

## Notes and Quotes for February 13, 2022 *Dharma Reflections*:

### “The Four Immeasurables”: Great Compassion

#### ***Mahākaruṇā* as an Immeasurable:**

(Note to readers: Going forward I will dispense, for the most part, with the use of diacritical marks in Sanskrit and Pali words.)

For a robust introduction to the meanings and import of compassion, see this overview:

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Karu%E1%B9%87%C4%81>

To explore “39 Definitions of Karuna”, see:

<https://www.wisdomlib.org/definition/karuna>

“Just as a mother who has an only son would protect her own son with her life, so one should cultivate a boundless mind towards all living beings.”

-From *The Metta Sutta*, quoted in Anālayo, *Compassion and Emptiness in Early Buddhist Meditation*, Windhorse Publications, 2015, p. 29.

“If you possess one quality, it would be as if you had all enlightened qualities in the very palm of your hand. Which quality? Great compassion.

-Buddha Shakyamuni, *Sutra That Expresses Avalokiteshvara’s Realization*

- Erik Pema Kunsang, compiler and translator, *Jewels of Enlightenment—Wisdom Teachings from the Great Tibetan Masters*, Shambhala, 2003, p. 133.

“2. May beings everywhere who suffer  
Torment in their minds and bodies  
Have, by virtue of my merit,  
Joy and happiness in boundless measure.”

- From Chapter 10 Dedication in *The Way of the Bodhisattva*, Shantideva, Padmakara Translation Group, Shambhala Classic, 1997, p. 162.

“In cultivating compassion we draw from the wholeness of our experience — our suffering, our empathy, as well as our cruelty and terror. It has to be this way. Compassion is not a relationship between the healer and the wounded. It’s a relationship between equals. Only when we know our own darkness well can we be present with the darkness of others. Compassion becomes real when we recognize our shared humanity.

“As in all the aspiration practices of the four limitless qualities, we start the compassion practice where we are and then expand our capacity. We start by locating our current ability to be genuinely touched by suffering. We can make a list of those who evoke a feeling of compassion. It might include our grandchild and our brother and our friend who is afraid of dying, as well as beings we see on the news or read about in a book.

“The point is simply to contact genuine compassion, wherever we may find it. Then we can follow the three-step formula, ‘May I be free of suffering. May you be free of suffering. May we be free of suffering.’”

-Pema Chödrön - *Comfortable with Uncertainty* - Shambhala Publications

“Compassion and bodhicitta bring genuine self-confidence and self-esteem. The courage and conviction that come from them have a strong foundation in reason. These qualities enable us to face problems and suffering without being overwhelmed by confusion, depression, or low self-esteem. We will be able to deal with what life brings with determination and confidence. Why? Because with bodhicitta we are aware that suffering arises from causes and conditions such as afflictions and karma, and we know that these causes and conditions can be overcome. In this way, bodhicitta brings optimism and hope.”

- *In Praise of Great Compassion* – vol. 5 in *The Library of Wisdom and Compassion*, The Dalai Lama and Thubten Chodron, 2020, Wisdom Publications, p. 63

“In his homage at the beginning of the *Supplement*, Candrakirti says (MMA 1-4C):

Sravakas and solitary realizers arise from the excellent sages (buddhas);  
the excellent sages are born from bodhisattvas;  
the mind of compassion, nondual awareness,  
and bodhicitta—these are the causes of bodhisattvas.

Compassion alone is seen as the seed  
of a Conqueror’s rich harvest, as water that nourishes it,  
and as the ripened fruit that is the source of long enjoyment;  
therefore, at the start I praise this compassion.

Like a bucket in a well, migrators have no autonomy;  
first, with the thought of “I,” they cling to a self;  
then, with the thought of “mine,” they become attached to things;  
I bow to this compassion that cares for all migrators.

