

COMPASSION ON THE EARTH AND ITS INHABITANTS - A BUDDHIST REFLECTION

Buddhism rests on two main pillars, wisdom and compassion. It is true that much of the popular literature on Buddhism tends to stress wisdom, insight, quiet meditation. But the second aspect is equally important, perhaps even more so.

Many people who are not even vaguely interested in Buddhism will know the story of the Buddha's life: how he renounced the throne of Kapilavastu to go on a lonely search for truth. After many years of trying out all known philosophical and meditative approaches, he decided simply to sit down beneath a tree and not to get up until he had found the answer to the question "why do people suffer?" He found it in a great event called Enlightenment or Nirvana. This is the defining moment of Buddhism, the experience which all Buddhists hope one day to have, the condition to which all Buddhist philosophy points.

But shortly afterwards, there was a second moment, less well known, perhaps, but of equal importance. He was not the first person to find the solution to the riddle of life and death, but other who had found it had remained where they were, content to live and die in the knowledge that they had passed beyond life and death. In the Buddhist tradition they are called "Silent Buddhas".

The Buddha, however, was filled with compassion for all the unenlightened beings who would continue to be born, suffer and die. He considered the possibility of teaching others how to attain nirvana. At first, it seemed a hopeless task. How could he impart such a profound teaching to anyone? It had taken him years of unrelenting effort, not to mention thousands of previous lives, to arrive at this. Surely it was impossible to teach that which was, by definition, beyond words and concepts? Then he was struck by an idea, or as they would put it in ancient India, a god. Perhaps there might be a few people with "just a little dust in their eyes", people who would be able to appreciate what he had to say. He got up from his seat under the tree and, no doubt with a resigned look on his face, set off on his mission of forty years of teaching. If the first moment marks the start of the Buddha's enlightenment through wisdom, the second marks the start of Buddhism, and all because of his compassion.

What can this mean to us? We are, presumably, not Buddhas. But to the extent that we have gained some insight about the environmental mess we have made for ourselves, we do have some insight - let us be bold and even call it wisdom. Is that enough? What is our motivation for telling others about the environment and how we can make a difference to our lives and that of others? Is it to set ourselves up as "experts", as important people whose opinions need to be sought whenever environmental matters come up in conversation? If so, we are feeding into the same attitude that created the environmental problems in the first place: the feeling that "I" am somehow important, that what "I" achieve will endure forever.

Far better to forget about "I" and teach what we know out of compassion. We who have important jobs in academia, in government or in business can afford to preach about the environment without considering whether that company car really needs to be replaced already. The rich can export their pollution. To where? To where the poor live. We cannot all be Buddhas. We cannot all be Mother Teresa. Or not yet, anyway. But each one of us can develop our ability to respond to situations wisely, creatively and above all compassionately.

Enough jargon. How does this work in practice? If I am truly compassionate, and I am asked to contribute in time or money to an environmental project, then I will not first ask about the project's tax-exempt status, or consider how it will affect my image. I will do it simply because beings are suffering and there is something I can do about it. Or I can decide not to participate if I think it will be counterproductive - that too can be an act of compassion. But the reason for the decision in either case will not be "I". Nor will it be "they": pity is not

compassion. It will be "we", it will be "us". Compassion is "feeling with" others, entering their world, feeling their suffering. The Buddha taught that as we have passed from life to life, every single being has been our mother, our father, our lover, our friend. How quickly we have forgotten those close ties! Yet once the scavenger eating from the dustbin was our dearly-loved child. This is a meditation in its own right: try to see every being as one's own mother, and act accordingly.

Too tall an order? Then consider this: by leaving future generations a planet in working order, I am extending compassion to untold millions of sentient beings. Who are these beings? My own future incarnations! As long as we remain unenlightened, we will have to face the consequences of our actions. Hopping to another planet between incarnations is rare - if we destroy this one, we will have to live on it.

The Buddha had nothing to gain by his long years of teaching. As an enlightened being, he lacked nothing, desired nothing, detested nothing. He could just have opted to exit into the unfathomable depths of nirvana, leaving no trace behind. That he did not is a sign of his limitless compassion. Every day, Buddhists around the world recite, whether out loud or in their hearts, the "bodhisattva vows":

All beings, without number, I vow to liberate
Endless blind passions, I vow to uproot
Mysteries beyond measure, I vow to penetrate
The great way of Buddha, I vow to attain.

Even to non-Buddhists, the great compassion of the Buddha can serve as an exemplar. Let us not merely clean our own backyards. True, we must do that first, or our words will not carry much weight. But let us not stop there, for there are many other backyards that need cleaning. Perhaps the bodhisattva vows can be recast for our own age. Perhaps we can evolve a set of affirmations of our own, to confirm to ourselves that we will not stop until the world is at peace with itself:

All species of beings, I vow to respect
Endless selfish desires, I vow to uproot
Ecological disasters beyond measure, I vow to avert
The compassion of the great religious teachers, I vow to attain.

OM MANI PADME HUM