experience happiness and the willingness to alleviate their suffering—we cannot possibly give rise to bodhicitta or perfect our spiritual practice. The Seven-Point Cause and Effect Method uses a sequential technique to help us develop Metta and compassion. It starts by making us realize that in the beginningless samsara, all sentient beings have once been our mothers. This realization evokes gratitude for their dedication and care, ultimately kindling our resolve to repay their love. After establishing Metta and compassion by using this method, we meditate on our altruistic resolve to liberate all sentient beings from samsara, which will guide us towards cultivating bodhicitta. The Seven-Point Cause and Effect Method demonstrates that we must overcome certain hurdles, such as our disconnection, indifference, and animosity towards others to nurture loving-kindness and compassion. How do we achieve this? The key lies in building connections with others by recognizing that, in the beginningless samsara, all beings across the six realms have once been our mothers.

However, merely acknowledging this fact is insufficient, as many individuals struggle to show filial devotion to their present mothers, let alone those from previous lives. Therefore, after accepting that all beings had been our mothers, we must reflect on their motherly love and pledge to reciprocate it. Both Master Tsongkhapa's the *Great Treatise on the Stages of the Path* and Master Xing'an's *An Inspiration to Give Rise to the Bodhi Mind* contain sections that help us contemplate the selfless devotion of our current and past mothers. For example, we must reflect on the truth that without our mothers bringing us into this world and caring for us, our current life and all we have would not exist. As such, we can never repay her in full. Genuine Metta that can inspire action must spring from this fundamental understanding.

In conclusion, to effectively cultivate Metta, it is essential to know its importance and the correct methods to develop it. If we fail to meet these prerequisites, we may find ourselves listening to the *Metta Sutta* without fully engaging with its message, or like detached observers merely appreciating a soothing, pleasant melody. In this case, the *Metta Sutta* would merely become another sutra that appears unrelated to our lives, providing neither guidance nor direction for personal growth.

Metta, beyond refining our mindset, can eliminate the hostility and hatred at the heart of all conflicts and wars. If more people embrace and spread Metta, they can generate a powerful field of loving-kindness that eases anxious minds and fosters social harmony. In a world where many are concerned about air pollution, the most harmful pollution is actually not in the air we breathe but in the negativity stemming from hatred and cruelty. Such a world desperately needs the purifying power of Metta.

Therefore, practicing Metta is crucial for both individuals and the world.

## III

### What Does the Metta Sutta Say?

What exactly does the *Metta Sutta* teach us? If we do not have a clear understanding, we may just listen to it and forget about it soon after. Even when reciting it word by word, we may be lacking sincerity. This type of passive listening and recitation will not help us cultivate the mind.

The *Metta Sutta* has two components: the methods for cultivating Metta and the targets of our Metta practice.

## **1. Methods for Cultivating Metta**

The core methods revolve around four essential wishes:

May I and all living beings be free from hostility and danger.

May I and all living beings be free from emotional harm.

May I and all living beings be free from physical harm.

May I and all living beings remain happy.

At first glance, these four phrases may seem simple, but let us deeply consider their relationship to our lives. Being free from conflicts and hostility allows us to feel truly safe and worry-free. Being free from emotional harm and physical imbalances enables us to experience lasting happiness. Is this not the perfect life?

Ask yourself: what is the ultimate goal of all your efforts? It all comes down to these four things—a sense of security, freedom from physical harm, freedom from emotional harm, and ultimately, happiness. So let us bless ourselves and all sentient beings with these four wishes. When everyone can enjoy such an ideal life, is the world not at its best?

Some may wonder: can the world really become better just by thinking positively about it? The truth is, if we approach everything with loving-kindness, our world will naturally become beautiful. Then, we can spread this beauty to all sentient beings. How effectively we can do this depends on the strength of our Metta—is it pure, complete, and sincere? Indeed, cultivating Metta requires constant practice and nurturing. It is more than a one-time event or a simple wish made during meditation; it is a mental force that needs to be strengthened and expanded.

## **2. The Targets of Our Metta Practice**

How do we extend a single thought of Metta to encompass all beings, everywhere, and at every moment? This involves three progressive stages.

