

THE BUDDHIST CONCEPTION OF COMPASSION

Ven. Piyadassi Maha Thera

YOU are often moved by a sudden cry of pain, or by the sight of another's distress. Your heart melts, and you wish to act in accordance with your kind feelings. You rush to the rescue of the helpless one, you succour him and relieve him of his distress. You do not crave selfishly for some remuneration or try to exploit the situation by depriving him of his belongings. This is true *karuna* in the finest sense of the word. If by chance you are rewarded or honored for your humanity, then that is a different thing.

It seems to me that it is not quite proper to help others, to be of service to the poor and the needy, with the sole intention of gaining 'merit' – reaping in return much profit and gain. If we approach a situation with such selfish motives then our good action is tarnished; we should not be too conscious of the results of our good deeds and be attached to it. The result will follow us like our own shadow; for actions have reactions, seed brings forth fruit, cause produces effect. To know the deed and its due consequence is right understanding, but to become attached to the results is to invite greed or craving which is a stumbling block to right understanding, purity and peace.

When we offer food to a starving man we need not think of a good rebirth in the heavens, a rebirth in a good state of existence, or expect to reap a good harvest in return; for that is not the Buddhist attitude, or as a matter of fact the right attitude. By such wishful thinking we only add fuel to the fire of our greedy selfish thoughts. On close analysis you will see that the only real reason for giving food to that man is that he is hungry. Hunger, as the Buddha says, is the worst ailment. When we see that he has eaten, that his hunger has ceased, and that he feels happy, then we too feel happy and pleased. Such selfless actions really bring us unallayed joy. Gladness at another's happiness is the third sublime state known as **Mudita** or sympathetic joy.

Thus by selfless giving, by being generous (**dana**), we cease to be niggardly and become liberal not only with wealth, but with our thoughts we become more and more broad-minded.

We must thus try to understand the true significance of action (karma) and result (**vipaka**) in Buddhist thought.

It is very necessary to be conscious of the good and bad results of our actions, in order to know how they come to fruition, but we should not be greedily attached

to the result. A correct understanding of the law of **karma**, and how it operates, incites us to be just and compassionate.

Compassion is not limited merely to the giving of food and such material things to the poor and needy, or to giving a copper to a beggar. All actions done with a pure motive free from greed, false views and pride are reckoned as genuine acts of kindness. Imparting knowledge to the illiterate, guiding the muddle-headed and the uninstructed along the right path, giving strength and moral support to the weak and fearful, ministering to the sick, etc., are all humane actions.

Marvelous, for instance, was the Buddha's mode of ministering to the sick. He was the great healer. Not only did he heal the sick with the charm of his friendship but he also ministered to them out of compassion. The commentary to the Dhammapada records a touching story:

A young man of Savatthi listened to the Buddha, gained confidence in him and entered the Order. He became known as Tissa. After time he fell sick. First small pustules broke out on his body, gradually became bigger and burst, developing into ulcers. His fellow monks, being unwilling to look after Tissa, abandoned him and he was forlorn.

The Buddha came to know of this, went to the fireplace and set some water to boil. Then the Blessed One went to where Tissa was and caught hold of the corner of the bed on which he was lying. The monks, realizing what the Master was trying to do, carried the patient with the bed to the fireplace. There the Master made the monks wash Tissa's garments and dry them, while he gently cleaned the ulcers and washed the sick monk. The patient was most refreshed and lay on his bed with a composed mind. Thereupon the Blessed One explained the doctrine to him. With a collected mind Tissa listened and at the end of the sermon attained the highest stage of sainthood and passed away. The funeral rites were duly performed and the Buddha caused the relics to be enshrined in a stupa.

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