

The Core Tenet of the Buddha-dharma is Great Compassion

Author: Venerable Yinshun

Source text: 《福慧隨身書》 No.015 《慈悲為佛法宗本》

Translated by Yinshun Cultural & Educational Foundation Translation Team

| | |
|---|-----------|
| THE BUDDHA’S TEACHINGS STEM FROM GREAT COMPASSION | 2 |
| THE SOURCE OF GREAT COMPASSION | 5 |
| The Aspect of Interrelationships—Manifestation of Dependent Co-arising Phenomena | 5 |
| The Aspect of True Equality—Nature of Dependent Co-arising Phenomena | 7 |
| GREAT COMPASSION AND ITS PRACTICE | 9 |
| Giving | 10 |
| Kind Speech | 10 |
| Beneficial Deeds | 11 |
| Cooperation | 11 |
| CULTIVATION OF GREAT COMPASSION | 12 |
| THE EXPERIENCE OF GREAT COMPASSION | 15 |
| Compassion That Arises Out of Contemplation of Sentient Beings in Suffering | 15 |
| Compassion That Arises Out of Contemplation On the Reasons Sentient Beings Cannot Stop the Cycle of Life and Death | 16 |
| Compassion That Arises Out of Contemplation of Sentient Beings But Without Any Attachment | 16 |

The Buddha’s Teachings Stem from Great Compassion

The saying, “great compassion is the foundation”¹ is perfect and just. Great compassion is the essence of the *Mahāyāna* teachings. It conveys the true subject matter of Buddhism.

A practitioner who follows the *Mahāyāna* teachings must give serious consideration to, and completely grasp, the essence of the *Mahāyāna* and its meaning. From the aspect of a bodhisattva’s practice, the *sūtras* constantly teach that “great compassion is foremost” and “great compassion is the foundation.” And from the aspect of the result; that is, completing the practice and attaining the goal of Buddhahood, the *sūtras* say that “all buddhas, the world honored ones, have great compassion as their essence.” The treatises say that “the heart of a buddha is great compassion.” Both the *sūtras* and treatises consistently teach that the core of the *Mahāyāna* practice and its goal is no other than great compassion. If great compassion is neglected, then there is no bodhisattva to be found, nor will there be a buddha. In addition, we could say that if there is no great compassion, there is no Buddha-dharma. This is because the Buddha-dharma springs forth from great compassion.²

This core tenet of the *Mahāyāna* may not be regarded as something important by *Śrāvakayāna* practitioners, who focus mainly on self-benefit. As a matter of fact, within the teachings of the *Tripitaka*³ that the *Śrāvakayāna* practitioners recognize and accept, what the Śākyamuni Buddha portrays is just as such [that is, Buddha himself embodies the core tenet of *Mahāyāna*]. Take the accounts of the Śākyamuni Buddha’s actual life, for example. The motive behind Prince Siddhārtha’s initial desire to undertake spiritual practice arose when he observed farmers working in the fields. [It is recorded that] the prince had grown up in the [luxury of the] palace and rarely saw farmers working on the land. [When he did get this chance,] he saw

¹ The Chinese version of this saying sometimes uses 慈悲 *cībēi* but more often it uses 大悲 *dàbēi*. Both refer to the same thing but with different emphasis. Compassion and loving kindness (慈悲) relay the ideas of removing suffering and bestowing happiness, respectively; both are aspects of great compassion (大悲), which places emphasis on compassion. That is, prioritising compassion, or removing suffering first, will make happiness long-lasting.

² Here, the reference can be related to the story of the Śākyamuni Buddha, who initially considered not teaching the Buddha-dharma and simply entering nirvana, as he was concerned that there were no beings who could accept and believe what he had awakened to. But due to his great compassion and upon Brahma’s request and encouragement, the Śākyamuni Buddha decided to turn the Dharma wheel, and so the Buddha-dharma exists to the present day, bringing benefit to people.

³ *Tripitaka* means “the three baskets.” It refers to the Buddhist canon of teachings that are made up of the *sūtra* (Buddha’s sermons), *vinaya* (precepts and regulations), and *abhidharma* (treatises) texts.

farmers working very hard under the scorching sun. He also saw that the farmers were not allowed to rest when they were hungry, thirsty, and tired.⁴ Moreover, he saw how the buffalos were put to work, whipped, and shackled with yokes that pressed hard onto their skin and flesh, causing them to bleed. The prince saw that many small bugs and worms in the soil were eaten by the birds when the earth was tilled. He also saw that where the buffalos' blood had dripped onto the soil, soon afterwards there would be maggots that became a meal for the birds. These scenes showed sentient beings causing mutual harm to each other, and the hardship of the farmers, which revealed the cruel side of this world. At this time, the prince felt deep sympathy and pain in his heart, which gave rise to thoughts on seeking a spiritual path to liberate the beings in this world [from their suffering].