First, we need to focus on cultivating Metta towards ourselves. Our body and mind, the five aggregates, although illusory like a dream, serve as indispensable conditions that aid our

practice. This is because we can use these illusory elements to attain the ultimate truth. For this reason, we should take care of our bodies and give them blessings. It is said that those who do not love themselves cannot genuinely love others because they do not know what love truly is. When practicing loving-kindness, we need to first allow ourselves to immerse in the feelings of loving-kindness and sincere blessings. Although concepts like “loving-kindness” and “sincere blessings” may seem familiar and straightforward on paper, deeper within our minds, we may lack experience in expressing them, or we may struggle to evoke them quickly in actual practice. Therefore, beginning with self-practice is the most effective approach.

The “body scanning meditation” we are learning also starts with familiarizing ourselves with our body, caring for it, and imbuing it with right mindfulness and positive energy and strength. This helps us to dispel negative feelings, enabling us to have a healthy body and mind when practicing Buddhism and benefiting others. Only after cultivating loving-kindness within ourselves can we effectively spread it.

Next, we need to practice Metta towards people around us. We should extend the Metta we have personally cultivated and experienced to our parents, teachers, relatives, friends, fellow practitioners, monks, and lay disciples in our community. We should sincerely wish for them to be free from hostility, danger, mental and physical suffering, and hope that they experience ongoing happiness. Since these people are familiar to us, it should not be too difficult to practice Metta towards them. Still, in the beginning, it is not necessary to visualize them all at once. We can divide these people into smaller groups to make our visualizations clearer and steadier before broadening our practice to encompass more of them.

Lastly, we need to cultivate Metta towards all sentient beings. From all beings with form and name; from all saints to non-saints; from all beings in the east, west, north, south, southeast, northwest, northeast, southwest, below, and above; to all those on land, in water, and in the air; from humans to the highest deities; and to all those in the woeful planes... In short, we should wish for all beings in the ten Dharma realms to be free from hostility, danger, mental suffering, and physical suffering, and hope they maintain happiness.

In conclusion, the cultivation of Metta is an ongoing journey of opening our hearts. By gradually progressing from ourselves to others, and from close connections to more distant ones, we can eventually encompass all sentient beings as recipients of our loving-kindness. This process will help us dispel indifference, jealousy, hatred, and anger within us, as well as negative emotions towards ourselves and others. Truly understanding the teachings of the *Metta Sutta* is crucial for implementing this guidance within our minds.

## IV

### **Making Each Sentence a Heartfelt Wish**

Once we understand the meaning of each sentence in the *Metta Sutta*, the next step is to move from being a mere listener to an active practitioner. This requires acknowledging the importance of loving-kindness for oneself, all beings, and the world. Of course, it will be best if you can develop bodhicitta. But even if you are in the initial stage of the Mindful Peace Courses and cannot yet attain this level, it is still essential to at least recognize the positive impact of loving-kindness on our physical and mental well-being, happiness, and social harmony.

When we embrace loving-kindness, we leave behind indifference and opposition. Then, in our family, work, and interpersonal connections, we will actively care for others, hoping they find relief from physical and mental distress and enjoy lasting happiness. This will establish a warm and harmonious atmosphere around us. As the saying goes, “When you give a rose, its scent remains with you.” By extending loving-kindness, we not only demonstrate our goodwill to others, but also strengthen our loving-kindness. Indeed, the more we use our loving-kindness, the more it multiplies.

We should transform each sentence of the *Metta Sutta* into a heartfelt wish—just as we do when we are seriously ill and sincerely hope for a speedy recovery, or when we deeply desire something we need. Our wishes must be genuine, pure, and untainted.

By making the *Metta Sutta* a daily practice and listening to it repeatedly, we strengthen these wishes, etching the scripture into our hearts, constantly reminding ourselves, and ultimately making loving-kindness the foundation of our lives. In contemporary terms, this means turning loving-kindness into a natural reflex. Thus, our wishes can remain strong, no matter what we say or do, allowing us to evoke loving-kindness anytime, anywhere.

