

THE APPLICATION OF KARUNĀ AND ITS SIGNIFICANCE IN BUDDHIST ETHICS AND PRACTICE IN CONTEMPORARY SOCIETY

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ABSTRACT

The phrase “Karuna Sītala Hadayam” literally means ‘compassion cools the heart’ and this phrase teaches us the central tenet of Buddhist ethics and practice: our emotions are meant to be transformed into steady tranquillity from which nothing – not to even our own desires and desires of others – is excluded. Compassion springs from the Buddha’s teachings and is its ethical expression as non-harming to self and other (āhiṃsā), and as a path to secular personal and social liberation (nibbāna). According to Sayadaw U Jotika compassion is a ‘cooling balm’ that relieves painful emotion and allows us to attain balance (kalyanamitta) mindfulness (sati, sampajana) and self awareness. In his work “The Practice of the Buddha’s Wisdom, Loving Kindness and Compassion,” Ven. Pandit Kurunegoda Piyatissa points out how the Buddha embodies most perfectly compassion and wisdom (pañña), since compassion and wisdom (pañña) are inseparable in facing both suffered individually and collectively.

This paper draws from the basic Pāli texts (Dhammapada, Sutta Nipāta, Majjhima Nikāya, and the Paramatthajotikā Commentary) to focus on the doctrinal and practical importance and usage of karunā. Compassion is characterized rather far from being a passive quality, rather as a dynamic force that is built up through ethical conduct (sīla), through loving kindness meditation (metta bhāvanā), and through mindful engagement of the world. The Buddha’s numerous uses of karunā to refer to mental benefits include mental clarification (cittaṃ paśīdati), eliminate anger (dosa paṭinissatṭho hoti) and the eradication of delusion (pañña pajjota vihata moha tamam). Karunā sītala hadayām, a timeless formula for handling matters of social inequality, interpersonal conflict and environmental crises, is a sermon of relevance today in contemporary society. With compassion integrated into your life, ripples arise of harmony to help lift us all out of collective suffering and into ethical living. Universally applicable, this is a Buddhist wisdom principle through which we live and fosters coexistence, as well as holistic transformation on both personal and societal levels.

Keywords: Compassion (Karunā), Buddhist Ethics, Loving Kindness Meditation (Metta Bhāvanā), Social and Personal Liberation (Nibbāna), Mindfulness and Awareness (Sati, Sampajana), Ethical Conduct (Sīla), Wisdom and Balance (Pañña, Kalyanamitta).

1. INTRODUCTION

The principle of Karunā Sītala Hadayam: ‘Compassion cools the heart’ is the foundation of Buddhist ethico-spiritual practice. Karunā = Compassion = Transformative power alleviating suffering (dukkha), ethical nonharming (a hiṃsā) and inner peace and wisdom (pañña) In the Dhammapada, the Buddha emphasized the universal importance of compassion, stating:

“Sabbe sattā bhavantu sukhitattā”—“May all beings be happy.”

The quality of karunā is not passive, but an active thing that only develops when one develops mindfulness (sati) and wisdom. It is one of four brahmavihāras (divine abodes) with loving kindness (mettā), sympathetic joy (muditā) and equanimity (upekkhā). These qualities provide a basis for ethical conduct and meditative focus leading to personal liberation (nibbāna) and unity of the community [sobhā]; so that they are considered a form of liberation. Dual use of karunā as both ethical and meditative practice has been extensively discussed by scholars. According to Harvey (2000), compassion arises from the recognition of the shared nature of suffering and the ethical responsibility to alleviate it. This is echoed in the Metta Sutta:

“Mātā yathā niyaṃ puttāṃ āyusā ekaputtamanurakkhe,
Evampi sabbabhūtesu mānasā bhāvaye aparimāṇaṃ”

Just as a mother protects her only child with her life, so too should one cultivate an unlimited heart of compassion for all beings.”

According to Sayadaw U Jotika, his Dhamma Talk on Emotions, Karunā is a “cooling balm” that calms the fiery rage of anger and helps to extinguish the flames of grief, enabling one to understand and relate to others. This describes the work of compassion as similarly active in character as a personal virtue and a social ethic.

The Aṅguttara Nikāya further elaborates on the transformative effects of karunā:

“Cittam pasīdati, rāgo paṭinissatṭho hoti, dosa paṭinissatṭho hoti”

The mind becomes serene; attachment and anger are abandoned.” These doctrinal insights underscore that compassion is deeply interconnected with ethical conduct (sīla) and wisdom (paññā). Compassion, when rooted in mindfulness and understanding, becomes a sustainable and effective force for good.

The nature of construal of this is doctrinal, ethical and practical way as foundation of buddhist practice, all are explored in this paper. Taking as its points of departure Pāli sources and contemporary scholarship, it synthesizes insights to provide a timeless and universal way towards individual and collective well-being through karuṇā sīlā hadayam.

The Doctrinal Foundations of Karuṇā in Buddhism

Karuṇā (compassion) is one of the four brahmavihāras (divine abodes), an important teaching in both the disciplinary and meditative instructions of Buddhism. The Buddha places compassion as bedrock in the teaching of compassionate practice, grounded in the insight that suffering (dukkha) is universal, and it is ethical to end. The Dhammapada articulates this principle:

“Sabbapāpassa akaraṇaṃ, kusalassa upasampadā; sacittapariyodapanam—etaṃ buddhāna sāsanaṃ”

To avoid all evil, to cultivate good, and to purify the mind—this is the teaching of the Buddhas.” This ethical framework highlights the interconnectedness of non-harming (ahiṃsā), compassion, and wisdom.

