

Chapter 2

Compassion in the Middle-way

The meditation system based on the Middle-way that Kamalashila brought on his first trip to Tibet was actually based on the sutras of the Buddha. Kamalashila believed that there were three main paths to achieve Buddhahood. These three paths are: (1) developing compassion, (2) developing bodhichitta, and (3) developing prajna, which is the understanding of emptiness. Two of these, compassion and *bodhichitta*, are developed by the four *preliminary practices*. The third, prajna, is the actual meditation practice on emptiness. According to Kamalashila, these three paths cover all the aspects of practice needed to achieve Buddhahood.

The first aspect of meditation for Kamalashila was compassion. The Buddha describes in several sutras the necessity for the practice of compassion before any other practice. In one sutra it is said, "If one practices or if one tries to develop only one quality, then all the qualities of the Buddha would be in the palm of one's hand." What is this powerful quality? It is great compassion. All *bodhisattvas* must practice compassion. Another sutra says, "Great compassion necessarily comes before any meditation, and the quality of the meditation will depend entirely on whether there is compassion or not."

The Six Meditations on Compassion

How do we meditate on compassion? We meditate on all the beings who are suffering. Then, thinking how they are always suffering with many hardships and troubles, we develop great compassion. The way to meditate on compassion is to envisage the suffering of the beings of the six realms of samsara.⁵ First of all we think of the beings in the hell realms. We try to imagine them being constantly tortured by terrific heat or cold. When these tortures are inflicted on them, they feel them as the worst possible suffering. They are just like us; we do not enjoy suffering,

but they have to go through immense suffering. Thinking of their unbearable pain, one feels compassion.

The second meditation applies to the hungry ghosts. We think of them as being constantly tormented by unbearable thirst and hunger. In addition, they have to put up with many physical hardships. Thinking of all those beings who suffer in such terrible ways, we develop the feelings of compassion. This is called the meditation of compassion with respect to the suffering of hunger and thirst of the hungry ghosts.

The third form of the meditation applies to animals. We think of the animals and all the difficulties they have to put up with because they are quite ignorant. Because they lack intelligence, their desire, stupidity, and anger are very strong. This is what causes them to be angry at each other, attack each other, and eat each other, which is one of their basic sufferings. They also suffer when they are domesticated animals. Human beings beat them, tie them up, and make them work hard by carrying heavy loads, and they also kill them. When we look around us, we see how animals suffer just as much as we would if we had to go through that. Thinking of how much they have to endure, one feels compassion for them. This is developing compassion towards animals because of their suffering due to stupidity and ignorance.

The fourth way to meditate on compassion applies to human beings. We think of all the different kinds of problems and difficulties that human beings have to put up with; some are imprisoned or tortured or even killed. Although these people were not born in hell, their condition is very similar to that of beings in hell. With that thought in mind, we try to feel compassion for them. Then there are those who are very poor, lacking everything. Although these people were not born as hungry ghosts, they suffer in a similar way, being constantly hungry and thirsty. Thinking of this, we feel compassion towards people in that condition. Finally, there are people who are enslaved, or even if they are not actually slaves, do not have any freedom. Although these people were not born as animals, in fact, their condition is very similar to that of animals. Other people make them work and order them about. Thinking how painful this is, we feel compassion towards them. Finally we wish to be able to help all those different human beings and release them from their suffering and relieve them from that very painful condition.

The fifth way to meditate on compassion applies to the jealous gods. Although they have all the material pleasures that we could wish for, they are still quite unhappy because of what goes on inside their mind. Their jealousy is so strong that they keep envying what others have, and because of this, they never feel at peace or have real happiness. In the end, that feeling of jealousy is so strong that they end up fighting and quarreling violently. This, of course, generates much pain and suffering for them and others. Thinking of this, we feel compassion for them. This is compassion applied to the suffering of fighting and quarreling of the jealous gods.

Finally, the sixth meditation of compassion applies to the gods. Now in the short term it seems that beings in the god realms have the very best possible situation. They have all the pleasures that we could hope for, but unfortunately there is never any feeling of contentment. No matter how much we get, we always want more, so that the gods never actually feel peace of mind. Their minds are never peaceful or stable. They never feel that they have enough; they are unable to enjoy the happiness of peace. Finally, when they die, they have to go through the terrific anxiety and anguish of seeing where they are going to fall next, which is in a lower realm. So thinking of all the sufferings of the gods, we develop a feeling of compassion even for them.

