

Compassion (*Karuṇā*) and Pity (*Anukampā*) in Mahāyāna Sūtras

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It is a well-known fact that ideas of “devotion” and “compassion” can be seen at the roots of Indian thought. For example, in the bhakti movement of the itinerant poet-saints known as Alvars salvation is considered to result from interaction between the believer’s devotion (*bhakti*) to God and God’s blessing (*anukampā*) bestowed on the believer. The principle of shared feelings and shared suffering to be seen in this sharing of devotion closely matches the workings of compassion (*karuṇā*) and pity (*anukampā*) in Buddhism. The god Viṣṇu and the Buddha are both entities who bestow blessings and are compassionate (*anukampaka*), but etymologically speaking they are also “sympathetic.” Especially in the notions of compassion and pity to be seen in Mahāyāna Buddhism the idea of sympathy or empathy in the form of sharing suffering is clearly in evidence, and this is underpinned by a spirit grounded in a sense of equality with all beings. In this paper I wish to examine compassion and pity as seen in Mahāyāna sūtras, and by doing so I hope to show that the principle of shared feelings and shared suffering is a concept that ties in with the contemporary idea of coexistence, or living in harmony with others.

1. Defining Compassion (Removing Suffering and Bestowing Happiness)

The Sino-Japanese equivalent of “compassion” is the two-character compound *cibei* (Jp. *jihī*) 慈悲, and I wish to begin by analyzing this term.

(a) *Ci* / *jī* 慈 (*maitrī* “friendliness” < *mītra* “friend”)

This signifies “benevolence” or “kindness,” bringing benefits and happiness to others. Typical examples of its usage in Sanskrit include *mahā-maitrī* “great kindness” and *sarvasattva-maitrī-vihāra* “living with kindness towards all beings.” The Pāli equivalent of *maitrī* is *mettā*, and in English it is often translated as “loving kindness.”

(b) *Bei* / *hī* 悲 (*karuṇā*)

Sanskrit *karuṇā* is a noun deriving from the verb $\sqrt{kṛ}$, and its original meaning is “lamentation” or “plaintive cry.” It expresses a feeling of sympathy for the suffering of others and a desire to remove their suffering. A feminine noun, *karuṇā* alone is often rendered as *cibei* in Chinese, and in English it is usually translated as “compassion” or “pity.”

Thus, *maitrī* means “friendliness” and “kindness” while *karuṇā* means “grief” and “compassion,” and they were originally two discrete terms. But over time their meanings came to complement each other, and together they came to express the idea of removing suffering and bestowing happiness. As for the Chinese equivalent *cibei*, the original Sanskrit is often thought to be *karuṇā* or *kṛpā*.

Generally, *ci* corresponds to Sanskrit *maitrī* (“friendliness”) and signifies profound kindness, while *bei* corresponds to Sanskrit *karuṇā* (“sympathy”) and signifies deep pity. According to the standard explanation, to bestow happiness on living beings is *ci* (*maitrī*) and to remove their unhappiness, or suffering, is *bei* (*karuṇā*).¹

It is also stated in many sūtras and treatises that the fundamental spirit of Mahāyāna Buddhism lies in compassion. For example, in chapter 1 of the *Vairocana-bhisambodhi-sūtra* it is stated that “the *bodhi*-mind is the

cause, great pity is the root, and expedient means is the culmination.”² It is emphasized, in other words, that the mind that unceasingly seeks awakening (*bodhi*) is the cause, boundless compassion is the basic condition, and skilful means is the ultimate act.

Again, in the *Avataṃśaka-sūtra* great importance is attached to “great compassion” (*mahā-karuṇā*), and emphasis is also placed on “being guided by great compassion” (*mahākaruṇāpūrvāṅgama[-tā or -tva]*)³ or “being preceded by great compassion” (*mahākaruṇāpūrvakaḥ*⁴ or *mahākaruṇāpuraskṛtatva*⁵).

Further, in the *Da zhidu lun* 大智度論 we find the following passage: “Kindness and pity (*cibei*) are the basis of the Buddhist path. Why? The bodhisattva sees living beings tormented by various sufferings—the suffering of birth, old age, sickness, and death, bodily suffering and mental suffering, suffering in this life and suffering in the next life—arouses great kindness and pity, saves them from such suffering, and then engenders the aspiration [for awakening] and seeks unsurpassed perfect awakening (*anuttarā samyaksambodhi*).”⁶ Kindness and pity are thus regarded as the basis of awakening or enlightenment. It also says: “‘Kindness’ (*ci* = *maitrī*) refers to thinking lovingly of living beings and always seeking peace and objects of happiness so as to bring benefit to them. ‘Pity’ (*bei* = *karuṇā*) refers to thinking pityingly of living beings and experiencing various kinds of bodily suffering and mental suffering in the five paths [of cyclic existence].”⁷ It is important to note that here the function of *karuṇā* is defined as having pity on living beings and sharing their physical and mental suffering.

