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Buddhism: Integrating with Modern Sciences
to Mental and Social Development

Graduate School,

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รายงานสืบเนื่องจากการประชุมวิชาการระดับชาติและนานาชาติ 2564



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BUDDHISM:

Integrating with Modern Sciences to Mental and Social Development
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ACTIVE KARUṆĀ

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Foreword

This writing aims to share some ideas and personal observations about the needs of practical approaches of karuṇā (compassion) here and now, what could nourish the heartfelt scientific activism, especially within the Noble Sangha. Intentionally, I would not use highly sophisticated phrases to express the importance of this subject. The simple reason is: it maintains the balance between practice and theory as per the subject requirements.

Background

Compassion and compassionate actions are not specifically related to religious activities and privilege for any human race, nation, specific group members, or others. It is some inherent nature of any sentient being that, as anyone can sense (see, hear, feel) the suffering of others, we all have an instinct response to it. Compassion has becoming more and more important in the field of education, politics, economy and science.¹ Many articles and journal papers are available on this topic, and several institutes and organisations emphasise their social and individual values.² We can say that compassion is an essential, basic competence that must develop irrespectively of age, sex, profession. It has the most significant and incredible force and power to be the hearth for corruption-free politics (change politics for good, for the collective well-being and happiness); for student-centred-learning in the field of education; for gentle, and patient health care systems; tolerant,

¹ <https://www.compassioneducationalliance.org/>
<https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/topic/compassion/definition>
<https://www.compassionateactionnetwork.org/science-of-compassion>
<https://www.compassioninpolitics.com/>

² Pubmed search for the key-word „compassionate” gives 1945 results:
<https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/?term=compassionate&filter=simsearch2.ffrft>

loyal, non-aggressive defence, military and police forces. Deep-rooted compassion based on insight and realisation about the truth of suffering, supports individuals to have the courage to get involved actively to help others; meanwhile, someone would be able to stay calm and internally grounded even in the emotional storms and be able to shift others' perspectives.

Buddhist Approaches

Humanity and other sentient beings face multiple sufferings in more visible, tangible forms in our present era than before. Pandemic phenomena related to Covid-19 and multiple “side effects” on individuals, society, economics and many other aspects are just one form of this. Therefore, it is a must for an engaged Buddhist to maintain some kind of peace and harmony even during the challenging time if someone has been taken refuge in the Triple Gem. Not only for the peace of mind for himself but for the sake of others as well. This fundamental peace and harmony are not only based on saddhā (faith, trust, fidelity) and taking refuge provides not only shelter to us during “samsaric storms” and situations but also could bring insight by developing sensitivity and compassion.

What about others who have not taken this refuge formally? In fact, there are more and more lay-people from the secular population in the West (they are not lay-Buddhist) who can benefit from the Buddha Dhamma directly or indirectly. How is it possible? In many ways, but most commonly, they get some support or help from Dhamma practitioners when they are in need. There is a circular and spiral “evolutional” process and progress due to the active compassionate social activity; as the more we do, the more we establish peace and harmony within and around us. Sometimes it is enough to turn entire life orientation when people benefit from the good deeds of others, and they realise it happens only due to non-differentiated radiation of compassion by unknown Buddhist practitioner. Good examples are always great transformative tools, even according to neuroscience (i.e. the mechanism of mirror neurons in learning processes).

Doing good for others includes educating people. Even if someone far away from any Buddhist teacher, it is possible to get in touch with Dhamma. Nowadays,

people get involved in contemplative practices by media (television, radio and other online platforms), public events related to any new age movements, spiritually oriented festivals and other forums knowingly or unknowingly. We could say there is no corner of this world where we cannot find at least some advertisements on yoga, meditation or Mindfulness courses where compassion is being taught. Scientists also get access to more and more information and inspiration on this subject by the media. As the subject is already in the media, it is evident that professionals and monks should work together to screen the low-standard sources and be active in public platforms to educate people properly and spread valuable information based on compassion (offering simple and helpful topics always).

Meditation and contemplative practices became extremely popular due to the positive biological, neurological, psychological effects on human beings; therefore, it has also become a market item for some people in the business sector. Richard J. Davidson and Daniel Goleman (2017)³ have created some new paradigm and typology about the “deep path” (traditional, complex spiritual or religious forms of practices) and “wide path” (a less intensive practice that can reach more people), so it is easier to understand these directions and trends nowadays. Of course, somebody might have valid critics about some “wide path” methods. However, it is also worth thinking that they could act as a gateway for the traditional lineages later on, as someone develops mental health, sensitivity, responsibility and attention with time.

