

As human beings we all have the potential to be happy and compassionate people, and we also have the potential to be miserable and harmful to others. The potential for all these things is present within each of us.

If we want to be happy, then the important thing is to try to promote the positive and useful aspects in each of us and to try to reduce the negative. Doing negative things, such as stealing and lying, may occasionally seem to bring some short-term satisfaction, but in the long term they will always bring us misery. Positive acts always bring us inner strength. With inner strength we have less fear and more self-confidence, and it becomes much easier to extend our sense of caring to others without any barriers, whether religious, cultural, or otherwise. It is thus very important to recognize our potential for both good and bad, and then to observe and analyze it carefully.

This is what I call the promotion of human value. My main concern is always how to promote an understanding of deeper human value. This deeper human value is compassion, a sense of caring, and commitment. No matter what your religion, and whether you are a believer or a nonbeliever, without them you cannot be happy.

Kindness and a good heart form the underlying foundation for our success in this life, our progress on the spiritual path, and our fulfillment of our ultimate aspiration: the attainment of full enlightenment. Hence, compassion and a good heart are not only important at the beginning but also in the middle and at the end. Their necessity and value are not limited to any specific time, place, society or culture.

Thus, we need compassion and human affection not only to survive; they are the ultimate sources of success in life. Selfish ways of thinking not only harm others, they prevent the very happiness we ourselves desire. The time has come to think more wisely, hasn't it? This is my belief.

Developing Compassion

Before we can generate compassion and love, it is important to have a clear understanding of what we understand compassion and love to be. In simple terms, compassion and love can be defined as positive thoughts and feelings that give rise to such essential things in life as hope, courage, determination and inner strength. In the Buddhist tradition, compassion and love are seen as two aspects of same thing: compassion is the wish for another being to be free from suffering; love is wanting them to have happiness.

The next matter to be understood is whether it is possible to enhance compassion and love. In other words, is there a means by which these qualities of mind can be increased, and anger, hatred, and jealousy reduced? My answer to this is an emphatic, "Yes!" Even if you do not agree with me right now, let yourself be open to the possibility of such development. Let us carry out some experiments together; perhaps we may then find some answers.

For a start, it is possible to divide every kind of happiness and suffering into two main categories: mental and physical. Of the two, it is the mind that exerts the greatest influence on most of us. Unless we are either gravely ill or deprived of basic necessities, our physical condition plays a secondary role in life. If the body is content, we virtually ignore it. The mind, however, registers every event, no matter how small. Hence we should devote our most serious efforts to bringing about mental peace rather than physical comfort.

The Mind Can Be Changed

From my own limited experience, I am convinced that through constant training we can indeed develop our minds. Our positive attitudes, thoughts, and outlook can be enhanced, and their negative counterparts can be reduced. Even a single moment of consciousness depends on so many factors, and when we change these various factors, the mind also changes. This is a simple truth about the nature of mind.

The thing that we call "mind" is quite peculiar. Sometimes it is very stubborn and very resistant to change. With continuous effort, however, and with conviction based on reason, our minds are sometimes quite honest and flexible. When we truly recognize that there is some need to change, then our minds can change. Wishing and praying alone will not transform your mind; you also need reason—reason ultimately grounded in your own experience. And you won't be able to transform your mind overnight; old habits, especially mental ones, resist quick solutions. But with effort over time and conviction grounded in reason, you can definitely achieve profound changes in your mental attitudes.

As a basis for change, we need to recognize that as long as we live in this world we will encounter problems, things that obstruct the fulfillment of our goals. If, when these happen, we lose hope and become discouraged, we diminish our ability to face these difficulties. If, on the other hand, we remember that not just we but everyone has to undergo suffering, this more realistic perspective will increase our determination and our capacity to overcome troubles. By remembering the suffering of others, by feeling compassion for others, our own suffering becomes manageable. Indeed, with this attitude, each new obstacle can be seen as yet another valuable opportunity to improve our mind, another opportunity for deepening our compassion! With each new experience, we can strive gradually to become more compassionate; that is, we can develop both genuine sympathy for others' suffering and the will to help remove their pain. As a result, our own serenity and inner strength will increase.