2. Three Kinds of Compassion

In addition to ordinary *maitrī* and *karuṇā*, we also find references to “great *maitrī*” and “great *karuṇā*,” which refer to the compassion of Buddhas and bodhisattvas. In this case, because the Buddha’s compassion regards the suffering of living beings as his own suffering, it is referred to as “great pity based on sameness of essence” since it is grounded in a Buddha’s awareness of his fundamental sameness with all beings, and because it is vast and cannot be covered or contained, it is also called “great pity without cover.” These views are, however, not found in the sūtras and treatises of Indian Buddhism and developed in East Asia, but their basic gist is common to many sūtras and treatises. In the following I shall take up these doctrines concerning compassion in Mahāyāna sūtras and treatises and point to some basic underlying ideas.

First, I wish to draw attention to the universality and equality that are characteristic of compassion. For instance, in the *Da zhidu lun* compassion is divided into three kinds depending on the object to which it is directed:⁸ (1) compassion that has living beings as its object; (2) compassion that is free from attachment and has as its object existents (*dharma*s) after having realized that they have no intrinsic substantiality; and (3) compassion that has no object. Among these three kinds of compassion, the third is the unconditional compassion of absolute equality and the supreme form of compassion underpinned by the realization of emptiness, a form of compassion possessed only by the Buddha.

The element shared by these three forms of compassion is a sense of equality. Equality in the first kind of compassion, which has all living beings as its object, is that which identifies with them and treats them all as fellow beings. Equality in the second kind of compassion, which has existents as its object, is equality in truth insofar that it is underpinned by the principle that all existents are empty and lack any intrinsic substantiality. Equality in the third kind of compassion, which has no object, posits no distinctions between the objects to which it is directed and springs spontaneously from the experience of emptiness.

This third kind of compassion, which has no object, recognizes no distinctions whatsoever and is described as “unobstructed great kindness” and “objectless (or unconditional) great pity.” It is also said to be practised neither for one’s own sake nor for the sake of others. There is no distinction between self and others in this completely unconditional compassion. It can be pointed out that this idea of equality between self and others lies at the basis of

compassion in Buddhist thought.

3. The Etymological Analysis of *Maitrī*, *Karuṇā*, and Their Equivalents in Other Languages

The Sanskrit words *maitrī* and *karuṇā* also have important meanings. First, *maitrī* means “bestowing benefits and happiness on others,” while *karuṇā* means “pity,” “lamentation,” and “plaintive cry.”

According to M. Monier-Williams’s *Sanskrit-English Dictionary*,⁹ the word *karuṇā* derives from the verb $\sqrt{kṛ}$ (classes 5 and 9), meaning “to hurt, injure, kill.” The adjective *karuṇa* has the meanings “mournful, miserable, lamenting,” etc., while the feminine noun *karuṇā* is translated as “pity, compassion, mercy,” etc.

According to R. L. Turner’s *Comparative Dictionary of Indo-Aryan Languages* (2809, 2811),¹⁰ *karuṇa-* (adj. mournful) and *karuṇā* (n. pity) may possibly derive from the verb $\sqrt{kṛ}$ (to call), and Turner points to related words such as Prākṛit *kaluṇa-* (unhappy) and *kuluṇa-* (sympathy, mercy) and Orissan *kāruṇa* (grieved, plaintive cry) and also to Sanskrit synonyms such as *kāruṇā-*, *kāruṇika-*, and *kāruṇya-*. These words all mean to sympathize with the suffering of others and try to save them from their suffering.

The above words are translated in English as “compassion” or “sympathy.” “Compassion” derives from Latin and can be broken down into *com-* “together” and *passion*, which originally meant “suffering of pain.” In particular, “Passion” (with a capital letter) refers to the sufferings of Christ and can also signify “martyrdom.” This derives from Church Latin *passi* “to suffer.” In English, “passion” usually refers to a vehement or overpowering feeling or emotion, and the reason that in early usage it also meant “martyrdom,” “suffering” or “grief” is because of its Latin derivation.¹¹ Thus, “compassion,” meaning literally “suffering together,” is a most apt translation of *karuṇā*.