Simple Buddhist ethics (*sīla*, *veramaṇī*) and the core teachings behind (Four Noble Truth and The Eightfold Path) are becoming real refuge in day-to-day life for those who are open to listening, thinking, and applying. Essential teachings and their meaningful application could give us strong support and clear orientation in every moment. It could act as an instant *remedy* since it could provide immediate problem-solving methods not only for monks or lay-Buddhist but also for those whose life, livelihood, health, safety are depending on other’s compassionate attitude (i.e. physically or mentally ill, poor, vulnerable ones). That is why psychology, cognitive

³ R. Davidson and D. Goleman: *Altered Traits. Science Reveals How Meditation Changes Your Mind, Brain, and Body*. Avery Publishing, USA, 2017. p.3-4.

science, sociology, environmental and other sciences are getting more interested in the alternative solutions based on Buddhist approaches.

There are some fundamental doctrines of early Buddhism which remain common to all Buddhism, including the cattāri ariyasaccāni (The Four Noble Truths) and the ariya aṭṭhaṅgika magga (Noble Eightfold Path). Compassion is also one of the core teachings and one of the common evidence for all Buddhist schools. The source of this is the teachings about the Four Immeasurables (appamaññā, which literally has no measure). In addition, many textual references are available from the Pali Canon on brahmavihārās⁴ or sublime attitudes⁵, i.e. mettā, karuṇā, muditā, upekkhā (loving-kindness, compassion, joy and equanimity). However, they have slightly different importance in the Theravāda tradition than in the Mahāyāna as they are considered as objects of meditation, “side effects” of the contemplation on The Four Noble Truth or any other types of meditation (samatha or vipassanā); pre-requisites for the bodhisattvahood.

Aspirations and the practical application of The Four Immeasurables (especially mettā and karuṇā) have taken shape in Engaged Buddhism's concept. Still, it is not evident for some monasteries, forest sanghas or other Buddhist communities why to follow the updates of scientific research projects and why to be courageous to implement new rules within the daily routine of a particular sangha and how it deepens our chance to abide in the four appamaññā. A straightforward example related to Engaged Buddhism and Green Dharma could be the topic of being compassionate through eating habits. Directly speaking, it means it is the time when there is no need to have meaningless arguments about the connection between vegan/vegetarian diet and non-violent attitude. It is very nice to see that many of the Buddhist Centre in the USA and Europe intentionally follow the non-violent attitude of eating habits. His Holiness The 14th Dalai Lama or the 17th Karmapa and other prominent Buddhist persons give public talks and online teachings endlessly

⁴ lit. abodes of brahma (divine abodes, divine dwellings)

⁵ SN 42.8, SN 46.54, AN 10.208, AN 3.65., AN 4.125, AN 5.27, AN 8.63, AN 11.17, MN 7, MN 52, DN 13, DN 17 and other later texts such as Visuddhimagga, Bodhisattvācāryavatāra etc.

nowadays about the importance of this subject in the term of environmental pollution and global warming. There are many Buddhist communities all over Asia who are already more aware of these facts proved by scientific findings and take active steps to encourage others to be active in the practical implementation of karuṇā. In terms of changing eating habits, we could contemplate the novel interpretation of some passage in the Vinaya Piṭaka as well. Some tradition says it is allowed to eat meat if the animal was not killed because of us; however, it gives for a question: What about if we are aware and know it well that it is harmful to the environment, it might be harmful to us (because of the hormones and other chemicals, antibiotics given to animals)⁶. If we say it is ok, then we might break one of the fundamental precepts, i.e. to be truthful.

Over the past century, more and more Buddhist lineages, monastic and lay-Buddhist communities, and organisations have started to help others in need. Several social activities are led by monks, including food distribution, offering shelter for orphans and other homeless people, establishing health care centres, hospitals, free school for low-income families, and educating self-supporting communities in remote places. These activities definitely change the lives of thousands of people and bring happiness and joy to their life. But, in my view, compassionate actions would be even more effective in a particular country if all Buddhists would work and make action plans together.

These compassionate actions obviously do not depend on kāla, deśa (sanskrit: time and place, region) and it is not the only evidence of Mahāyāna Buddhism related to the Bodhisattva vows who devote his life to help others to get enlightenment. It might be interesting for future studies to list how Theravāda, Mahāyāna, Zen, Vajrayāna and Dzogchen lineages would offer different methods and also how they rank compassion to unfold the concept of brahmavihārās, what kind of footsteps they are taking to get self-realisation. However, it is also interesting to see

⁶ <https://www.cowspiracy.com/>

how they present and practice compassion in their day-to-day life for “actual or practical realisation”.⁷