This incident does not suggest the Buddha was seeking a spiritual path only for himself. A while after this incident, the prince went on another outing and saw aging, sickness, and death. From [seeing just] one case [of aging and death], the prince was able to understand that aging and death were sufferings that all humans experienced, and that he himself was not exempted. [That is to say,] through [observing a few cases of] others' [experience] he came to understand that he himself unavoidably was the same as others, and from this understanding he inferred that all humans are the same. Through [witnessing] this course of pain and suffering that all human beings, as well as all sentient beings, endure in their lives, if practitioners focus mainly on themselves, then they will give rise to the *Śrāvakayāna* mind that loathes suffering. If they focus not only on themselves but also hold greater consideration for all sentient beings, then they will give rise to the bodhisattvas' mind of compassion and sympathy.

The Buddha did not think just of himself. Therefore, under the Bodhi tree, soon after he attained perfect enlightenment regarding the truth of the universe, he began to travel along the shores of the Ganges to turn the Dharma wheel, beat the Dharma drum, and blow the Dharma conch shell.⁵ By using the marvelous sounds of the Dharma, the Buddha inspired beings in the midst of suffering to [seek] awakening. From the records of the Buddha's life it is revealed that he lived his entire life based on nothing else but great compassion. [In other words, his whole life]

⁴ In Ancient India, farmers were enslaved, and so they had to keep working until their masters allowed them to rest.

⁵ "Turn the Dharma wheel," "beat the Dharma drum," and "blow the Dharma conch shell" are Buddhist similes for propagating the Dharma by teaching it to others.

revealed the foundation of a buddha's mind; that is, great compassion. Looking at the Buddha's practices in his past lives [when he was a bodhisattva], which is seen in the *Jataka Tales*, reveals how the Bodhisattva sacrificed himself for others and how he empathized with all sentient beings. From these stories of his past lives, *Śrāvakayāna* followers cannot but admit that the Bodhisattva, [before Buddhahood,] had relied on great compassion to cultivate the *pāramitās*⁶ and, upon perfection, that the Bodhisattva attained the goal of Buddhahood. Therefore, throughout the *Mahāyāna* practice—that is, from the Bodhisattva stage to Buddhahood—all the mental and physical practices are [grounded in] great compassion. If a practitioner were to diverge from great compassion, then how can that practitioner be considered as one who belongs to the *Mahāyāna*?

In the *Mahāyāna sūtras* it is said that bodhisattvas and *śrāvakas* are both called the children of the Buddha. But bodhisattvas are like the sons of a householder's first wife, while the *śrāvakas* are like the children of the other wives.⁷ In other words, in terms of bodhisattvas, they are like the sons of the first wife, who carry on the noble and pure lineage of the Buddha. As for the *śrāvakas*, although they too were said to be born from the mouth of the Buddha (sons of the Buddha)⁸ and were transformed by the Dharma, unavoidably their bloodline was mixed with other lineages. What these other lineages refer to is nothing else but the bias toward hermitic life and ascetic practices, based on the mindset of self-benefit. This was a sort of skilful means adopted by the Buddha for the sake of catering to the situation in India at the time.

The *Śrāvakayāna* is [part of] the Buddha-dharma and possesses a fraction of [the Buddha's] profound wisdom. The *Śrāvakayāna* is [part of] the Buddha-dharma but focuses on the aspect of profound wisdom. Therefore, it is unable to represent the complete and perfect Buddha-dharma because it includes an element that contradicts the true spirit of the Buddha, namely it lacks great compassion. Hence, the *Avataṃsaka Sūtra* likens the practitioners of the two-vehicle path as being born from the Buddha's back. Accordingly, if we look at the Buddha-dharma from the standpoint of the *Śrāvakayāna* and specifically regard the *śrāvaka* practices

⁶ *Pāramitā* means “perfection” and relates to virtuous practices that must be perfected by bodhisattvas in order to attain Buddhahood. The common group of *pāramitās* in *Mahāyāna* teachings is the six *pāramitās*, or six perfections: generosity, morality, tolerance, diligence, concentration, and wisdom.

⁷ In the Buddha's time, men were allowed to have multiple wives. The first wife was considered to have higher standing than subsequent wives and, so too, her children.

⁸ The Chinese text states that “*Śrāvakas* are also born from the mouth of the Buddha.” This is a reference to the Indian simile of the four-caste system, whereby brahmins were born from the mouth, royals from the arm, merchant classes from the legs and the slave class from the foot of Brahma.

as the core of Buddha's teachings, it cannot be said that the foundations of the Buddha-dharma is great compassion.⁹ Nevertheless, if we look at the Buddha-dharma from the aspect of *Mahāyāna*, which represents the true spirit of the Buddha, the teaching of great compassion as the foundation of all practices is most appropriate for revealing the essence of Buddhism; that is, the Buddha's true intent.

The Source of Great Compassion

Great compassion is the foundation of the Buddha-dharma. It can also be said that great compassion is similar to the concepts of benevolence in Chinese cultures¹⁰ and universal love in Christian cultures. However, [only] the Buddha-dharma enables the thorough and perfect functioning of great compassion. [This is unlike the case in Christian cultures] where universal love is obstructed by the view that there is a Creator God [who controls everything], or the case [in Chinese cultures] in which people commonly limit [their benevolence] to the narrow reference [of the family]. Based on the Buddha-dharma, great compassion is a kind of empathy that flows forth in accordance with situations and universal principles, and arises from consensus [about virtue].¹¹ This can be explained from two aspects.