As the *Metta Sutta*’s teachings become our own perspectives and mindsets, we will naturally develop a desire to contribute to the well-being of others. Then, by actualizing loving-kindness through real-life altruistic deeds, we further strengthen these positive perspectives and mindsets, leading to a profound transformation in the quality of our lives.

# V

## Practicing the Metta Sutta: Visualization and Cultivation

When practicing loving-kindness, how can we convert the *Metta Sutta*'s teachings into our genuine feelings? Visualization is a powerful technique. We can picture loving-kindness as sunlight bathing the earth. Sunlight sustains photosynthesis, making life flourish. It also acts as a natural disinfectant, clearing away dampness and mold. Moreover, it offers warmth, particularly during winter, instilling relaxation and happiness within us.

By visualizing our loving-kindness using these three attributes of sunlight, we can get a tangible sense of what loving-kindness feels like. Once we know what loving-kindness truly feels like, we can then go back to the *Metta Sutta* and turn each wish from it into radiant beams of sunlight. Visualize this sunlight spreading across all lands, eradicating the world's animosity and threats, dispelling the mental and physical suffering of all sentient beings, and infusing their cells with energy and carefree joy. As we visualize in this manner, it should feel as if we are observing a sunrise, darkness vanishing as life thrives.

Avalokitesvara is known for responding to prayers in countless locations. In the *Universal Gate: A Commentary on Avalokitesvara's Universal Gate Sutra*, it is said that merely reciting Avalokitesvara Bodhisattva's name can free us from perils such as floods, fires, storms, weapon assaults, and attacks by malevolent brigands. How can Avalokitesvara alleviate these disasters? The answer lies in his immense loving-kindness. He has cultivated loving-kindness over countless eons, eventually achieving great unconditional loving-kindness and universal compassion for all beings, empowering him to safeguard them from danger.

In summary, to enhance our Metta, we need to integrate visualization techniques when meditating on the *Metta Sutta*. By practicing these visualizations daily, we will continuously strengthen our Metta, dispel the darkness in our minds, and nurture a growing sense of peace in our lives. If this visualization technique is challenging at first, we can start by treating each sentence in the *Metta Sutta* as a heartfelt wish, which can be powerful in its own right.



# VI

## From Seated Meditation to Practicing in Daily Life

When we cultivate loving-kindness during meditation, we sometimes feel really good, as if our hearts are filled with compassion. However, once off the cushion, that feeling may quickly dissipate as we encounter real-life challenges. This indicates that true loving-kindness has not genuinely arisen. We know that bodhicitta has two aspects: aspirational bodhicitta and engaged bodhicitta. Loving-kindness is similar. It is only through testing it off the cushion that we can truly understand the extent of our practice on the cushion.

First, during Metta meditation, we should make genuine wishes and use visualization to consistently cultivate and exercise loving-kindness, transforming ourselves into a reservoir and transmitter of loving-kindness. As we recite each phrase, we should spread Metta in every direction and across all the ten Dharma realms. However, at times, our Metta may be obstructed when we think of people we dislike or feel indifferent towards. In these situations, it is important to revisit our relationship with all sentient beings, working to understand and accept even those we dislike or do not care about, and appreciate the opportunities they offer to test our practice.

Then, we must bring this loving-kindness into our daily lives. Can we treat all sentient beings with equal respect? When doing altruistic deeds, can we extend friendliness and care to all? This is the real measure of our loving-kindness. Otherwise, regardless of how much we practice Metta meditation, it may only amount to an empty promise without practical application.

Altruism is an effective way to cultivate loving-kindness, and it can be divided into elementary, intermediate, and advanced levels.

### 1. Three Levels of Altruism: Elementary

Elementary altruism involves understanding, sympathy, and acceptance, nurturing a mindset that takes joy in the successes of others and consistently feels grateful. Why do we get stuck when practicing Metta? Why do we find it difficult to generate loving-kindness towards certain people? It is because we are immersed in our own feelings and unable to understand others, making sympathy and acceptance impossible, let alone rejoicing and expressing gratitude. Even if we do have these qualities, they are extremely limited and do not extend to

all beings. This indifference, separation, and opposition are the result of our self-attachment.