Developing Compassion

It is very hard at first to develop the feeling of compassion for all beings in the abstract. Therefore we have to gradually develop this habit of thinking in terms of compassion for all beings. We have to start somewhere so we begin with showing compassion towards one person. To begin the meditation,⁶ we choose one person who is very close to us, someone we love very much, such as someone in our family or a very close friend. We already have the seed of compassion ready to grow in connection with this particular person so all we need to do is to cultivate compassion through meditation. We think how we would feel if this particular person that we love so much were put through various situations of extreme suffering. We think how much compassion we would have by how much we would want to help them and protect that person from that suffering. If we do this meditation often enough, then

we will come to a point when we will feel genuine compassion towards that particular person we have chosen as the object of meditation.

Then we gradually try to expand the scope of our compassion. Once we feel it for one person, we try to apply it to other people. At the beginning we may develop a strong feeling of compassion for our parents or a close friend or our children. Next apply this to someone else. For instance, if we choose another person at random and think that in the same way that we love our children now, we will feel that much love and compassion for others. We think this person who is not very important to us at the moment has been our child many, many times in previous lives. The love and compassion that we feel for our children in this lifetime, we should also be able to feel for that person who has had the very same relationship with us in a past lifetime. Or, if we feel very strong compassion for our parents, we can think that this other person has been as kind to us in the past, as our kind parents are to us in this life. Because they were our parents in a previous lifetime, there is no reason that we cannot feel the same compassion for that person as we feel now for our parents. In the same way, we may really feel strong compassion towards a close friend, feeling strongly that we are ready to do anything to help our friend be free from suffering. Then we can realize that this random person has probably been our friend hundreds or even thousands of times in previous lives. When we realize this, there is no reason to now treat that person any differently from the way we treat our present friend. So by carefully thinking in this way, we try to develop compassion also for that other person.

Once you have managed to cultivate this feeling of compassion with respect to one person, you try to include more and more people. First, we contemplate our compassion towards people whom we love, people in our family or who are in our circle of friends, until we achieve the same feeling of compassion for all of them. Once we have felt this, we try to apply this feeling of compassion towards people who are neither very close to us nor who really like us. Once we can manage this, we will eventually be able to enlarge our compassion towards people who we really dislike. We do this by realizing that in past lifetimes these people we can't stand have been our very dear parents or very close friends or beloved children; but due to our delusion, we think of them as our enemy. For us to consider them as our enemies is only a mistake on our part, because they have been so close to us and we have loved them so

much in the past. Thinking this, we try to apply the same feeling of compassion to these people also.

Finally we come to a point where we try to feel compassion also for all the people in the place where we live. Once we can feel this, we try to expand this towards the north, the east, the south, the west, finally to all directions, thinking that whoever is there should be the object of our compassion. We should feel compassion for everyone because everyone is basically the same, having the same goal, which is to be happy and not to suffer. Since everybody wants the same thing, that is why it would be totally unreasonable to think that we have to have compassion for some people and not for others. We must try to have our compassion go out to everyone without distinction. We must not feel that some people have a special link with us, but other people have never been connected to us, so it's all right to be indifferent towards them. In actual fact, everyone at one point or another has had a very close relationship with us. There isn't one being who hasn't been our parents or a very close friend or a child we loved dearly at one lifetime or another. When we realize this, we can feel that we have a debt of gratitude towards all beings. We have had this feeling of love for them before, and that this is also what we should feel now. It would be wrong to think that we can afford to just reject all those beings and not have any concern for what happens to them. That would be most unsuitable. Rather we should try to develop compassion towards all beings without any exception or limits.

The Meaning of Compassion

We saw previously in this chapter that there are three main aspects in the Middle-way system of meditation. The first is developing compassion. The Tibetan word for compassion is *nyingje*. The first syllable *nying* means "heart," but actually it refers to the mind. The word *nying* means heart, because it is not merely a way of thinking, but comes from within the deepest part of oneself, from one's heart.⁷ The second syllable of the word is *je*, which in this context means "protector." So the Tibetan word for compassion means that once we have managed to develop the feeling of true compassion, this attitude of compassion has the power to protect us from difficulties and suffering and it also protects others from their problems and pain. All of this protection from pain and suffering comes from a pure attitude of mind.