There are many Pāli sources which express the Karuṇā Sīlā Hadayam principle, literally meaning “Compassion cools the heart.” For instance, the Metta Sutta advises:

“Mātā yathā niyaṃ puttam āyusā ekaputtamanurakkhe, evampi sabbabhūtesu mānaṣaṃ bhāvaye aparimāṇaṃ”

Just as a mother protects her only child with her life, so too should one cultivate an unlimited heart of compassion for all beings.” This verse illustrates that karuṇā transcends boundaries, embodying boundless love and a commitment to alleviate suffering without discrimination.

The notion that karuṇā is either a feeling or emotion alone, as something personal to an individual's affective disposition, or simply a reactive process of affective alignment, without any element of reflection and ethical action, has been criticized by scholars like Bodhi (2005) who affirm that karuṇā cannot simply be a reaction to the sufferings of others, it is a mindful and an ethical act, calculated through an awareness of the connectedness.

Compassion as an Ethical and Meditative Practice

The foundation of non harming is karuṇā in Buddhist ethics. Pennātipātā veramaṇī sikkhāpadaṃ samādiyāmi—as the first of the five precepts (pañcasīla), “I undertake to abstain from killing living beings”—is an on the record commitment to living compassionately, and goes beyond refraining from harming to actively reducing suffering as far as it is possible. Meditatively, karuṇā is cultivated through metta bhāvanā (loving-kindness meditation), as described in the Visuddhimagga:

“Sabbe sattā dukkhaṃ pamuccantu”

May all beings be free from suffering.” The text further explains that true compassion arises from understanding the interdependence of all beings, free from attachment or pity. This meditative practice not only develops emotional resilience but also deepens the practitioner's capacity for empathy and mindful engagement with the world.

Sayadaw U Jotika reflects that compassion is an active force capable of transforming the mind and heart:

“Compassion cools the fires of anger and delusion, creating space for wisdom and understanding.” The Aṅguttara Nikāya echoes this transformative potential:

“Cittam pasīdati, rāgo paṭinissatṭho hoti, dosa paṭinissatṭho hoti”

The mind becomes serene; attachment and anger are abandoned.” These benefits highlight the dual nature of karuṇā as both an ethical guide and a meditative discipline.

The Interplay of Karuṇā and Wisdom

In Buddhism, compassion (karuṇā) is inseparably linked with wisdom (paññā). Compassion without wisdom risks being misguided, while wisdom without compassion may lack moral grounding. The Majjhima Nikāya states:

“Paññāya cassa disvā dhammaṃ, vimuccati yathābhūtaṃ”

Through wisdom, one sees things as they truly are and is liberated.” This interplay ensures that compassionate actions are effective and sustainable, avoiding harm or unintended consequences.

Sayadaw U Jotika underscores this point, emphasizing that mindfulness (sati) is the bridge between compassion and wisdom:

“Without mindfulness, compassion can become reactive and emotional, rather than transformative.” The Visuddhimagga further explains that wisdom enhances karuṇā by revealing the impermanence (anicca) and non-self

(anattā) nature of existence. This understanding prevents attachment to outcomes and fosters a genuine, selfless concern for the welfare of others.

Compassion in Social Ethics

Personal practice of compassion is also carried out on the community, which constitutes the foundation of Buddhist social ethics. The Sigālovāda Sutta emphasizes the importance of compassionate relationships within families and communities: Na ca tathā pi mātā pitā ca, puttam paṭijaggati so ariyo sevī, paṇḍito sabbabhūtesu. This teaching emphasizes how the compassion of a wise person benefits all beings as a mother and father serve a child. Harvey (2000) however notes that karunā is key to the addressing of structural inequalities and social harmony. Compassionate living encompasses refraining from causing harm as well as working to alleviate suffering in all of its forms (through charitable acts, advocacy for justice, and ecologically) as well.

The Transformative Power of Karunā

Karunā is demonstrated to be transformative possibility both in doctrinal texts and in contemporary practice. The Dhammapada highlights the purifying effect of compassion:

“Manopubbangamā dhammā, manoseṭṭhā manomayā”

The mind is the forerunner of all actions; with a pure mind, happiness follows.” Not only does Compassion purify the mind, Compassion also generates the emotional balance, resilience, and relational harmony.

Sayadaw U Jotika reflects on karunā as a universal principle: With ‘the thin in the middle’ here, ‘Karunā sītala hadayam’ embodies a truth which is specific to individual suffering only, yet has ripples of harmony extending even to the world, indicating (what might be regarded as contrary to this) a dual nature of compassion as personal virtue and as social ethic, both of which are central to the Buddhist path to liberation (nibbāna).

2. CONCLUSION

Buddhist practice consists of cardinal Compassion (karunā), that directs an ethical conduct and meditative focus. With its roots in the Buddha’s teachings and supplemented by contemporary reflections, it easily meshes with wisdom (paññā) to enhance self transformation and washes away societal disharmony. This timeless framework in terms of the Karunā Sītala Hadayam, meaning Compassion cools the heart, is a principle for ethical and spiritual living in the world in which suffering is relieved and a world of peace is created. Karunā is the mindful engagement with which the Buddha envisioned an existence in harmony and enlightenment, embodied. In this sense it goes beyond personal cultivation and directly into broader social and environmental ethics. This attempts to alleviate systemic suffering through motivation towards compassionate action, through something such as advocacy, charity, or ecological concerns. In a contemporary context karunā sītala hadayam offers practical advice for dealing with subjects such as social inequality, conflict and climate crises. In the end, karunā represents the Buddha’s ideal of an harmonious, in balance life. Practicing integration between ethical living, meditative awareness and active compassion, the society gap between personal spiritual development and society well being is bridged through this principle. As it has the power to unite and transform its disciples, inspiring collective harmony and blessing of the world this is the enduring relevance of The Karunā Sītala Hadayam of Buddhism.

3. REFERENCES

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