- *ibid.*, pp. 172-73

### *“Excellent Qualities Can Be Cultivated Limitlessly*

In *Commentary on Reliable Cognition*, Dharmakirti explains why it is possible to cultivate the mind’s excellent qualities limitlessly and to transform our ordinary mind into a buddha’s fully awakened mind. Three factors make this possible.

- 1) *The clear and cognizant nature of the mind is a stable basis for the cultivation of excellent qualities....*
- 2) *The mind can become habituated to excellent qualities that can be built up cumulatively....*
- 3) *Excellent qualities can be enhanced, but never diminished, by reasoning and wisdom.”*

- From the same *Library of Wisdom and Compassion*, vol. 3 (*Samsara, Nirvana, and Buddha Nature*), 2018, pp. 281-282.

“A step beyond kindness, compassion is the personal experience and practice of interbeing. We live our short lives not merely in interdependence but as a single great organism of many dynamic elements. What happens to you happens to me; what happens to me happens to you—at the same moment with the same intensity. If your behavior seems strange, it is because I am not yet well acquainted with your side of my psyche. I hear painful bondage in your angry words. I want to understand how it could have developed. I want you to hear my story too. Let’s get together and share, and your part of me will become more clear—my part of you will become more clear.”

- Robert Aitken Roshi’s essay on the Brahma Viharas in *Original Dwelling Place—Zen Buddhist Essays*, Counterpoint, 1997, p. 48.

“Dogen, the great teacher of Buddhism, said, ‘Zen is the wide, all-encompassing gate of compassion.’”

- Koun Yamada Roshi, in his own awakening narrative provided in Roshi Philip Kapleau's *The Three Pillars of Zen—Teaching, Practice, and Enlightenment*, 35<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Edition, Anchor Books, 2000, p. 232.

“The whole point of practice, of making this effort to recognize the nature of mind, is to benefit all sentient beings. When we say ‘all’ sentient beings, our aspiration automatically encompasses our own welfare and spiritual journey. We do not need to worry about being left out or not attaining enlightenment. The aspiration to accomplish compassionate buddha activity helps us achieve enlightenment more rapidly. The power of compassion accelerates our realization and makes it more profound. Thus if you want to speed up your progress, push the accelerator of compassion, love, and bodhicitta. If you want to slow down your discovery, put more focus on ‘self’—on self-liberation, individual salvation, or individual freedom.”

- Dzogchen Ponlop, *Mind Beyond Death*, Snow Lion, 2007, p. 185.

“Look into your mind and check if there are any aspects of yourself that you are unable to accept and forgive. There may be unskillful, harmful actions you did in the past, or habitual tendencies you are unable to give up, or negative thoughts you are ashamed of and try to keep hidden. Reflect that Chenrezig sees all of these—in fact, he knows you better than you know yourself—but does not feel even the slightest aversion for you. He completely accepts you just as you are, loves you unconditionally, and is compassionately dedicated to helping you for all of time until you are free and enlightened. This is because he sees you pure buddha nature, and thus he knows that your negative qualities are transitory and not who you really are. Try to really feel Chenrezig’s forgiveness and compassion for you.”

- From “Meditations to Cultivate Compassion” in *Awakening the Kind Heart—How to Meditate on Compassion*, Kathleen McDonald, Wisdom, 2010, p. 88.

“Compassion witnesses an individual in suffering, human or otherwise. Recognizing the suffering leads to the yearning for that individual to be free of that suffering. There is still a vision; compassion focuses on the fact that one doesn’t need to suffer in that way. It is possible to find serenity, equanimity, tranquility, and the equilibrium of freedom. Compassion wishes: May you be free of suffering and the source of suffering. It observes the suffering and the sources of suffering that are present, and it holds forth the vision that this suffering is not indelibly interwoven with your existence. You have the potential to be free. May you be free.”

- B. Alan Wallace, *The Four Immeasurables—Practices to Open the Heart*, Snow Lion, 2010, p. 128.

“Compassion practice is difficult, and you will almost certainly shed tears in the process. Tears mean that you are taking the practice to heart. More than a few teachers have said that a compassion practice without tears is not much of a practice.”