The Aspect of Interrelationships—Manifestation of Dependent Co-arising Phenomena

Nothing in this world, including material items, consciousness, and life, is independent; rather they are dependent co-arisen phenomena, which are mutually reliant on each other to exist. Upon relying on many causes and conditions, something comes into existence. In such a manner, it appears to exist as single and independent. This is similar to a network, in which there is a relationship [between each and all parts]. Everything exists as dependent upon a relationship with others, but may appear to function as single and independent. Though it appears as independent, the fact is that everything is determined by relationships. Without these

⁹ Here, *Śrāvakayāna* relates to the teachings in the *Āgama Sūtras*, which mainly focus on wisdom and gaining liberation, and less on teachings about great compassion.

¹⁰ Here, the reference to Chinese cultures relate to Confucianism because in pre-modern China that was the dominant philosophy that was accepted and promoted by the imperial court.

¹¹ Common consensus means there is a social standard generally accepted about what is pitiful and what is not, and the feelings of compassion and empathy that arise easily when one sees pitiful situations, while such feelings are less likely to rise when seeing happy situations.

relationships, there is no existence. Everything in this world exists as such, and sentient beings as well as humans are the same in this respect. Therefore, if one's view of human existence is based on such a truth, that everything's existence is dependent co-arisen, that view accords with the truth of there being no intrinsic self, encourages mutual benefit, and enables gratitude and the desire to repay that gratitude. In short, this is a view that is founded on great compassion.

Focusing only on this present life, humans cannot exist separately from society. Putting aside the relationships of one's immediate family, [all kind of affairs are all connected to others. For example,] items such as clothing, food, shelter, and medicine require farmers and workers to harvest or create raw materials and add value to them, and then business people are needed to sell these products to consumers. In addition, education needed to develop knowledge and skills, and success from our learning and career, is dependent on the help of teachers and friends. Furthermore, maintaining social order, undertaking public works, protecting the country's internal peace, and deterring external attacks are all dependent on the government, public services, and armed forces. If these conditions do not come together [favorably], then it would be hard for us to live peacefully and happily each moment of every day.

If we broaden our scope to other countries and their peoples in this modern time, the ways in which our thinking and economies are interrelated becomes more evident. Even those sentient beings that are not human have a direct or indirect effect on the prosperity of human societies. This is how closely related we are with other humans and beings. When realizing this interconnection, we naturally evoke some degree of empathy. Empathy depends on having a consensus view, which is to understand that there are connections and commonalities between each other. As a result, one gives rise to consideration [for others], which then motivates the great compassionate activities of mind and the physical body, namely loving kindness to bestow happiness, and compassion to remove suffering. This is a situation that people in this world can understand easily.

If we broaden the scope to relationships from the aspect of three life cycles, then all sentient beings, since time without beginning, have had a very close relationship with us, such as having the experience in the same type of existence. In other words, all sentient beings have been our parents, siblings, partners, and children. I owe gratitude to every sentient being—gratitude to

my parents, sentient beings, country (rulers): the Triple Gem.¹² Therefore, in a bodhisattva's mind, all sentient beings are regarded as their fathers, mothers, brothers, or sisters, and treat them in harmonious and joyous ways. In the Buddha's mind, all sentient beings are viewed in the same ways as Rahula (the Buddha's son). This type of consensus [about a certain value] is unlike the narrow [reference of] family, country, or our human species. Also, the consensus [about a certain value] is not [only because of having] the same occupation, social hierarchy, ideology, religion, or living in the same residential area, going to the same school, or having common enemies. Instead, it is a consensus view attained through understanding the mutually reliant relationship between one another as well as between all sentient beings. As a result, activities of mind and the physical body to repay gratitude arise; that is, the desire to bring happiness (loving kindness) and provide relief (compassion) to all sentient beings. Great compassion (benevolence or love [in Confucianism and Christianity, respectively]) is the foundation of morality and also the highest criterion of morality.

Great compassion seems mysterious, but in fact it is an empathy [for all sentient beings] arising from a mind that accords with the principle of dependent co-arising.

The Aspect of True Equality—Nature of Dependent Co-arising Phenomena

All phenomena exist through the process of dependent co-arising and have numerous relationships [between each other], as well as unlimited differences. These differences manifest that nothing exists independently with a true intrinsic entity. Therefore, through contemplating those dependently co-arisen phenomena to reach the ultimate truth, it is possible to thoroughly understand that all phenomena are without an intrinsic entity, and to realize that their ultimate nature is equal without duality. Such ultimate nature that is equal without duality is not God and does not belong to anyone. It is the original nature of all dependently co-arisen phenomena. When looking at all dependently co-arisen phenomena from the aspect of ultimate nature that is equal without duality, the underlying meaning is not just that there is a relationship of mutual supports. The deeper meaning is that everyone is equal, without duality.