Compassion as a Help for One's Self

If we try to achieve well-being in a selfish way, we have to do it on our own. There won't be anyone else to help us along, since all we are looking for is personal profit and achievement. To achieve personal well-being can only be done at other people's expense. Since no one likes something done at their expense, others won't like what we're doing and will try to prevent us from achieving happiness. This creates a great many adverse conditions for us. On the other hand, if we are not working just for our own selfish happiness, but are concerned for others' well-being, then others will recognize this loving concern in us. They will be aware of the fact that we are really trying to express love. If we love them, then they will love us, too. This in turn will benefit us, because other people will recognize that we are trying to help them, and in return they will be prepared to help us. They will see that we are befriending them and they will in turn befriend us. So in the end we will have all the right conditions that we need to achieve our goal, and we will not meet with any obstacles or adverse conditions.

Let's take an example of this. If we don't feel any love for other people, then automatically they will be aware that we don't feel love for them. So that even when we try to talk to them, they will have a feeling that perhaps we are trying to deceive them. When it comes to action, they may feel that we are going to hurt them. They will have this impression that somehow we are going to create an obstacle to their well-being and happiness. So there will always be a feeling of fear and distrust. These people will never become our friends and will never become close, because they feel that there is no love there.

On the other hand, if we are always loving, others will immediately feel that love and will know that we love them. They will know that if the time comes when they need help, they will get help. They will know that they have nothing to fear, that we are not going to hurt or deceive them. This will generate a feeling of mutual friendliness, with a wish to help each other. There will never be a feeling that we might be an enemy, or that we might hurt them, but there will be an automatic feeling that things will go very well between us. Therefore, if we have a loving attitude, others will feel it and will return this love.

If we are able to love one person, that one person will be our friend. If we can love two people, these two people will be our friends. They will help us to achieve what we want to achieve and get rid of obstacles that will prevent us from achieving it. If we love three people or four or six or a hundred or a thousand or 100,000 people, all of these people will be our friends and will help us achieve what we want to achieve and help us get rid of hindrances to our goal. In fact the degree to which we are able to have compassion will determine the degree to which other people can help us and befriend us. So how much we feel love and compassion towards others will be how much benefit and help we will receive from them.

Compassion as a Help for Others

Besides being of benefit for oneself, compassion can truly protect and help other beings. We may not be able to always achieve great things to help other beings, but even if we can't, merely having compassion will already make a tremendous difference. As we just said, if someone has no compassion, no feeling of love for other beings, others will feel this instinctively. They know that this person might cause them trouble, that this person probably won't help them if they need help, creating a constant feeling of fear or apprehension. The mind can never be completely at rest and peaceful because there is this constant feeling of unease. We are preoccupied because we do not know what to expect from the other person.

But if someone has compassion, immediately people can sense that this person is ready to help them if the need arises. When someone meets a truly compassionate person, it is like finding *healing nectar*. Even when one hears the words of someone, who is really compassionate, one can feel that they come from the heart, and this is enough to make one feel very happy. It is enough to make one forget one's suffering, troubles, and problems. One may say this is only a temporary benefit, but whether a temporary or an ultimate benefit, people know there is someone who is thinking in terms of helping them. Just knowing this is like healing nectar. Compassion is the kind of feeling that can only bring something good. It will never generate something harmful.

Compassion is beneficial in the short term and it is also beneficial in the long term. Whether others or we have compassion, this can only be

the root of goodness and happiness. At the present, there might not be great benefits coming out of our compassion. Whether we can actually generate something great from our compassion or not, what matters is that the root is there. This root of compassion is bound to bring very good results, something positive. It cannot be the source of defeat or something negative. In the short term, somebody might be able to do something that appears beneficial, but if this action is not backed by compassion, it might very well turn into deception or something that is not pure or completely beneficial. Even if we do something very small and this act is accompanied by compassion from the beginning to the end of the act, there will never be any problems involved with this activity because the activity is completely pure, completely wholesome, all the way through. That is why compassion is good all around. It is good in the short term. It really helps everybody and makes things better for everybody. It is good in the long run too because it is the only thing that will always bring a positive result, never a negative or painful result.