- Ken McLeod, *Wake up To Your Life - Discovering the Buddhist Path of Attention*, Harper San Francisco, 2001, p. 280.

#### “SUFFERING IS UNIVERSAL

“There is no escape from birth, old age, sickness, and death. We’re not doing anything wrong when we feel troubled; we are simply not accepting our karma. How can this unreliable world provide us with lasting happiness? And how could we possibly feel compassion if we don’t accept samsara and the suffering it brings to all living beings?

“Suffering is a universal experience. All living beings are subject to ignorance, karma, and pain. Instead of turning away from this or seeing it as useless, tormenting, or destructive, we can use this pain to develop compassion.

“Of course, if we felt only *our* pain and not the pain of others, we would be self-absorbed. If we saw only *their* pain without recognizing our own, our compassion would remain abstract. And if we saw both our own *and* others’ pain without understanding that suffering is the nature of samsara, we might simply conclude: Life is suffering and the best we can do is help each other get through it. But there is no vision in this approach. Instead, seeing that the nature of samsara is suffering, we must look to the cause.

#### “IGNORANCE IS IMPERSONAL

“The root cause of suffering is ignorance. Ignorance is the ground of all actions and experiences in samsara. In the sense that it is universal, we can say that ignorance is impersonal. We’re all equally subject to the karma and suffering arising from ignorance. In this respect, we are all innocents, really. We don’t need to blame ourselves—or anyone else—for our suffering. Instead we can blame ignorance.

“Nevertheless, ignorance does create karma, karma does ripen in all beings, and all beings do suffer. This poignant truth generates compassion for ourselves and all living beings.

“Compassion changes our mental attitude and emotions. We immediately lose our self-pity and self-absorption. We no longer indulge in denial of suffering, and we are no longer desperate to feel better—which is a pain in itself. Instead we can use suffering in a meaningful way to wake ourselves up. We can use it to develop a limitless heart of compassion and a strong feeling of connection to others. This reduces our sense of specialness altogether. When, like the buddhas and bodhisattvas of the past we wake up deeply from ignorance and delusion, we can live a life of compassion and service to others.”

- From the talk by the author, "Stretching the Heart Further," in *It's Up to You—The Practice of Self-Reflection on the Buddhist Path*, Dzigar Kongtrul Rinpoche, Shambhala, 2005, pp. 85-86.

"A spiritual practice based exclusively on either wisdom or on compassion is like a bird fluttering about in circles with only one wing. With the Four Applications of Mindfulness we cultivate wisdom, and with the Four Immeasurables we cultivate compassion, the two 'wings to enlightenment.' ...Wisdom is what enables us to go back to the source, to bear the suffering and regain the power of the spirit, strength of mind, and strength of heart, called in Tibetan *semshuk*. A life of compassionate service needs the strength and support of wisdom, which allows us to draw from the deep source of genuine happiness within each one of us."

- Ken McLeod, *Wake up to your Life - Discovering the Buddhist Path of Attention*, Harper San Francisco, 2001, p. 129.

"One who's long meditated on loving kindness,  
Through compassion I've tamed malevolence.  
I'm the one who stays at Ligpa Rock;  
I am a meditator free of distraction."

- Jetsun Milarepa, in *The Hundred Thousand Songs of Milarepa — A New Translation* by Christopher Stagg, Shambhala, 2017, p. 53.

"We can now see... why Zen is known as a transmission outside the sutras, without reliance on words and letters, and why it does not base itself on any one sutra as do the other sects. What this means is that for Zen, truth must be grasped directly and not taken on the authority of the sutras, much less on lifeless intellectual formulas. Not the sutras but the spirit of compassion and reverence informing them; not the words but the realization of the formless reality behind them; not the life of the Buddha but his awakening—this is the stuff of Zen. Zen does not repudiate the sutras—it merely seeks to grasp the Source in which they are grounded, namely, True-mind."