¹² The gratitude of the Triple Gem mainly refers to the Buddha, Dharma and samgha's presence, and efforts to show, teach and preserve the Dharma teachings so that we know there is a path leading to liberation from all suffering and we can practice that path with the Triple Gem's support and guidance.

The *Mahāyāna* teachings indicate that sentient beings and buddhas are equal and that all sentient beings have the potential to become buddhas. These teachings are based on the awakening to the nature that all dharmas are equal. Grounded in this contemplation of equality, naturally one gives rise to “great compassion based on the nature that all beings are the same.” [For example,] when seeing that sentient beings are caught in suffering and unable to attain Buddhahood due to having delusion, one will realize that these are one’s own sufferings and the imperfection of one’s own merits becomes evident. It is taught, in the *Mahāyāna*, that a practitioner’s aspiration and practices of great compassion that offer relief to sentient beings can extend into the future, without end because they realize the nature that all beings are equal.¹³ For all sentient beings and especially humans, there is empathy based on common understanding, which arises from mutual reliance for existence; that is, a form of dependent co-arising.

Further, for humans there is also a common, subconscious and intuitional empathy that often occurs in the face of suffering by sentient beings and humans. [In other words,] whether looking at oneself or others, everyone has a kind of intuition that we all are from the same origin, and we are eager for that same origin, which is an inclination toward equality and harmony. Such [intuition and eagerness] is not because God told us to do so. Instead, this is because the nature of dependent co-arising functions within us. Although we are yet to realize the principle of dependent co-arising, we do not stray far away from it. Due to many delusions, obstructions, and limitations, we have become confused. However, a kind of distorted intuition still comes forth through one’s own delusion. Such [intuition] is the source of theism (albeit somewhat distorted), the source of notions of morality, and the source of the spirit of great compassion. Great compassion is not something beyond or completely unrelated to humans. Rather, it is one’s natural behavior that shows empathy toward sentient beings that arises from a mind according with the truth.

¹³ Here, the reference to endless practices to save beings is because of realizing the nature that all beings are the same. Bodhisattvas who realize the truth of equality experience others’ suffering as their own. As there are countless beings, consequently, bodhisattvas continually work to bring all beings to enlightenment. Only when all beings are free from suffering, then the bodhisattvas are perfect and free from suffering too.

Great Compassion and its Practice

Great compassion is the root of the Buddha-dharma and the essential quality of the buddhas and bodhisattvas. Everything a bodhisattva does is a result of great compassion. All their acts are motivated by great compassion. Hence, it is said that bodhisattvas are not carefree due to great compassion. Why are they not carefree? This is because a bodhisattva's acts are subject to the great compassion inside them and take the fulfillment of sentient beings' needs as their motive. The motive of their acts is not based on their own desires. If sentient beings require certain help, bodhisattvas have no choice but to carry out actions to bring forth such assistance; if a bodhisattva should stop [doing something] for the sake of sentient beings' benefits, then the bodhisattva must cease [such actions]. The bodhisattva's practice of sacrificing oneself for the benefit of others stems from this [great compassion]. It is certainly not the case that bodhisattvas carefully go about ensuring the attainment of their own benefits. Instead, they carry out deeds completely for the sake of others, without considering themselves [first].

The great compassion of bodhisattvas can be [further] analyzed as the four minds of loving kindness, compassion, appreciative joy, and impartiality. Loving kindness refers to giving sentient beings all sorts of benefits and joy, whether they are worldly or transcendental. Compassion refers to relieving sentient beings of their hardship and suffering, and especially helping sentient beings resolve the cause of cyclic existence. Appreciative joy refers to the situation in which a bodhisattva feels joyous when seeing sentient beings gain happiness and freedom from suffering. [In other words,] the joy and happiness those beings experience is then taken by the bodhisattvas as their own joy. Impartiality refers to viewing equally those whom we are fond of, or not. That is, bodhisattvas do not recall the favor or ill-will that sentient beings bring to them and then discriminate between whom they like and dislike. Giving joy and relieving suffering is the essence of loving kindness and compassion. However, if one has a habit of feeling jealousy or discomfort when seeing other people enjoy good fortune, and harbors animosity or strong personal affections, which then results in favoring some people and harboring disdain toward others, then under such situations it will certainly be impossible to give rise to a loving kindness and compassion that is impartial and without bias. Therefore, bodhisattvas require not only loving kindness and compassion but also appreciative joy and impartiality. Only with the combination of these four minds can bodhisattvas achieve true bodhi mind.

However, it is not enough to have thoughts of great compassion. One must also undertake compassionate deeds. In other words, great compassion is not merely a thought. Rather, bodhisattvas must undertake actual deeds in order to fulfill and concretize their great compassion and make it complete. Deeds that can actualize and concretize great compassion are called altruistic deeds. A general framework [of these deeds] is composed of the four all-embracing virtues: giving, kind speech, beneficial deeds, and cooperation.