Compassionate Communication

Firstly, the way of expression below tries to be as simple as it is possible, to be a direct example for “active karuṇā” or better to say: “to be an active performance of karuṇā in written form”. This gesture of being rather simple than overemphasising on scientific proof could be considered as *a radical act of a natural mind* from the point of the *Dzogchen* tradition or a kind of *ZEN movement as momentary art of expression*, to indicate that karuṇā is simple universal teaching what should direct even the scientific activities. Compassionate attitude is far beyond even that question of what Buddhist lineage or yāna we have taken to examine the meaning and the practical approaches of it in the present era.⁸ When we think on what exactly mean compassionate communication, we might reflect first on the Eightfold Noble Path (especially on sammā vāc, righteous speech) and the fourth precept (musāvāda veramaṇī sikkhāpadaṃ samādiyāmi). We can recall all the related suggestion given by the suttas (avoid lying, gossip, harsh, rude words or meaningless conversation) to avoid harmful actions by speech and communication. These are important basic points, but it is not granted to perform active karuṇā if we focus only on what we should avoid or try to be honest. Compassionate communication is based on expanded empathy or better to say “to feel others” and to have energy and courage for dynamic response any time, by knowing exactly when to speak and how. We should understand how to decrease suffering and increase happiness by communication. It seems inconsistent, but: compassionate communication could be definite, dynamic speech; pleasant, sweet and kind; sharp or *flesh cutting* and could be complete silence depending on various situations. Silence is a gentle, compassionate way to interact. Apart from the Buddhist content, we have several experiences from our daily routine

⁷ One of the most popular and strong practices is the Green Tārā sādhana, which is precisely meant for realizing and expanding our active, limitless compassionate nature in every moment in our lives.

⁸ It might be worth re-interpreting the concept of *eka-yāna* in this gesture of expression.

about compassionate communication. Parents should be strict and straight with their children to support their physical and mental health; meanwhile, a doctor should think twice about how and when to communicate with a cancer patient and family members to support the health progress. A scientist should also be wise when and how to share new findings not to get involved in any harmful situation (as it has happened many times in history - Copernicus, Galilei). There is no exact, final prescription about what to do as things are interdependent and impermanent (*Panta rhei*), but regular Mindfulness practice (*satipaṭṭhāna*) would be our root foundation for acting appropriately at the very momentum.

Secondly, it is essential to emphasise that science could be a great support to build a bridge and *channels for communication* between East-West, Tradition-Modernity, Philosophy-Science for better understanding of the worldly phenomenon (like functions and meaning of life, mind, consciousness, cognition). However, suppose the compassionate attitude is inactive or dormant in a scientist or any professionals⁹. In that case, there is a risk of being overcomplicated with terminus technicus in their communication and they might develop pride and arrogance, especially towards those who do not have the same scientific vocabulary that a particular scientist has. Many people even feel ashamed and feel inferior to others in such a situation, which means they experience *akusala cetasika* due to lack of understanding on that subject or simply because somebody makes them feel they do not know anything.

As Buddhists, we should never forget that it is always our responsibility to speak and communicate according to the audience's actual mental state, knowledge and acquirements. It is also a common observation that it is easier to share and explain anything for those who have deeper understanding and insight on something (actually they can share it most simply); meanwhile, there are lots of confusion, inadequacy or inconsequential phrases in case of others who have limited or one-sided knowledge.

⁹ Any secular or any religious people, philosophers, monks, nuns are also professionals in this content.

Sākyamuni Buddha was a real profound example of his compassionate teaching as many suttas prove that he was always able to use appropriate words, phrases and metaphors well-timed to help others gain insight. As we see, communication could act as a kind of upāya (skilful method) for enlightenment and could also be a direct representation of compassion if we can feel and resonate with others during any kind of verbal interaction.

No doubt, science has its own language and we have to be open for dialogues and the sake of smooth and fruitful interactions; we all have to expand our scientific vocabulary due to the same active compassionate attitude. The simplest example could be any social workers. If they devote their lives to support others, such as migrants or poor people in a remote area in a foreign country, it is a must to learn their language first. The same applies to any science, including Buddhist philosophy. Dhamma could be shared easily with anyone from the scientific fields if we are ready to understand the way of communication by others. Sometimes, a specific word in Latin or any local language can be the medium, and in other cases, communication could happen throughout numbers, tables, graphs or symbols. Nevertheless, first, we have to learn all of these forms or at least be familiar with them, to be able to be active in compassionate communication with others.

Science and Dhamma

Science, especially psychology or neuroscience, has many spiritual benefits as it could also help to re-arrange or shape new frames for the Dhamma, highlight its mechanism and potential what we can utilise for the benefit of humankind, so all would be granted by open dialogues. Promising and valuable clinical research records make Dhamma more visible and more attractive for humanity, as we can see the example of Mind and Life Institute, The Healthy Minds or Greater Good Science Centre. Thousands of scientists have already committed to cultivating well-being and relieving suffering through a scientific understanding of the mind, life, and the

interaction between human beings and the environment¹⁰. They work on specific scientific research for a kinder, wiser and more compassionate world and society. However, it is not the appropriate time to write thousands of doctoral theses, publish millions of journals on this topic for all of us and seek scientific evidence, statistics or references to prove the relevance of the theory on active compassionate actions. No doubt, we should be grateful for those who do it with enthusiasm because they spread the message in written form; however, it is even more significant if scientists and monks can afford time and energy not only to study, research and speak about compassion but put more effort to apply it in their daily practice. Karuṇā could definitely be an active force, a useful catalyser for right-actions (including body, speech and mind aspects) at macro and micro level, in case of individual or group initiatives, in the short- or long term scientific projects as well. It has great potential even if we are just supporting others from the “backstage” or becoming the main actor for any changes.

