

The extraordinary attitude of great compassion

His Holiness the Dalai Lama

A POWERFUL COMPASSION OF UNIVERSAL SCOPE

When meditating on compassion, reflect on how sentient beings experience suffering. To greatly increase the strength of your compassion, begin by visualizing a being undergoing severe torment, for example an animal destined for slaughter. Imagine that being's mental state in such a situation, and then arouse within yourself a fervent wish that it be freed from this suffering.

You can also visualize other beings. When traveling by train in India, there is no shortage of examples of unfortunate creatures of every kind, both animals and humans. Imagine these beings who, despite a thirst for happiness equal to your own, endure obvious misery. People also use animals as beasts of burden. Towns and villages are full of cattle that Indian society forbids people to kill, but that no one cares for once they have grown old and useless. In India one also sees beggars who are blind, deaf, unable to speak, or disabled, as well as people in extreme poverty. Instead of compassionately helping them, people avoid or drive them away, sometimes even striking them. This is a common sight at any Indian railway station.

Visualize in this way any situation you find unbearable. This will give you a powerful compassion that can more readily extend to a universal scope.

Then think of sentient beings in other circumstances. They may not presently be undergoing obvious suffering, but their accumulated negative actions, inevitably producing undesirable consequences in the future, ensure that they too will undergo similar experiences.

Wishing happiness for all sentient beings who lack it is called universal love; wishing them freedom from suffering is called compassion. These two meditations can be practiced together until they bring about a change in your mind.

THE EXTRAORDINARY ATTITUDE

Your training in love and compassion must not remain merely a matter of imagination or wishes. You must develop a sincere intention to devote yourself actively to relieving sentient beings of their suffering and making them happy. It is a practitioner's duty to undertake this work. The more strongly you cultivate compassion, the more obliged you will feel to do so. Because of their ignorance, sentient beings do not know the methods that would enable them to achieve their goal. Those who possess this knowledge have a responsibility to carry out their intention to work for others' welfare.

This state of mind is called the extraordinary attitude, or exceptional attitude. The strength of compassion that prompts one to assume this responsibility is not found among practitioners of lesser capacity. According to the oral traditions, this extraordinary attitude entails a commitment comparable to signing a contract.

Once you have aroused the extraordinary attitude, ask yourself whether, beyond your courage and determination, you truly have the ability to bring authentic happiness to other sentient beings. Lasting happiness will be within their reach only when you have shown them the correct path to omniscience and they have eliminated their own ignorance. Although you can benefit others by bringing them temporary well-being, ultimate goals can be accomplished only if they take responsibility for dispelling their ignorance. The same applies to you: if you wish to attain liberation, this responsibility is yours.

WITHOUT ATTAINING OMNISCIENCE ONE CANNOT TRULY BENEFIT OTHERS

As I have just said, you must also show human beings the right path, which you cannot do without possessing the knowledge yourself. There are various ways of acquiring it. One is to develop intellectual understanding, but the deepest understanding is based on experience.

The teaching you give others must not be obscure to you. You must also possess perfect wisdom, enabling you to judge its relevance and timeliness according to each person's disposition and mental abilities. Certain very profound ideas cannot be given to just anyone; they might prove more harmful than beneficial.

To assess others' faculties, you will need to overcome every subtle form of obstruction to knowledge. The Buddha himself provided an example during his lifetime. A householder wished to become a monk, but highly accomplished disciples such as Śāriputra did not recognize in him sufficient potential for virtue to merit ordination. Only the Buddha, through the power of his omniscience, discerned that potential. Consequently, until you are completely enlightened yourself, an inner obstruction to knowledge will remain, making your work of helping others incomplete.

Since the fulfillment of other sentient beings' wishes and well-being depends on their own initiative, you may think: "Why should I work to attain enlightenment? After all, many Buddhas are there to help them, provided they take the first step."

However, to benefit from the assistance of a spiritual guide or teacher, one must have karmic connections with that person. Thus, some teachers can be effective only for certain disciples. To understand this fully, read sūtras such as *The Perfection of Wisdom in Eight Thousand Lines*, in which Buddhas and bodhisattvas, perceiving that a practitioner has a stronger karmic connection elsewhere, advise that person to seek their own teacher. Some people capable of seeing a Buddha with their own eyes may therefore benefit less from that encounter than from a relationship with you, supported by a deeper karmic connection. Since this cycle of existence has no beginning, neither do karmic

connections. Here, however, I am referring to strong karmic connections formed in recent lives.

Even if your realization of omniscience does not benefit every living being, it will undoubtedly bring many practical benefits to some of them. It is therefore very important that you strive to attain complete enlightenment. Certain people will greatly need your help on the spiritual path, and it is essential that you take responsibility for working for others' welfare. This thought will develop your certainty that, without attaining omniscience, you will be unable to fulfill your chosen purpose and truly benefit others.

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