Giving

There are three broad categories of giving that can embody all beneficial deeds. One is the giving of tangible possessions, such as financial assistance, physical help in the form of labor, or even the sacrifice of one's own life for others. The second is the giving of Dharma, which includes situations whereby one offers guidance through ideology and uses the righteous Dharma to teach people. It even includes situations in which one gives just a word or a single sentence to help sentient beings change their mindset, give up unwholesomeness and move toward wholesomeness. The third is the giving of fearlessness. An example is given here. When sentient beings are afflicted with vexations or caught in bad situations, they experience immense anguish and hopelessness. Bodhisattvas use the righteous Dharma to comfort and guide them, and also employ various skilful means to help and protect them so that they can overcome their psychological suffering. These are the three broad categories of giving, and without giving, great compassion will be meaningless. Although the three broad categories of giving can contain all kinds of altruisms, one must also employ kind speech, beneficial deeds and cooperation.

Kind Speech

Kind speech refers to verbal expressions that present affection and care. This can be speech that is pleasant to the receiver, but can also include stern words of reprimand. All such speech must come from great compassion and must be able to help the receiver feel the underlying good intention so that the receiver is willing to accept those words with joy. Otherwise, if one were to undertake an act of giving to the poor or those in trouble and use language that is belittling, arrogant, or ridiculing, then the receivers who have self-pride are most likely going to reject the offer of help, or will accept the help with reluctance and a feeling of repulsion.

Another example is when giving feedback relating to a situation or person(s). If the feedback is with good intention and constructive, then such kind speech is more readily accepted by the receiver and can help them improve. Otherwise, [if the feedback is given unskillfully] though it is factual, the receiver may develop resentment and the feedback may cause misunderstanding and conflicts.

Beneficial Deeds

Beneficial deeds in modern language may correspond to welfare services, such as charitable programs designed and implemented for the sake of improving social welfare or to benefit the general public.

Cooperation

Cooperation means to work side-by-side with all other partners, through the good and the bad times. Whether in a work or recreational situation, we should not make special arrangements for ourselves but instead should maintain an equal standing with others. Such an approach is a good way to influence others.

When bodhisattvas want to benefit others with great compassion, the method must be thoroughly considered. Kind speech, beneficial deeds, and cooperation are the methods that enable the acts of giving to become efficacious and can ensure that sentient beings really obtain the benefits. These four all-embracing virtues are the foundation for providing charitable relief to sentient beings and for creating harmony with sentient beings. These are virtues any leader who aims to embrace sentient beings must have. Bodhisattvas [aim to] become leaders or guides but their purpose is not to gain more power. Instead, their purpose is to provide relief to sentient beings. They know that this is the only way to embrace sentient beings and accomplish the aim of benefiting humans. [To sum up,] a bodhisattva should develop great compassion and enable that great compassion to materialize into acts of giving and so forth. This is an essential requisite of a bodhisattva.

The leadership of bodhisattvas is not limited to political governance.¹⁴ Bodhisattvas who have the aspiration and practice of great compassion can be in any social class and field of career, and always take on the role of leaders, just as Vimalakīrti, who is regarded as “the most honorable” among all classes and fields of career.¹⁵

Cultivation of Great Compassion

Compassion is found in all humans. However, [ordinary people] are unable to expand it and move away from the narrow reference to themselves and selfishness. Because [compassion] is based on the narrow reference point of oneself and selfishness, it is unavoidably mixed with attachment and then becomes affection. The ancient Chinese poem regarding praise of tigers says, “Among all animals, tigers are the fiercest. Who would dare to make a tiger angry? Yet, due to the affection between father and son, with each step it watches over [its young].” Compassion is truly something that all sentient beings universally possess. Even the fierce tigers are not different in this respect. Therefore, the cultivation of great compassion is focused on how to broaden the scope of compassion and purify it so that our compassion is not distorted by wrong views that are related to narrow reference points and selfishness. Hence, the development of great compassion is called “cultivating compassion,” just as we nurture seedlings to enable them to grow strong and healthy.

¹⁴ The reference to political situation here relates to the general situation during Venerable Yinshun’s life, where the word leader would be associated with political leaders in China and Taiwan.

¹⁵ The Chinese text literally states “the most honorable (一切中尊 *yīqièzhōngzūn*).” The translation has clarified this based on the information in the *Vimalakīrti Sūtra*, which says, “If he is among elders, he is the most honorable elder and will teach the elders the excellent Dharma. If he is among householders, he is the most honorable householder and will teach the householders to remove their greed. If he is among the Kshatriyas (royals and warriors), he is the most honorable Kshatriya and will teach them the practice of endurance. If he is among the Brahmins (priests), he is the most honorable Brahmin and will teach them to suppress arrogance. If he is among the government ministers, he is the most honorable minister and will teach them righteous governance. If he is among the princes, he is the most honorable prince and will be a role model of loyalty and filial piety. If he is among the courtiers, he is the most honorable courtier and will teach and govern the court ladies. If he is among commoners, he is the most honorable person and will help people’s power of merits prosper. If he is among the beings in the Brahma heavens, he is the most honorable heavenly being and will teach the beings in the Brahma heavens to develop superior wisdom. If he is among the Śakra heavens, he is the most honorable Śakra king and will show the beings in the Śakra heavens impermanence. If he is among the worldly guardians, he is the most honorable of the guardians and protects all beings. The householder Vimalakīrti uses such countless and skillful ways to bring benefits to all beings. 《維摩詰所說經》卷1〈2方便品〉：「若在長者，長者中尊，為說勝法；若在居士，居士中尊，斷其貪著；若在刹利，刹利中尊，教以忍辱；若在婆羅門，婆羅門中尊，除其我慢；若在大臣，大臣中尊，教以正法；若在王子，王子中尊，示以忠孝；若在內官，內官中尊，化政宮女；若在庶民，庶民中尊，令興福力；若在梵天，梵天中尊，誨以勝慧；若在帝釋，帝釋中尊，示現無常；若在護世，護世中尊，護諸眾生；長者維摩詰，以如是等無量方便饒益眾生。」