The word “sympathy” can similarly be broken down into *sym-* and *pathy*, which both derive from Greek. *Sym-* is an assimilated form of the prefix *syn-*, used before *m*, *p*, etc., meaning “together, alike,” while *pathy* derives from Greek *patheia* “suffering.”¹² Therefore, this compound too means literally “suffering together.” The idea common to the nuances of all these words is the universal idea of coexistence.

4. The Usage of *Anukampā* and Its Meaning

The next important term is *anukampā*, a noun formed from the prefix *anu-*, meaning “after, alongside,” etc., and the noun *kampā*, which derives from the verb \sqrt{kamp} (class 1), meaning “to tremble.” Therefore, *anukampā* means “trembling in conformity with or alongside something or someone.” Likewise, *anukampin* means “having pity” or “sympathizing” and frequently forms a compound with *hita-* or *loka-hita-* to refer to someone who acts with sympathy in benefitting the world. These terms can be seen in typical stock phrases that were in use from the time of early Buddhist scriptures.

- (1) In the *Suttanipāta*, in a section dealing with the life of the Buddha, we find the following verse among the verses recording Asita’s prophecy after the Buddha’s birth.

The prince shall reach the pinnacle of awakening; as one who sees supreme purity (i.e., *nirvāṇa*), benefiting and having pity on the multitude (*bahujana-hitānukampī*), he will turn the Dharma-wheel; his holy life will spread widely. (Sn 693)

Hita (benefiting) and *anukampin* (having pity) are here used together. These two words are also used frequently together in Mahāyāna sūtras, and this verse is worth noting as an early example of this usage.

- (2) In the *Mahāparinibbāna-suttanta* of the *Dīghanikāya* we find the following passage:

“Monks, those matters that I have known and proclaimed should be thoroughly learnt, practised, developed, and much cultivated by you, so that this holy life may endure for a long time, that it may be for the welfare of the multitude, for the happiness of the multitude, out of pity for the world, for the benefit, welfare, and happiness of

gods and humans.. And what are those matters? They are the four foundations of mindfulness, the four right efforts, the four roads to power, the five faculties, the five powers, the seven factors of enlightenment, the noble eightfold path.”

Katame ca te, bhikkhave, dhammā mayā abhiññā desitā, ye vo sādhuṇaṃ uggahetvā āsevitabbā bhāvetabbā bahulīkātābba, yathayidaṃ brahmacariyaṃ addhaniyaṃ assa ciratthitikaṃ, tadassa bahujaṇahitāya bahujaṇasukhāya lokānukampāya atthāya hitāya sukhāya devamanussānaṃ. seyyathidaṃ, cattāro satipaṭṭhānā cattāro sammappadhānā cattāro iddhipādā pañcendriyāni pañca balāni satta bojjhaṅgā ariyo aṭṭhaṅgiko maggo. (DN II, 100 [pp. 119–120])

Here, the content of the teachings alluded to as the “Dharma-wheel” in (1) has become the thirty-seven aids to enlightenment. The wording seen in this passage was used as stock phrases and carried over into many Mahāyāna sūtras.

(3) *Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā* (Vaidya ed., BST 4, Darbhanga, 1960, p. 37):

When, Kauśika, Tathāgatas, worthy of honour and perfectly awakened, do not appear in the world, then, Kauśika, bodhisattvas and great beings, endowed with skilful means as a natural result of the perfection of wisdom that they have previously heard, will, Kauśika, have pity on beings and, coming to this world out of pity, cause the ten good ways of action to flourish in the world.

yadāpi kauśika tathāgatā arhantaḥ samyaksaṃbuddhā loke notpadyante, tadāpi kauśika bodhisattvā mahāsattvāḥ pūrvāsrutena prajñāpāramitāniṣyandena ye upāyakaṃśālyasamanvāgatā bhavanti, te 'pi kauśika sattvānāṃ anukampakāḥ anukampāṃ upādāya imaṃ lokam āgamyā daśa kuśalān karmapathān loke prabhāvayanti.

In this passage, the teaching taught by compassionate bodhisattvas is the “ten good ways of action,” or the ten good deeds, and this reflects a reorganization of the Buddhist teachings in Mahāyāna sūtras.

