

**STUDIES ON
HUMANISTIC BUDDHISM Ⅳ**

**HUMAN LIFE
人間佛教研究論文選**

Fo Guang Shan Institute of Humanistic Buddhism, Taiwan
and
Nan Tien Institute, Australia

**COMMENTARY:
LOVING-KINDNESS
AND COMPASSION**

D.E. Osto

Senior Lecturer, Massey University

Source

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Venerable Master Hsing Yun writes that loving-kindness (*maitri*) and compassion (*karuṇā*) “are like a priceless passport—a person may own nothing, but no matter where they go happiness and safety will follow.” How might this statement be understood within the context of the Universal Vehicle (Mahāyāna) of Buddhism? As the Venerable Master writes, loving-kindness aims to bring others happiness, and compassion is the desire to alleviate the suffering of others. Here, I understand loving-kindness (*maitrī*) to love in its purest altruistic sense. *Maitrī* is not an erotic, passionate, selfish, or possessive love. All true love wants is the happiness of others. This is the love of Christ, not the love of Romeo for Juliet. Compassion follows naturally from this love in the sense that wanting to bring others happiness naturally leads to possessing compassion for their suffering. Likewise, if you possess no love for sentient beings, having compassion for them will be difficult, if not impossible. Although love and compassion are qualities possessed by all decent people to some degree, they are absolutely central to the practice of the Universal Vehicle.

The ultimate goal of the Universal Vehicle is to become a Fully Awakened One (Buddha) in order to save all sentient beings from suffering. Someone who embarks on such a course is known as a bodhisattva (literally “a being [who strives] for awakening”). One becomes a bodhisattva when they arise the “mind of awakening” (*bodhicitta*), which is the intention to become a Buddha in order to save all beings. The source of the mind of awakening are universal love (*mahāmaitrī*) and universal compassion (*mahākāruṇa*). They are “universal” (literally “great,” *mahā*-) because no beings are excluded from this love and compassion. Likewise, the path is known as the universal or great (*mahā*-) vehicle (*yāna*) because it aims to carry all beings to awakening. At the completion of the path after countless lifetimes of training, one attains the omniscient wisdom and limitless loving and compassion of a Fully Awakened One (Buddha). Thus, love and compassion form both the beginning and the end of the Universal Vehicle of Awakening.

The centrality of universal love and compassion in the Mahāyāna is well illustrated in an important Mahāyāna scripture known as the *Supreme*

Array (Gaṇḍavyūha). This scripture forms the longest and final portion of the immense *Flower Ornament Scripture (Avataṃsaka Sūtra)*, and recounts the story of a young man named Sudhana who quests for awakening in ancient India during the time of Śākyamunī Buddha. During the course of his travels, Sudhana encounters fifty-three spiritual guides (*kalyāṇamitra*) who instruct him on the bodhisattva's course of conduct (*bodhisattva-cārya*). The final three guides are the famous Mahāyāna bodhisattvas Maitreya, Mañjuśrī, and Samantabhadra. At the conclusion of the story, Sudhana merges into the body of Samantabhadra in a cosmic vision of universal awakening.

The *Supreme Array* begins with the Buddha residing in Jeta Grove surrounded by his disciples and five thousand great bodhisattvas. While these bodhisattvas wonder about the powers and attainments of the Buddha, the Lord reads their thoughts and

...enters a meditative trance (*samādhi*) called "The Lion's Yawn," the body of which is universal compassion, the entrance into which is universal compassion, which was the foremost meditative trance due to universal compassion, which follows the principles in the sky of the Dharma due to universal compassion, which is an array illuminating the entire world.¹

This trance causes the grove to appear as an infinitely vast space containing untold worlds adorned with countless treasures. After this amazing display, the Buddha emits a ray of light from his forehead, which shows the bodhisattvas infinite worlds and the endless meritorious practices of the Buddha throughout all space and time. This vision causes every bodhisattva present to realize "...entrances into universal compassion equal in number to the atoms in an inexpressible number of buddha lands."² Thus, the immediate result of the Buddha's trance and light-ray is the generation of universal compassion in the bodhisattvas present, and highlights the central importance of compassion in Mahāyāna Buddhism. As a form of motivation for action,

universal compassion distinguishes the Buddha and bodhisattvas as rulers of the spiritual domain of the dharma realm (*dharmadhātu*) from their earthly counterparts, who may be motivated to act by greed for wealth or lust for power.