Thus, in order to expand our Metta, we must let go of self-attachment. This can be achieved by embracing the concept of dependent origination and fostering understanding and empathy, thereby allowing us to genuinely accept all sentient beings. We should recognize that those who harm us are victims themselves, ensnared by their own greed, anger, and ignorance. Like patients suffering from a grave illness, they are severely ill within samsara, causing them to act in ways that are beyond their control. This understanding can help us shift from opposition to empathy.

We sometimes impose expectations on others and cannot understand their actions and thoughts. This is also because we habitually look at situations from our own perspective. If we can learn to embrace the concept of dependent origination, we will be able to better appreciate individual differences. The principle of dependent origination reminds us that life is an infinite accumulation, and each person's character, habits, thoughts, and ways of thinking reflect their unique experiences. We should respect the principle of dependent origination, understand and accept others, and offer guidance using the most appropriate methods.

In conclusion, the greatest barrier to cultivating Metta is self-attachment, which becomes more pronounced in everyday experiences. To overcome self-attachment, profound Buddhist wisdom is needed. We interact with three types of sentient beings: those we like and feel close to, those we are indifferent towards, and those we dislike and reject. When practicing Metta, we should transform indifference into empathy, dislike into acceptance, and distance into close connection. Only then can we approach all sentient beings in daily life with loving-kindness, rather than separating Metta meditation from our everyday experiences.

How extensive is Avalokitesvara Bodhisattva's great loving-kindness? Does achieving perfection in loving-kindness require him to free all sentient beings from samsara? Actually, it does not, because if that were the case, with countless beings still mired in samsara, how could buddhas and bodhisattvas have reached enlightenment? Having perfected loving-kindness means being able to generate Metta towards every sentient being we meet, providing help to the best of our abilities, and eradicating all traces of indifference, hatred, and opposition. Once this is achieved, we then have perfected loving-kindness.

## **2. Three Levels of Altruism: Intermediate and Advanced**

At the intermediate level, altruism involves making the vow of great compassion of buddhas and bodhisattvas and practicing the six perfections<sup>2</sup> and the four means of conversion<sup>3</sup>.

Finally, advanced altruism is achieved by helping others while practicing equality, no-self, and no-obtain. This requires experiencing emptiness and understanding that all sentient beings in the six realms are fundamentally one. This realization helps us see that all distinctions between self and others arise from self-attachment. Only through such practices can one elevate conventional bodhicitta to ultimate bodhicitta, allowing us to engage in altruistic acts while recognizing that the three aspects—the giver, the recipient, and the act itself—are all empty. Thus, one aids sentient beings without clinging to the notion of sentient beings being saved.

In summary, the key focus when meditating on the *Metta Sutta* is to treat every sentence in the scripture as a sincere wish for the well-being of all sentient beings, whole-heartedly spreading loving-kindness. Then, off the cushion, continuously put these thoughts into practice, turning wishes into actions. The two aspects mutually reinforce each other: meditation provides guidance and a foundation for daily actions, while daily actions serve as a test and enhancement for meditation.

## VII

### Stages in the Practice of the Metta Sutta

While listening to the *Metta Sutta*, immerse yourself in the text and envision your mind as all-encompassing. It is formless, infinite, filling the vast emptiness, and spreading across countless world. In this way, your mind is everywhere, reaching all the void and the boundless Dharma realms. Thus, the device that is playing the *Metta Sutta*, too, represents your mind, and each phrase it utters is a genuine wish originating from within you. As you listen to the words of the *Metta Sutta*, you are continually reaffirming your vows, awakening and fortifying this loving-kindness wish.

The *Metta Sutta* covers a wide range of targets, from ourselves and the people around us to all sentient beings within the six realms, and even to all saints and sages. In the early stages of

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<sup>2</sup> Six perfections: giving, morality, forbearance, vigor, meditative absorption, wisdom

<sup>3</sup> Four means of conversion: generosity, kind words, helpfulness, and consistency between words and deeds

the practice, to thoroughly comprehend the main ideas of the sutra, it is essential to separate it into several sections and practice them one by one; otherwise, we might only develop a superficial understanding of the text. Begin by listening to the entire sutra, but then narrow your attention to work on a particular section.