How to Develop Compassion

Self-centeredness inhibits our love for others, and we are all afflicted by it to one degree or another. For true happiness to come about, we need a calm mind, and such peace of mind is brought about only by a compassionate attitude. How can we develop this attitude? Obviously, it is not enough for us simply to believe that compassion is important and to think about how nice it is! We need to make a concerted effort to develop it; we must use all the events of our daily life to transform our thoughts and behavior.

First of all, we must be clear about what we mean by compassion. Many forms of compassionate feeling are mixed with desire and attachment. For instance, the love parents feel for their child is often strongly associated with their own emotional needs, so it is not fully compassionate. Usually when we are concerned about a close friend, we call this compassion, but it too is usually attachment. Even in marriage, the love between husband and wife—particularly at the beginning, when each partner still may not know the other's deeper character very well—depends more on attachment than genuine love. Marriages that last only a short time do so because they lack compassion; they are produced by emotional attachment based on projection and expectation, and as soon as the projections change, the attachment disappears. Our desire can be so strong that the person to whom we are attached appears to be flawless, when in fact he or she has many faults. In addition, attachment makes us exaggerate small, positive qualities. When this happens, it indicates that our love is motivated more by personal need than by genuine care for another.

Compassion without attachment is possible. Therefore, we need to clarify the distinctions between compassion and attachment. True compassion is not just an emotional response but a firm commitment founded on reason. Because of this firm foundation, a truly compassionate attitude toward others does not change even if they behave negatively. Genuine compassion is based not on our own projections and expectations, but rather on the needs of the other: irrespective of whether another person is a close friend or an enemy, as long as that person wishes for peace and happiness and wishes to overcome suffering, then on that basis we develop genuine concern for their problem. This is genuine compassion. For a Buddhist practitioner, the goal is to develop this genuine compassion, this genuine wish for the well-being of another, in fact for every living being throughout

the universe. Of course, developing this kind of compassion is not at all easy! Let us consider this point more closely.

Whether people are beautiful or plain, friendly or cruel, ultimately they are human beings, just like oneself. Like oneself, they want happiness and do not want suffering. Furthermore, their right to overcome suffering and to be happy is equal to one's own. Now, when you recognize that all beings are equal in both their desire for happiness and their right to obtain it, you automatically feel empathy and closeness for them. Through accustoming your mind to this sense of universal altruism, you develop a feeling of responsibility for others; you wish to help them actively overcome their problems. This wish is not selective; it applies equally to all beings. As long as they experience pleasure and pain just as you do, there is no logical basis to discriminate between them or to alter your concern for them if they behave negatively.

One point I should make here is that some people, especially those who see themselves as very realistic and practical, are sometimes too realistic and obsessed with practicality. They may think, "The idea of wishing for the happiness of all beings, of wanting what is best for every single one, is unrealistic and too idealistic. Such an unrealistic idea cannot contribute in any way to transforming the mind or to attaining some kind of mental discipline because it is completely unachievable."

A more effective approach, they may think, would be to begin with a close circle of people with whom one has direct interaction. Later one can expand and increase the parameters of that circle. They feel there is simply no point in thinking about all beings, since there is an infinite number of them. They may conceivably be able to feel some kind of connection with some fellow human beings on this planet, but they feel that the infinite number of beings throughout the universe have nothing to do with their own experience as individuals. They may ask, "What point is there in trying to cultivate the mind that tries to include within its sphere every living being?"

In other contexts, that may be a valid objection. What is important here, however, is to grasp the impact of cultivating such altruistic sentiments. The point is to try to develop the scope of our empathy in such a way that we can extend it to any form of life with the capacity to feel pain and experience happiness. It is a matter of recognizing living organisms as sentient, and therefore subject to pain and capable of happiness.

Such a universal sentiment of compassion is very powerful, and there is no need to be able to identify, in specific terms, with every single living being in order for it to be effective. In this regard it is similar to recognizing the universal nature of impermanence: when we cultivate the recognition that all things and events are impermanent, we do not need to consider individually every single thing that exists in the universe in order to be convinced of it. That is not how the mind works. It is important to appreciate this point.