- Roshi Philip Kapleau, in *To Cherish All Life—A Buddhist Case For Becoming Vegetarian*, Second Edition, The Zen Center, 1981, p. 43

"Unlike the other benefits of meditation that emerge gradually—like a quicker recovery from stress—enhancing compassion comes more readily. We suspect that cultivating compassion may take advantage of 'biological preparedness,' a programmed readiness to learn a given skill,

as seen, for instance, in the rapidity with which toddlers learn language. Just as with speaking, the brain seems primed to learn to love.”

- Daniel Goleman and Richard J. Davidson, *Altered Traits—Science Reveals How Meditation Changes Your Mind, Brain, and Body*, Avery, 2017, p. 111.

## Possible Discussion Starting Points

1. Dzigar Kongtrul, Rinpoche, says above: “Nevertheless, ignorance does create karma, karma does ripen in all beings, and all beings do suffer. This poignant truth generates compassion for ourselves and all living beings.”

Since it is this *truth* (of our very being) that “generates compassion,” maybe we don’t have to *do*, or *change*, or *add*, or *create* much of anything to access compassion. When we just see things as they are, including the pain, we liberate all things, including ourselves. We don’t have to go searching for something outside ourselves, or try to find something different about what we already are.

2. In the same talk, Kongtrul Rinpoche points out: “we can use suffering in a meaningful way to wake ourselves up.” Koun Yamada Roshi (above, from *The Three Pillars of Zen*) quoted: “Dogen, the great teacher of Buddhism, said, ‘Zen is the wide, all-encompassing gate of compassion.’” Does compassion lead to enlightenment? Does enlightenment reveal compassion? Consider Hakuin Zenji in his “*Song in Praise of Zazen*” (chanted before teishos are delivered at the RZC) — “The gate to the oneness of cause and effect is thrown open.”
3. Consider Roshi Kapleau’s quote above from *To Cherish All Life* — to the extent that you have had experiences at or exposure to the RZC, in what ways have you seen compassion brought forth explicitly? In what ways do you find it coming through implicitly?
4. Dharmakirti asserted (above) “it is possible to cultivate the mind’s excellent qualities limitlessly.” Each Brahma Vihara, including great compassion, is a “boundless abode.” Do you find it exciting to contemplate that things like wisdom and compassion are inherent in you and can be infinitely cultivated?
5. In her meditation, Kathleen McDonald (above) points out that Chenrezig’s acceptance of, love for, and dedication to helping each one of us is available for us to experience and benefit from. Are you aware of times when the Bodhisattva of Compassion (Chenrezig, Kannon, Kwan Yin, Avalokitesvara, etc.) has directly intervened in your life to help

you? Do you have any prayerful or devotional practice in relationship to Kannon?

6. Read again Candrakirti's three verses on how "Compassion alone is seen as the seed of a Conqueror's rich harvest, as water that nourishes it, and as the ripened fruit that is the source of long enjoyment" (above). Just how essential *is* compassion, anyway?
7. Savor again the pithy passage from Dzogchen Ponlop (above), that includes ""The whole point of practice, of making this effort to recognize the nature of mind, is to benefit all sentient beings.... The power of compassion accelerates our realization and makes it more profound." Can you think of a clearer distillation of what "the whole point of practice" might be?
8. Shantideva's verse of Dedication:

"May beings everywhere who suffer  
Torment in their minds and bodies  
Have, by virtue of my merit,  
Joy and happiness in boundless measure."

contains the implicit recognition of the transferability of merit. Have you ever considered dedicating all your merit, all your roots of goodness, to the benefit and welfare of all beings? When I heard the "Dedication of Merit" chanted at the end of my first session, my reaction was, "WHOA! Wait a darn minute! That there is MY merit, and you're just givin' it away!" Do you find the idea of transferable merit intriguing? Might it imply that the power of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas to help us is thereby enhanced? Are you willing to dedicate the merit of our learning together about compassion to the benefit and welfare of all beings?