For example, the phrases, “May I be free from hostility and danger. May I be free from mental suffering. May I be free from physical suffering”, can be practiced together or separately. By repeating these phrases, we gain a comprehensive understanding of hostility and danger and what it means to be liberated from them. Through repetition, we improve our concentration; and by maintaining clarity throughout the process, we strengthen our awareness.

We should only move on to practicing other sections when the mindset developed in the current section is clear, stable, and continuous. By “clear,” we mean knowing exactly what these wishes are and how they make us feel—as unmistakable as the distinct flavors of sugar and salt. “Stable” means being able to generate the corresponding mental state at any time with consistent intensity, rather than sporadically. “Continuous” implies that during Metta meditation, our loving-kindness mindset can be sustained without interruption between thoughts and remains undisturbed by delusive ideas. Furthermore, it means we can extend this loving-kindness into our everyday life. By achieving these three objectives, we can invoke the phrases from the *Metta Sutta* at any time, allowing us to emanate powerful loving-kindness akin to sunlight—illuminating the earth, banishing darkness, and filling all lives with love, harmony, and peace.

Meanwhile, when it comes to the target of our Metta, we also need to progress in stages. Start with yourself, then shift your focus to those around you, and ultimately broaden your Metta to include all sentient beings. In the future, we can integrate our Metta practice with the contemplations of the *Vows of Bodhisattva Samantabhadra Sutra*, merging the cultivation of Metta and bodhicitta.

Metta is often regarded as the foundation for cultivating bodhicitta. However, even after developing bodhicitta, we should continue practicing Metta. This is because bodhicitta enables us to strengthen our Metta, expanding it from finite to infinite. By integrating this with the experience of emptiness, we can truly achieve unconditional great loving-kindness and universal compassion. This is the journey we embark upon in our Metta practice.

# VIII

## Summary

In summary, the practice of the *Metta Sutta* generally includes the following key points:

1. Understand Each Sentence: Transform the content of the sutra into your sincere wishes for all sentient beings.
2. Incorporate Aspirations into Daily Life: Practice and test these wishes in your daily life, bringing the aspirations from meditation into your everyday actions.
3. Meditative Practice: Learn the meditative techniques of the sutra to dispel darkness, indifference, and opposition within your body and mind, and to establish friendly, harmonious, and warm relationships with others.
4. Bodhicitta and Loving-Kindness: Based on the perspectives from the *Vows of Bodhisattva Samantabhadra Sutra*, develop bodhicitta through loving-kindness and perfect great compassion through bodhicitta.
5. Equality and Selflessness: Cultivate boundless compassion and great empathy based on the views of equality, no-self, and non-obtain.

For those at the stages of Scholarly and Practitioner, achieving the first three points is commendable. The last two points are the focus of advanced practitioners in the Victorious and Sagacious stages.

## **Appendix:**

# **The Mahayana Buddhist View of Compassion and Its Transformative Role in Psychotherapy**

Lectured at the Fourth International Forum on Psychoanalysis and Chinese Culture, 2009

The mind is a key point of shared concern for both Buddhism and psychology. Within our minds, there is the potential for good, which can develop into a noble character and bring happiness and comfort. There are also negative psychological aspects that can give rise to mental illnesses, causing afflictions and suffering. When the body experiences illness, we seek timely medical treatment to prevent the condition from worsening and damaging our health. Similarly, when our minds suffer from ailments, we must also take them seriously and treat them actively. Although these mental illnesses are intangible and formless, if neglected, their harm can be as severe as physical illnesses. In extreme cases, they can drive people to despair. According to available data, the number of people who fall ill or even die due to mental problems is on the rise annually, which should not be overlooked.