Given patience and time, it is within our power to develop this kind of universal compassion. Of course our self-centeredness, our distinctive attachment to the feeling of a solid "I," works fundamentally to inhibit our compassion. Indeed, true compassion can be experienced only when this type of self-grasping is eliminated. But this does not mean that we cannot start to cultivate compassion and begin to make progress right away.

Since compassion and a good heart are developed through constant and conscious effort, it is important for us first to identify the favorable conditions that give rise to our own qualities of kindness, and then to identify the adverse circumstances that obstruct our cultivation of these positive states of mind. It is therefore important for us to lead a life of constant mindfulness and mental alertness. Our mastery of mindfulness should be such that whenever a new situation arises, we are able to recognize immediately whether the circumstances are favorable or adverse to the development of compassion and a good heart. By pursuing the practice of compassion in such a manner, we will gradually be able to alleviate the effects of the obstructive forces and enhance the conditions that favor the development of compassion and a good heart.

Global Compassion

I believe that at every level of society—familial, national and international—the key to a happier and more successful world is the growth of compassion. We do not need to become religious, nor do we need to believe in a particular ideology. All that is necessary is for each of us to develop our good human qualities. I believe that the cultivation of individual happiness can contribute in a profound and effective way to the overall improvement of the entire human community.

We all share an identical need for love, and on the basis of this commonality, it is possible to feel that anybody we meet, in whatever circumstances, is a brother or sister. No matter how new the face or how different the dress or behavior, there is no significant division between us and other people. It is foolish to dwell on external differences because our basic natures are the same.

The benefits of transcending such superficial differences become clear when we look at our global situation. Ultimately, humanity is one and this small planet is our only home. If we are to protect this home of ours, each of us needs to experience a vivid sense of universal altruism and compassion. It is only this feeling that can remove the self-centered motives that cause people to deceive and misuse one another. If you have a sincere and open heart, you naturally feel self-worth and confidence, and there is no need to be fearful of others.

The need for an atmosphere of openness and cooperation at the global level is becoming more urgent. In this modern age, when it comes to dealing with economic situations there are no longer familial or even national boundaries. From country to country and continent to continent, the world is inextricably interconnected. Each country depends heavily on the others. In order for a country to develop its own economy, it is forced to take seriously into account the economic conditions of other countries as well. In fact, economic improvement in other countries ultimately results in economic improvement in one's own country.

In view of these facts about our modern world, we need a total revolution in our thinking and our habits. It is becoming clearer every day that a viable economic system must be based on a true sense of universal responsibility. In other words, what we need is a genuine commitment to the principles of universal brotherhood and sisterhood. This much is clear, isn't it? This is not just a holy, moral or religious ideal. Rather, it is the reality of our modern human existence.

If you reflect deeply enough, it becomes obvious that we need more compassion and altruism everywhere. This critical point can be appreciated by observing the current state of affairs in the world, whether in the fields of modern economics and health care, or in political and military situations. In addition to the multitude of social and political crises, the world is also facing an ever-increasing cycle of natural calamities. Year after year, we have witnessed a radical shifting of global climatic patterns that has led to grave consequences: excessive rain in some countries that has brought serious flooding, a shortage of precipitation in other countries that has resulted in devastating droughts. Fortunately, concern for ecology and the environment is rapidly growing everywhere. We are now beginning to appreciate that the question of environmental protection is ultimately a question of our very survival on this planet. As human beings, we must also respect our fellow members of the human family: our neighbors, our friends, and so forth. Compassion, loving-kindness, altruism, and a sense of brotherhood and sisterhood are the keys not only to human development, but to planetary survival.

The success or failure of humanity in the future depends primarily upon the will and determination of the present generation. If we ourselves do not utilize our faculties of will and intelligence, there is no one else who can guarantee our future and that of the next generation. This is an indisputable fact. We cannot place the entire blame on politicians or those people who are seen as directly responsible for various situations; we too must bear some responsibility personally. It is only when the individual accepts personal responsibility that he or she begins to take some initiative. Just shouting and complaining is not good enough. A genuine change must first come from within the individual, then he or she can attempt to make significant contributions to humanity. Altruism is not merely a religious ideal; it is an indispensable requirement for humanity at large.

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