(4) Ibid. (pp. 108–109):

The Blessed One said, “For thus, Subhūti, those bodhisattvas and great beings [who are close to awakening] have practised for the welfare of the multitude, for the happiness of the multitude, out of pity for the world. For the benefit, welfare, and happiness of a great body of people, having pity on gods and humans, out of pity they wish to realize unsurpassed perfect awakening, and having realized unsurpassed perfect awakening they wish to proclaim the unsurpassed teaching.

bhagavān āha / tathā hi te subhūte bodhisattvā mahāsattvā bahujaṇahitāya pratipannā bahujaṇasukhāya lokānukampāyai / mahato janakāyasyārthāya hitāya sukhāya devānāṃ ca manuṣyānāṃ ca anukampakā anukampāṃ upādāyānuttarāṃ samyakṣaṃboddhim abhisamboddhukāmāḥ anuttarāṃ samyakṣaṃboddhim abhisambudhyānuttarāṃ dharmam deśayitukāmāḥ //

In this passage, the objective of the bodhisattvas’ practice is the welfare and happiness of large numbers of people, and it is done out of compassion for the world. Likewise, they wish to proclaim the unsurpassed teaching for the same reasons.

(5) Ibid. (p. 125):

Furthermore, those Tathāgatas, worthy of honour and perfectly awakened, then remain, persevere, and live in other worlds. For the welfare of the multitude, for the happiness of the multitude, out of pity for the world, for the benefit, welfare, and happiness of a great body of people, having pity on gods, humans, and all beings, out of pity they all too revere this perfection of wisdom and have enthusiasm for it.

ye 'pi te 'nyeṣu lokadhātusū tathāgatā arhantaḥ samyaksaṃbuddhā etarhi tiṣṭhanti dhriyante yāpayanti bahujaṇahitāya bahujaṇasukhāya lokānukampāyai mahato janakāyasyārthāya hitāya sukhāya devānāṃ ca manuṣyānāṃ ca sarvasattvānāṃ cānukampakā anukampāṃ upādāya, te 'pi sarve imāṃ prajñāpāramitāṃ samanvāharanti, autsukyam āpadyante.

(6) *Suvikrāntavikrāmiparipṛcchā Prajñāpāramitā* (R. Hikata ed., Fukuoka, 1958, p. 4, ll. 7–13):

The Blessed One said to the bodhisattva and great being Suvikrāntavikrāmin, “Excellent, Suvikrāntavikrāmin! You do well to ask the Tathāgata, worthy of honour and perfectly awakened, about the perfection of wisdom. It is for the sake (*arthāya*) of bodhisattvas and great beings, and because you have practised for the welfare of the multitude, for the happiness of the multitude, out of pity for the world, for the benefit, welfare, and happiness of a great body of people, of gods and humans, and because you wish to spread light for bodhisattvas and great beings now and in the future.”

... yathā 'pi nāma tvaṃ bahujaṇahitāya pratipanno bahujaṇasukhāya lokānukampāyai mahato janakāyasyārthāya hitāya sukhāya devānāṃ ca manuṣyāṇāṃ ca etarhy anāgatānāṃ ca bodhisatvānāṃ mahāsatvānāṃ ālokaṃ kartukāma iti //

Passages (5) and (6) use stock phrases to describe the preaching and mental attitude of Tathāgatas and bodhisattvas, and the content of the teaching on which the bodhisattva Suvikrāntavikrāmin relies and which he teaches to others is the “perfection of wisdom” (*prajñāpāramitā*), a doctrine distinctive of the *Prajñāpāramitā-sūtra*.

(7) *Saddharmapuṇḍarīka-sūtra* (Kern-Nanjio ed., BB 10, Osnabrück, 1970, p. 41, ll. 10–12):

And, Śāriputra, in a future age too there will be in immeasurable, countless worlds in the ten directions Tathāgatas, worthy of honour and perfectly awakened, for the welfare of the multitude, for the happiness of the multitude, out of pity for the world, for the benefit, welfare, and happiness of a great body of people, of gods and humans.

ye 'pi te śāriputra anāgate 'dhvani bhaviṣyanti daśasu dikṣv aprameyeṣv asaṃkhyeṣu lokadhātuṣu tathāgatā arhantaḥ samyaksaṃbuddhā bahujaṇahitāya bahujaṇasukhāya lokānukampāyai mahato janakāyasyārthāya hitāya sukhāya devānāṃ ca manuṣyāṇāṃ ca /

It can be seen that these stock phrases also appear frequently in the *Saddharmapuṇḍarīka-sūtra* (*Lotus Sūtra*). And judging from the fact that these phrases also appear in the votive prayers added to many manuscripts, is evident that they had a great impact on the beliefs of the Mahāyāna, which attached much importance to the copying of scriptures.