In terms of treatment scope, psychology mainly focuses on treating psychological disorders. It primarily addresses pathological and abnormal psychological conditions, but does not cover common human afflictions such as greed, hatred, and ignorance. In contrast, Buddhist practice not only aims to eliminate negative mental states but also emphasizes the cultivation of positive mental qualities. Among the three virtues attained by the Buddha, the virtue of cessation is attained through the eradication of afflictions, representing the ultimate liberation from negative mental states. The virtues of wisdom and compassion embody great wisdom and great compassion, respectively, representing the full manifestation of humanity's inherent positive psychological qualities. Wisdom tends to benefit oneself, while compassion tends to benefit others. Together, they constitute the essence of Mahayana Buddhism, which emphasizes benefiting oneself and others, and awakening oneself and others. The cultivation and practice of compassion, in particular, is a unique and distinguished aspect of Mahayana Buddhism, setting it apart from Shravaka Buddhism. In this lecture, I will briefly introduce the Mahayana Buddhist view of compassion and its transformative role in psychotherapy, focusing on three key aspects.

# I

## What Is Compassion?

### 1. Compassion

“Compassion” is a word frequently mentioned in our daily life. When we describe someone as loving, we might say, “he is very compassionate.” In this case, compassion is a symbol of virtue. When we seek sympathy from others, we might ask them to “show some compassion.” In this context, compassion represents a form of practical help.

As for the relationship between compassion and Buddhism, many people may be familiar with the phrase “Monastics hold compassion in their hearts,” but they might not know that the term “compassion” (*ci-bei*) originates from the Buddhist scriptures. *Ci* means loving-kindness to all sentient beings and giving them happiness, while *bei* means compassion for all beings and eliminating their suffering. Although *ci* (loving-kindness) and *bei* (compassion) emphasize different aspects, they are interconnected. The ultimate giving of happiness inevitably involves alleviating suffering, and the true alleviation of suffering will undoubtedly bring happiness to others.

In Buddhism, compassion is not only a practical method of practice, such as loving-kindness meditation, but also one of the two main qualities—wisdom and compassion—attained by buddhas and bodhisattvas. As a defining quality of buddhas and bodhisattvas, compassion is not a vague concept; it has specific connotations and evaluation criteria. So, what are the characteristics of the compassion of buddhas and bodhisattvas?

### 2. Great Loving-Kindness and Great Compassion

The compassion of buddhas and bodhisattvas is characterized by great loving-kindness and great compassion. The term “great” here refers to the boundless expansion of compassion. This type of compassion extends to relatives as well as enemies; it includes humans and animals, covering all beings in the six realms. In other words, as long as there is a single being whom we are unwilling to benefit, whom we ignore or even view as an adversary, it does not represent the great loving-kindness and great compassion achieved by buddhas and bodhisattvas. Furthermore, the compassion of buddhas and bodhisattvas is enduring and

unchanging, extending to infinite future generations. Therefore, this type of compassion has measurable criteria and can be assessed through one's intentions and actions.

However, the compassion we typically refer to may only apply to specific individuals. For example, a mother's compassion for her children, while intense, is not universal and cannot be extended beyond her children. This type of compassion could merely be an emotion triggered by significant disasters, such as the nationwide outpouring of care that followed the Sichuan earthquake. Although such care was widespread, it was not lasting and could not be consistently maintained. What is the reason for this? It's because ordinary people have "self-attachment," which involves a strong sense of self-importance that instinctively drives us to focus on ourselves and overlook others. A mother's love for her children, although seemingly selfless, is often just an extension of the "self"; therefore, such compassion cannot be further extended to other sentient beings. It is also because of this "self" that we find it difficult to maintain sustained care for "others" beyond ourselves. Even if such emotions are initially sparked by specific events, they typically revert to habitual self-concern over time. Without correction through meditation, this "self" will continue to dominate, leading us to neglect or even forget the many others in the world who need help.

### **3. Unconditional Great Loving-Kindness and Universal Great Compassion**

The key reason that buddhas and bodhisattvas can achieve infinite compassion lies in their realization of emptiness, their understanding of no-self, and the elimination of opposition and barriers between themselves and others. Therefore, this kind of compassion is also known as "Unconditional Great Loving-Kindness and Universal Great Compassion." "Unconditional" means that there are no distinctions of closeness or distance, love or hatred; there is no sentient being that the bodhisattvas abandon or are unwilling to help. "Universal" means seeing oneself and all sentient beings as one entity. Just like when your foot is sprained, your hand naturally reaches out to soothe it and relieve the pain. This assistance is a natural bodily reaction that requires no thought. Until the pain is alleviated, this help will not cease halfway, nor will there be any distinction between the hand as the benefactor and the foot as the beneficiary.