Once the bodhisattvas realize these entrances into universal compassion, they send out infinite magical creations in the form of ascetics, brahmins, doctors, merchants, and other beings. Through their manifestation, these bodhisattvas act as spiritual guides for countless sentient beings in order to relieve them of suffering and progress them on the Universal Vehicle. The bodhisattva of wisdom, Mañjuśrī leaves the Buddha’s retinue and travels to the south where he meets the young man Sudhana. Inspired by this encounter, Sudhana sets out on a pilgrimage to visit spiritual guides and learn how a bodhisattva carries out the course of conduct on the path to awakening.

After visits to fifty guides of various occupations and abilities and numerous visionary experiences, Sudhana journeys to a great pavilion where resides the future buddha Maitreya (whose name means “The Loving One”). Upon meeting the great bodhisattva, Sudhana recites fifty-five verses in praise of him beginning with:

Here is the one who has acquired universal
compassion, whose mind is completely purified,
Maitreya, the Lord of Benevolence, intent upon the
welfare of the world.

Residing at the final coronation stage of a bodhisattva,
this best son of the conquerors, abides contemplating
the range of the buddhas.³

Here we see the hero’s mention of Maitreya’s universal compassion first among his countless good qualities. Moreover, he is called the “Lord of Benevolence” (*maitraśīri*). The word translated as benevolence is *maitra*, which is cognate with both his name, Maitreya, and *maitrī*, love. Thus, this first verse highlights the importance of both love and compassion in

the Great Vehicle.

Following Sudhana's encounter with Maitreya and a brief visit with Mañjuśrī, the hero has his final visionary experience of bodhisattva Samantabhadra (universal good).⁴ Here the *Supreme Array* praises Sudhana for producing "an ocean of intentions arising from universal compassion," for "shining upon all beings with a cloud of principles due to his universal love," and for grasping "the diamond of universal compassion." When he meets, Samantabhadra, the bodhisattva says,

Thus, O Son of good family, the ocean of all eons would be exhausted through the proclaiming of these: my efforts toward the purification of the lands of perfectly awakened buddhas in previous lives; and my efforts toward the deliverance, bringing to maturity, and purification of all by me acting with an intention, which has been obtained through universal compassion...through the power of universal compassion, through the power of well purified supernormal powers, through the power of accepting all spiritual guides, I obtained the dharma body that is absolutely pure and non-differentiated within the three times.

Here the dharma body (*dharmakāya*) is coextensive with the dharma realm, the ultimate nature of reality. Thus, Samantabhadra proclaims that his attainment was achieved in part through his universal compassion.

At the very end of the *Supreme Array*, just before Samantabhadra recites his famous verses known as the *Bhadracāri*, the scripture tells us that Sudhana attained equality (*samatā*) with the various powers and practices of Samantabhadra. The list of these ends with, "equality in universal love and universal compassion, and equality in the inconceivable miracle of the liberation of bodhisattvas." Thus, highlighting once again at the scripture's

conclusion the importance of these virtues.

The *Supreme Array* has been one of the most popular and influential Mahāyāna scriptures throughout Asia. In it we witness the central importance of universal love and compassion for the path of the Great Vehicle. Venerable Master Hsing Yun says these qualities are a “priceless passport.” Regarding wealth, it is worth pointing out that the hero of the *Supreme Array* is the son of a wealthy merchant-banker, whose name, Sudhana, literally means “Good Wealth.” The scripture tells us that he is called Good Wealth because at his birth jewels and gems magically sprung up from the earth and rained down from the heavens. However, I would suggest that there is another sense that Sudhana is wealthy. His vast store of merit accumulated over countless lifetimes and his spiritual qualities such as universal love and compassion are his true wealth. These are his “priceless passports” that allow him to travel throughout the land meeting the spiritual guides and learning the path to supreme awakening.

Notes

1 My translation from the Sanskrit text of Vaidya, P. L., (ed.), *Gaṇḍavyūhasūtra* (Darbhanga: Mithila Institute, 1960), 4-5. All translations from the *Supreme Array* are my own from this edition.

2 Ibid, 34.9-10.

3 Ibid, 472.

4 Ibid, 420-36.

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