Concluding Remarks

In the above I have examined examples of the usage of words for “compassion” and “pity” in Mahāyāna sūtras. In early Buddhism *maitrī* was frequently used, but it gradually came to be used together with *karuṇā*, to which were then added *muditā*, or “rejoicing” in the happiness of others, and *upekṣā*, meaning “equanimity,” and these four qualities came to be known as the “four immeasurable states of mind” or the “four pure abodes.” These were valued as the basic virtues to be practised by a practitioner of Buddhism.

In Mahāyāna Buddhism compassion was linked to practices for the benefit of others, becoming a vow of the bodhisattva, a basic cause for proceeding towards enlightenment, and the basis of Buddhist practice. As was seen in the examples from the *Avataṃsaka-sūtra* and *Vairocanaḥisambodhi-sūtra*, this became a current of thought common to Mahāyāna sūtras in general.

Anukampā, which is similar to compassion, was used with reference to Tathāgatas and bodhisattvas who appear in this world and preach the Dharma for the welfare and happiness of people and out of pity for the world. Bodhisattvas are those who have pity on or sympathize with (*anukampakā*) living beings and the world, a world that encompasses all beings, including gods, humans, and *asuras*. It was also held that by means of this *anukampā* it was even possible to reach unsurpassed perfect awakening.

The bodhisattva comes forth into this world for the sake of the welfare and happiness of the world and its inhabitants and out of pity for them, and he regards living beings with compassion. This mode of being is delineated

as the ideal of Mahāyāna Buddhism.

1. But in the *Mahāprajñāpāramitā-sūtra* it is stated that Buddhas “dwell in kindness and pity, grant happiness, and remove suffering. In this fashion they think pityingly of all sentient beings and equally wish to make them free from suffering and gain happiness.” (T.220.7.1041b12–13: 安住慈悲與樂拔苦。如是愍念一切有情。平等欲令離苦得樂) Again, in the Mahāyāna *Mahāparinirvāṇa-sūtra* we read: “To remove non-benefit for living beings is called ‘great kindness’; to wish to grant living beings immeasurable benefits and happiness is called ‘great pity’..” (T.374.12.454a8–9: 爲諸衆生除無利益是名大慈。欲與衆生無量利樂是名大悲). Thus *cī* (kindness) and *bei* (pity) were not strictly differentiated and express virtually the same sentiment, and either *maitrī* or *karuṇā* was often translated as *cibei*.
2. T.848.18.1b29–c1: 菩提心爲因。悲爲根本。方便爲究竟。
3. Dbh., p. 16, l. 5; p. 71, l. 2; p. 96, l. 15; *Gaṇḍavyūha*. p. 6, l. 12; p. 389, l. 19.
4. Dbh., p. 116, l. 17; p. 143, l. 12.
5. Dbh., p. 18, l. 6.
6. T.1509.25.256c16–19: 慈悲是佛道之根本。所以者何。菩薩見衆生老病死苦身苦心苦今世後世苦等諸苦 所惱。生大慈悲救如是苦。然後發心求阿耨多羅三藐三菩提。
7. T.1509.25.208c9–11: 四無量心者。慈悲喜捨。慈名愛念衆生。常求安隱樂事以饒益之。悲名愍念衆生。受五道中種種身苦心苦。 In this fashion, *maitrī* and *karuṇā* are often explained in the context of the four immeasurables (*catvāri apramāṇāni*).
8. T.1509.25.209a7, 257b26, 417b21.
9. M. Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit English Dictionary*, Oxford, 1899.
10. R. L. Turner, *A Comparative Dictionary of the Indo-Aryan Languages*, Oxford University Press, 1966.
11. The Passion refers to the sufferings of Jesus Christ in Gethsemane and on the Cross, while Passion music includes works such as Bach’s *St. Matthew Passion*. In addition, *Passiflora*, or passion flowers (*flos passionis*), are so called because the various parts of the flower are considered to be symbolic of the last days of Jesus, especially his crucifixion.
12. The element *-pathy* in English is used to form compounds with the meaning of feeling, suffering, bodily disorder, method of cure, etc. Typical examples in medical terminology are “homeopathy” and its opposite “allopathy.” These too derive from the original meaning of “suffering.”