The compassion of bodhisattvas for all sentient beings is similar. Guanyin Bodhisattva can "perceive the call for help and alleviate suffering" and "respond to countless pleas for help and always ferry people across the sea of suffering like a boat" precisely because he realizes that all sentient beings and himself are inherently one. Therefore, such help is given without any preconditions, without judging whether it is profitable or whether there will be any return.



At the same time, this compassion embodies the “emptiness of the three wheels” (the giver, the recipient, and the act of giving), with no opposition between the giver and the recipient. As stated in the *Diamond Sutra*, bodhisattvas “liberate innumerable sentient beings; in reality, no sentient beings are liberated.” Because of no-self, there is no-abidance; and because of no-abidance, there is infinity.

So, how can we expand our existing compassion to the great compassion akin to that of buddhas and bodhisattvas? This requires appropriate meditation practice.

## II

### The Practice of Compassion

#### 1. Awakening Compassion

Before practicing compassion, it is essential to recognize the significance of this mindset in shaping and developing one’s life. Many appreciate and admire the quality of compassion but hesitate to put it into practice. This reluctance stems from the belief that compassion involves sacrifice, giving, and the loss of personal interests. Such concern about gain and loss leads many to treat compassion as a mere concept. Even when people perform acts of compassion, they cannot invest the same level of care and commitment as they would for themselves. This is because in our minds, others are always seen as separate from ourselves, and self-interest and altruism are always viewed as inherently conflicting.

However, Buddhism teaches us that compassion is not only an altruistic act of kindness but also a self-beneficial practice that enhances one’s character. When we harbor compassion for others, our hearts become gentle and open. This gentleness brings us peace and tranquility, while this openness helps us build harmonious relationships with others. From this perspective, treating others well is actually treating ourselves well. When we recognize this, compassion naturally becomes a proactive and conscious behavior. As we give, we simultaneously receive—not in the form of reciprocation from others, but through the improvement of our own mental state.

However, this understanding is still based on self-interest, or rather, it views altruism as a means to self-benefit. Once facing various sentient beings in concrete situations, new

challenges arise. This is because the ordinary mind has likes and dislikes and is inherently unequal. It is particularly challenging to feel compassion for those we do not favor. Even when we approach it as a duty, it feels forced and difficult. Such compassion often leaves us feeling burdened and inclined to withdraw. So how can we make compassion grow quickly and become the dominant force in our minds?

## **2. Practicing Compassion**

In Mahayana Buddhism, three main practices are provided to help us achieve the breadth, strength, and purity of compassion.

First, there is breadth, achieved by arousing bodhicitta (the Bodhi mind) to expand compassion. Bodhicitta is a mind of enlightenment and altruism, striving not only for personal awakening but also for the enlightenment of all sentient beings, ultimately eliminating all suffering in life. This noble altruistic aspiration serves as a powerful force for the expansion of compassion. However, our minds are filled with various other desires. How can we ensure that our bodhicitta remains clear and undisturbed? This requires taking the vows of bodhicitta. Through solemn vows, we affirm this aspiration and make it the true foundation of our lives. When we live according to these vows, always keeping sentient beings in mind and doing our utmost to help them, our hearts will gradually expand, and our compassion will blossom.

Second, there is strength, achieved by cultivating bodhicitta to reinforce compassion. Taking bodhicitta vows only plants the seed of bodhicitta in our minds, but given our ingrained habits from beginningless time, this initial strength is insignificant. Therefore, it is essential to nourish it continuously. This involves practicing the ritual meditation of bodhicitta, reminding ourselves daily of the mission to “benefit all sentient beings.” Additionally, it requires integrating this aspiration into our daily lives, carrying it with us in everything we do. Through proper and sustained practice, the seeds of compassion are nurtured to robust growth, becoming a dominant force with unparalleled influence, a compelling intention that is unforgettable, and an ultimate goal, impervious to any external influences.