According to the transmission of the ancient sages, the practice of developing great compassion has two main methods. One is to view others as ourselves. This is to put oneself in another's shoes as if one is the other person, and then to think about what to do and how to tackle the situation. Everyone knows that each person loves themselves and will always protect their own interests. If I have such a thought, then others will too. If one is able to take our own self-love and infer that onto others, and further steps into their shoes and treats others in the same way as one would look after oneself, then great compassion will naturally and spontaneously arise. The *Dharmapada* says, "All beings fear death, and all tremble under the threat of weapons. Treating others like oneself, neither kill nor harm." Treating others like oneself is consistent with the Confucian principle of reciprocity.¹⁶ However, [such compassion] is just an extension of selfish love. Although this method can develop compassion, it cannot completely purify the quality of compassion.

The other method is to view those we like and dislike equitably. Apart from loving oneself, there are also some people we love and care for dearly, and these are no other than our parents, partners, children, and so on. Then there are some people toward whom our loving kindness or compassion is hard to evoke. These people are no other than our enemies. For the sake of facilitating the cultivation of great compassion, we can try to gradually broaden [our great compassion] by starting from those we are close to, then to those we are acquainted with, and finally onto those we dislike. All humans, or sentient beings in a broad sense, can be grouped into three categories: those we love, hate and neither like nor dislike.

These three categories may be even further split into several levels. Initially, we begin with our beloved family members and close friends. We observe their suffering and long to remove their suffering. When we see them without fortune and joy, we long to bring them fortune and joy. We continue to practice in this way until we can regard the suffering and joy of our beloved ones as our own and attain the status in which the feeling is so deeply embedded in us that at every moment we want them to be happy and free from suffering. Then we broaden the scope to the people we are only acquainted with; that is, those for whom we harbor no hatred nor

¹⁶ In the *Analects of Confucius*, "Zi Gong [a disciple of Confucius] asked: Is there any one word that could guide a person throughout life? The Master replied: I would say 'shù' [reciprocity]: never impose on others what you would not choose for yourself." 《論語》〈衛靈公〉：「子貢問曰：有一言而可以終身行之者乎？子曰：其恕乎！己所不欲，勿施於人。」

gratitude. When we contemplate [on our relationships with these people] more carefully, it will become clear that we actually owe gratitude to these people, especially when we consider that since time without beginning, no one has not been my mother, father, or teacher.¹⁷

This method is to develop concern for the suffering and happiness of people whom we neither like nor dislike, and let loving kindness and compassion arise. The aim is to continue practicing in this way until we view them in exactly the same way as our own family members, or those we hold in gratitude. When we are able to have great compassion toward the people we neither like nor dislike, then we can progress to those we dislike. Those whom we dislike may have once treated us poorly or may still be our enemy. However, would not such persons have treated us well in some past time or life? Why is it that we always hold onto resentment and easily forget their kindness?

In addition, when thinking about the reason these people are our enemies, it becomes clear that sentient beings do not innately possess hatred toward us. Rather, the reason is because they are affected by wrong views, afflicted by the temptations of desire and propelled by their defilements, such that they are not in full control of themselves. When we see that these people are undertaking evil deeds and being ignorant and deluded, we should pity them, forgive them and [even try to] help them. How can we have hatred toward these people merely because they have caused us some minor frictions? Moreover, those we like and dislike are not fixed and unchanging. For example, if we do not treat our family members in accordance with virtues and show them compassion and love, then they can become our enemies. In contrast, if we can treat our enemies using the power of virtues and sincerity of compassion, then we can transform the relationship from animosity into friendship. [Therefore,] why do we not endeavor to have great compassion toward our enemies and why do we not devise ways to help them gain happiness and freedom from suffering? When we use various ways to contemplate situations and gradually broaden our scope such that we can have great compassion for our enemies, this is the accomplishment of viewing those we like and dislike equally.

When compassion reaches the level at which it can be applied universally to all beings, this is the great compassion taught in the Buddha-dharma. Great compassion should be nurtured and

¹⁷ This reference to time without beginning refers to the Buddhist concept of endless cycles of births and deaths, and that in each life we have parents and teachers etc. who care, nurture, and educate us.

extended. The two methods discussed above are the practices that are most effective and easy to cultivate in developing great compassion.