We all have different facilities, financial backgrounds and opportunities to do something for others. We might have a different way to serve others: mother, teacher, doctor, friend, neighbour, classmate, colleague, politician, social activist living in a society or as a fully ordained monk from a monastery, but **WE ALL HAVE OPPORTUNITY TO DO SOMETHING ACTIVELY!**

Some suggestion about compassionate action in practice:

- let your comfort zone behind and stand up from your meditation cushion to put compassion in action
- make your life not only meaningful but also useful, for the sake of all beings
- never hesitate to do good for others
- never miss to warn or stop anyone who is about to harm himself or others
- never get involved in any harmful actions or situations
- be compassionate with human beings, animals, plants and all kinds of living being

¹⁰ <http://www.ecodharma.com/> , <https://dharmanet.org/coursesM/37/ecology0.htm> , <https://www.mindandlife.org/insights/topics/compassion-and-empathy/> , <https://centerhealthyminds.org/>

- be vegetarian or vegan
- lead as simple life as possible to decrease your eco-foot-print
- get involved in any types of scientific project which works on the well-being of others
- study Dhamma and science parallel; have diligence and enthusiasm in learning processes
- keep it in your mind that any study should be based on compassion as removing avijja is the most important factor to lessen suffering for others and for us
- teach Dhamma for those who are suffering and ready to learn how to change their perspectives (use any platform what are available¹¹)
- be active, creative and open-minded to help plan or design any scientific research out of compassion decrease or eliminate suffering
- help plan or design scientific research in which all steps and protocols are based on compassionate motivation (including: hypothesis, research methods, sampling methods, data management, working with people involved in the projects)
- be a good example for others with your deeds, words and thoughts to encourage them to overcome difficulties
- improve your communication skills to find the most compassionate way to communicate.

Conclusion

Wars, violence, starvation, migration, global warming or recently the issue of Covid-19 and its psychological, political and economic effects also provide us with an opportunity to understand how important it is to implement the precious Dharma teachings (i.e. The Four Immeasurables) actively in the ocean of samsaric-misery. It

¹¹ We all are aware of how the personal connection between teacher and disciple needed. However, we also could face separation due to lock-downs during a pandemic, so online teachings became a life-saving facility sometimes for people suffering from mental illnesses. Therefore, we should be open and flexible related to any platforms in the future as well if it supports others' well-being.

became clear how important it is to maintain the interaction with the society to stay on the middle path (*majjima paṭipadā*) for even Buddhist monks. Society needs more and more active novices, monks and nuns who do not only study suttas and abhidhamma and stay isolated in monastic environment but start to get involved in different social activities, humanitarian or environment-saving projects. Alternatively, they teach as many people as possible about the dukkha samudaya and niruddha, or at least some breath observation or simple samatha meditation, as they have gained clear insight about the Noble Truths on sufferings through the practice of samatha and vipassana.

Forms of *active compassion* are innumerable as they change along with the changing situations. It should always be a dynamic response to the individual's needs or society at any particular momentum. One key for the proper dynamic response in the term of science is to realise the differences between the current problems in Asia or the West. Different countries, regions, or communities have to emphasise sustainability, sustainable livelihood, maternal or child care, education, disability rehabilitation, how to treat addictions, how to prevent violence or abuse according to their needs. We all have to be very honest with others and ourselves to unfold the root cause of any of these issues mentioned above. There is no country without some or many of these burdens. We all have to take responsibility for every action we do for others or even if we miss doing something good for others. Therefore, it is necessary to consider how Buddhist communities could cooperate more effectively with science for social development in Asia and the West and apply *karuṇā* as a universal direction for peace, freedom, equanimity, and happiness.

It is much easier to live a harmonious and peaceful life if someone could abide in the state of compassion, or we might say someone could constantly maintain that compassionate quality of the mind. Therefore, be humanitarian and radiate compassion towards all. Do not do it only to exert the highest moral principle called *ahimsā*, but to prevent the unwholesome deeds and their results (i.e. suffering, sorrow) because *kamma*, is the only “properties” that we possess in our life.¹²

¹² As Ven. Sayadaw Upandit (1992) pointed in his book.

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