Third, there is purity, achieved by cultivating the view of emptiness to elevate compassion. The ordinary mind is complex, so when we nourish compassion, it is often intertwined with negative mental states such as ego, greed, attachment, and hatred. For instance, some people perform altruistic acts to gain fame, while others may feel resentful when their good deeds are misunderstood. These attitudes can hinder the attainment of true compassion.

Self-attachment prevents us from being infinite, while love and hatred prevent us from being impartial. Therefore, it is necessary to cultivate the view of emptiness, understanding that the self and the external world arise from dependent origination, without an inherent and unchanging essence. What we cling to as real is actually just our own assumptions and delusions, not the true nature of the objective world. With this understanding, negative mental states lose their foundation and instantly disappear under the insight of emptiness. Only when the impurities mixed with compassion are removed one by one can we attain the vast, pure, and undefiled compassion of buddhas and bodhisattvas.

### III

## The Transformative Role of Compassion in Psychotherapy

### 1. Compassion Can Enhance Interpersonal Communication

For psychotherapists, effective communication is a necessary professional skill. However, relying solely on techniques may not allow one to truly reach the heart of another person. For example, using “empathy” requires therapists to see the world from the patient’s perspective in order to facilitate communication. But as psychologist Dr. Irvin D. Yalom has pointed out, “It is extremely difficult to truly understand another person’s feelings. Too often, we project our own feelings onto others.”

What obstructs true “empathy” is precisely self-attachment, a strong sense of self-importance. This causes us to view problems through our own standards and preferences, making it impossible to achieve true empathy. In contrast, compassion in Mahayana Buddhism is based on a strong desire for altruism, which is the primary condition for approaching, accepting, and embracing others. In cultivating compassion, one must continually overcome self-attachment through the contemplation of emptiness, freeing oneself from self-centeredness. Only in this way can the barriers between self and others be removed, allowing one to enter the inner world of others and achieve true empathy.

In Mahayana Buddhism, there is a treatise called the *Way of the Bodhisattva*, authored by Bodhisattva Shantideva. This treatise provides a practice method called “exchanging self with others,” and its theoretical foundation lies in recognizing the faults of self-attachment and the benefits of altruism. With this understanding, one can shift the importance placed on oneself

onto all sentient beings and transform indifference towards others into the way one treats oneself. In other words, it is about reversing the positions of self and others in our minds. This practice helps us relinquish our self-importance and cultivate an altruistic mindset. It is also an effective method for achieving true empathy.

## **2. Compassion Can Resolve Various Psychological Issues**

Conventional psychotherapy often aids patients through external guidance. While this approach may alleviate certain psychological problems, it does not necessarily eliminate the root causes. Because our lives are fundamentally based on confusion and afflictions, these continually generate problems and keep us in a perpetually reactive state, exhausted from coping.

In Buddhism, however, the practice not only involves using right view to eliminate pathological psychology but also emphasizes the establishment of positive psychology. This positive psychology is known in Buddhism as right mindfulness, and compassion is an essential part of it. Although ordinary compassion has the power to resolve anger and other negative emotions, its effects are limited. Compassion in Mahayana Buddhism is based on the wisdom of emptiness. This wisdom of emptiness represents the inner awakening of the mind and the inherent ability of life to dispel afflictions. It is the fundamental reason why buddhas and bodhisattvas can attain liberation and freedom. Because of the power contained in the wisdom of emptiness, compassion based on this wisdom naturally has the ability to solve all psychological problems. Just like a body with strong immunity can defend itself against any viral infection, leaving no opportunity for the virus to take hold. Even existing ailments can be self-regulated and healed as the immune system is strengthened. Thus, this intrinsic power is the fundamental solution to solving psychological problems.

From the perspective of Mahayana Buddhism, the above primarily introduces the similarities and differences between Buddhist compassion and worldly compassion, the specific practices and methods for perfecting compassion in Buddhism, and the role of compassion in psychotherapy. I hope my talk has been thought-provoking for everyone.