The Experience of Great Compassion

The aforementioned methods on developing great compassion are still mainly focused on worldly affairs [and not connected to transcendence]. Some *Śrāvakayāna* practitioners think that loving kindness and compassion merely arise on the basis of contemplating worldly affairs [and has no connection with transcendence. However,] this is not the true meaning [of practicing great compassion] in the Buddha-dharma. According to the *Mahāyāna*, great compassion and wisdom are not opposites. Within human beings' consciousness, which has defilements, emotions and rationality are not distinct from each other. They [great compassion and wisdom] can be regarded as mutually interacting and integrating, or can be considered as different aspects that appear from the activities of our mind. Just like turning the impure into pure, the realization through wisdom also [embodies] the manifestation of great compassion. It is not the case that rationality is dry [without emotions]; instead it is brimming with genuine great compassion. An example is when the Buddha perfected his great enlightenment. At the time when the ultimate wisdom is attained this also embodies [the accomplishment of] great compassion. If someone attempts to practice and attain realization without great compassion, then they will either fall into the path of heretics or become a practitioner with *abhimāna*, like a seedling affected by damping-off, or scorched seeds.¹⁸ Compassion can be split into three categories.

Compassion That Arises Out of Contemplation of Sentient Beings in Suffering

This is the common compassion and love possessed by ordinary people. Ordinary people do not realize that the self and all phenomena are empty of fixed entity, and instead think that

¹⁸ The literal meaning of the Sanskrit word *abhimāna* is “undue estimate of oneself.” This refers to a type of arrogance that is specifically related to self-conceit about one’s spiritual attainment and mistaking such attainment to be higher than what it is. For example, some practitioners attain the fourth *dhyana* and think it is arhatship, or some attain liberation and think it is the same as what the Buddha attained. The result is that such practitioners see no need to further practice and learn, so they no longer progress to the higher levels of attainment, particularly Buddhahood. This is why they are like a seedling affected by damping-off, or scorched seeds.

sentient beings are real. Consequently, when they see sentient beings experiencing joy or suffering, empathy with loving kindness and compassion arises within them. Such compassion eventually remains within the realm of life and death, no matter if the compassion is equal to [Confucian] benevolence, or [Christian] universal love.

Compassion That Arises Out of Contemplation On the Reasons Sentient Beings Cannot Stop the Cycle of Life and Death

This is where one awakens to the truth that sentient beings are empty of fixed entity. However, since their spiritual capacity is weak, such practitioners are unable to thoroughly understand that all dharmas are empty [or have attachment to Dharma principles.] This is the mind state of the two-vehicle practitioners, the *śrāvakas* and *pratyekabuddhas*. [For example,] sentient beings are caught in the cycle of life and death; that is, in the cyclical process of delusion, karma, and suffering, which is called “shackles of cause and effect.” When these practitioners see that sentient beings are in such a process and continually cycling from one life to the next without end, then there arises compassion within them.¹⁹ The arising of this kind of compassion is still based on sentient beings as objects of contemplation. Because they have realized the truth that all sentient beings are empty, they contemplate that all sentient beings are the compound [of the five aggregates], and [the five aggregates] function in accordance with the principle of dependent co-arising. If one does not contemplate on any being as an object, which is empty of fixed entity, then how can compassion arise?

Compassion That Arises Out of Contemplation of Sentient Beings But Without Any Attachment

This kind of compassion is unlike the compassion that two-vehicle practitioners attain. The latter only awaken to the truth that sentient beings are empty, but continue to hold the misconception that all other dharmas are real. The buddhas and bodhisattvas [of higher levels] can thoroughly realize the truth that all dharmas and sentient beings are empty. Yet, this does not mean that they focus only on realizing emptiness where there is no appearance of dharmas and sentient beings. Rather, while they thoroughly awaken to the truth that all dharmas and

¹⁹ This endless cycle is what they observe but their fixation is on the underlying principle of cause and effect. The attachment or focus on this principle is the source of compassion for these practitioners.

sentient beings are empty, in their state of realization, sentient beings that are empty of fixed entity do appear.²⁰ [On the one hand,] sentient beings that are empty of fixed entity arise from causes and conditions. They are ultimately empty. [On the other hand,] in the state where one realizes the truth that all dharmas and sentient beings are ultimately empty, there arises sentient beings empty of fixed entity.

The [relationship between] wisdom and great compassion can be described as wisdom is the genuine pity for the sufferings of sentient beings, and this pity flows from the realization of great compassion. [That is, wisdom has great compassion as one of its functions, just like the teaching that] *prajñā* is one dharma that is known by various names from different aspects. When the buddhas and bodhisattvas attain true awakening, if their realization only includes awakening to emptiness [where there is no appearance of sentient beings,] how can they give rise to great compassion toward sentient beings? Therefore, practitioners must have sentient beings as objects of contemplation so that great compassion can arise and flow.

The third kind of compassion is different from the other two. The first category of compassion is where one has attachment to sentient beings and regards them as something that has intrinsic nature. The second category of compassion is where one no longer has attachments to sentient beings nor regards them as something that has intrinsic nature, but still views other dharmas as real. Only the *Mahāyāna*'s great compassion, which arises out of contemplation of sentient beings but without any attachment, is gained from thoroughly penetrating the emptiness of sentient beings and all other dharmas. [In the realization of] this third category, only mirage-like sentient beings and other dharmas appear, all of which have no fixed entity.²¹

Some so-called *Mahāyāna* practitioners do not understand the profound meaning of the *Mahāyāna* and think that the realization as taught in the *Mahāyāna* only focuses on the equal and universal nature of all dharmas; they regard the realization as something related to wisdom

²⁰ Note that this is explaining the state that is realized by the buddhas, which is actually beyond description and duality. Often, when practitioners awaken to emptiness (while in meditation) they see emptiness but do not see manifestations of dharmas. Once out of meditation, dharmas appear while they no longer see emptiness. In the state of realization of the buddhas one can see emptiness while also seeing sentient beings, but without any attachment or wrong views concerning emptiness and manifested dharmas.

²¹ What this is trying to explain is that for buddhas and bodhisattvas who have attained this level of awakening, they will have perceptions of the various dharmas (sentient beings and others) as they arise from the coming together of causes and conditions, but there is no erroneous attachment to these dharmas as intrinsically real and independently existing objects.

only. They do not know that attainment of realization in the *Mahāyāna* must have an equal balance of great compassion and wisdom. If the description of realization is lacking in great compassion, it cannot reveal the unique virtue of the buddhas and bodhisattvas.

Chinese Confucians have gained some inspiration from Buddhism. [In their practice,] they think that they have realized the essence of benevolence and feel that they are filled with vitality. This is similar to the realization [of great compassion] in the *Mahāyāna*. However, Confucians cannot reflect inward to realize the truth that the self is empty, and their minds are limited ([due to] the perception of duality). In this respect, their realization of benevolence is not comparable to that of great compassion in Buddhism.

Regarding insight meditations that enable practitioners to realize the truth of all dharmas, in the *Āgama Sūtra*, there are four titles that align well with the four Dharma seals (Table 1).

Table 1: Insight Meditation That Aligns with the Four Dharma Seals

| Insight Meditations | Four Dharma Seals |
|----------------------------|--|
| Nothingness (no desires) | All conditioned phenomena are impermanent. |
| Immeasurableness | All sensations are suffering. |
| Emptiness | All dharmas are without an intrinsic nature. |
| Signlessness | Nirvana is tranquil. |

[It is clear that] the meditation of immeasurableness enables practitioners to be free from attachments and has the same position as [the meditations of] emptiness, signlessness, and nothingness.²² However, as *Śrāvakayāna* Buddhism flourished, the meditation of immeasurableness [as a means to liberation was] somehow forgotten. *Śrāvakayāna* practitioners have forgotten that immeasurableness refers to no bounds. This means that when someone projects their insight [meditation] externally, [the meditations of] loving kindness, compassion, appreciative joy, and impartiality have immeasurable sentient beings as the

²² Note that the meditations on emptiness, signlessness, and nothingness are the three gates to liberation. Here, Venerable Yinshun is pointing out that the meditation on immeasurableness can also lead to liberation. This point is to draw attention to the present understanding in Theravada practices that consider the meditation on immeasurableness as a worldly practice that does not lead to liberation.

objects. Immeasurable refers to everything and anything, without bounds. Thus, these are called the four immeasurable meditations.

When someone projects their insight [meditation] internally, the fixed entity of sentient beings is unattainable and [so] there is no fixed and limiting entity that exists between each other. Therefore, the meditation of immeasurableness is a kind of right insight whereby one realizes that [all sentient beings] exist by way of mutual reliance, in accordance with the principle of dependent co-arising and all are equal and without a distinct entity. When someone is able to realize the truth that the self and others are equal and exist by way of mutual reliance, then wisdom and compassion become united and there is no longer any difference between the two. Forgetting that this meditation of immeasurableness [can lead to liberation] highlights the partiality [toward self-liberation] in *Śrāvākayāna* Buddhism.²³ The great compassion, the true essence of Buddhism, has been overlooked and enshrouded [in Early Buddhism]. This is the one regrettable situation of Early Buddhism. The true essence had not been revealed until *Mahāyāna* Buddhism became popular.

To sum up, if realization attained by a disciple of the Buddha accords with the [true] spirit of the Buddha, then wisdom and compassion are united in the state of that realization. It is by no means the case that such realization is biased to a rational wisdom only. When absolute truth is realized [through wisdom], the ultimate virtue of great compassion that is universal without any selfishness is accomplished, too. Only with the ultimate virtue of great compassion can wisdom be called *prajñā*, with which one can thoroughly awaken to the truth. Therefore, it is said, “the essence of a buddha is great compassion.”

²³ The meditation on immeasurableness (the four immeasurable meditations) focuses on sentient beings and benefiting others, which has a different focus when compared to *Śrāvākayāna* practices that focus on self-liberation.