Compassion as the Root of Enlightenment

Compassion has the power to protect oneself and other beings from suffering. The Buddha and all the great bodhisattvas have said again and again how important, how fundamental, this quality of compassion is. What they said is indeed true. Actually, whether they said it or not would not make any difference insofar as compassion itself is concerned. Compassion has this power of protection. Because the Buddha praised compassion does not make the qualities of compassion any greater nor if the Buddha had not praised compassion, his silence would not have made compassion lose its power. Compassion itself has a particular power. This is true even in non-spiritual terms: Compassion can help to protect us from suffering. But, of course, it is even more important in spiritual terms. All the *shravakas*, all the *arhats*, were able to achieve their realization because of the Buddha's teaching. It was through the activity of the Buddha that they were able to achieve realization. And where did the Buddha himself come from? Buddhahood is achieved through three kinds of qualities—compassion, prajna, and bodhichitta. Without these three there is no Buddhahood. However, the root of bodhichitta and prajna is compassion. Bodhichitta and prajna develop from a foundation

of compassion, so the root of all achievements in Dharma and the spiritual path is compassion.

Compassion is not necessarily very strong in our mind at first. Nor is it very stable at the beginning, so we have to practice in order to develop compassion. We know that without compassion there will be many problems, many difficulties for ourselves and for others. That is why we have to practice to develop our compassion more and more.

Developing Compassion

What is the main way to develop compassion? It's done in two steps. The first step is to try to see within ourselves a person we feel compassion for—our parents or our children or a friend. To find a single person we have compassion for is a very important thing. Once we have found that first little spark of compassion, we try to develop it more and more, so that it can become more and more beneficial for others and for ourselves. Once we develop our compassion, other people will feel this compassion in us. They will be able to taste that feeling of compassion in us and this will make them feel happy. In return, they will feel compassion towards us. Then there will be a sort of exchange of compassion going back and forth between us. This will develop the compassion greater and greater, and will become a greater source of happiness all the time. This is how we try to develop compassion, starting with one very small aspect of compassion that is already there in us.

We begin by feeling compassion for all the people we are very close to. Then we try to extend it to people we know in general but with whom we have no particularly close relationship, and then we extend it even to people we don't know. Finally, we generate compassion towards those we dislike or even people who are trying to harm us. Normally, we feel anger and aggression towards the person we consider our enemy, but we should realize that anger is really a very tricky thing because anger becomes so unbearable that we have to do something to hurt the other person. But if we follow through with our anger, it will not only be harmful for the other person, but it will also be for us as well because once we start hurting the other person, his anger is going to flare up like a fire. Once he is angry at us, whatever we do will be hindered by what he is doing to stop us and we won't be able to find the right conditions to do what we have to do. This in turn will make our anger flare up again.

From that time onwards, it will be a constant escalation of harm between the two of us, until in the end it will be totally out of control. It just goes on and on without limit. That is why we should try not to resort to anger.

What should we do in the face of anger? If somebody else hurts us, we should try to understand that the other person doesn't really know what he or she is doing. If we can generate this feeling of compassion when somebody else is hurting us, then automatically his anger will tend to decrease. If the next time around, we are able to feel compassionate, his anger will become even less than before. If we continue doing this, he may even come to like us in the end. So it is very beneficial if we can avoid being angry. Once we have managed to develop compassion with respect to those who dislike us, we will be able to extend that feeling of compassion to all beings wherever they are in the world.

We try to develop compassion more and more through repeated practice. At first we begin with one person and in the end we extend our compassion to millions and millions of beings. In fact we embrace everyone because every sentient being has the same desire to find happiness and be free from suffering. Our compassion should end up being towards all without any exception or any bias.

At first we should concentrate on great and obvious suffering. Then we apply ourselves to minor forms of suffering. Then we apply ourselves not just to suffering itself, but also to its cause, which is unvirtuous action. For instance, we begin to realize that even when people are not actually suffering at the moment, they are creating the cause of future suffering through doing unvirtuous actions. It is like watching someone approaching an abyss; even though the person hasn't fallen in it yet, we know it could occur at any time.

Then we can develop compassion for beings because they do not understand the truth of reality. Compassion will develop more and more and become finer and finer until it becomes compassion without any conceptual reference. So we try to develop compassion progressively, until it reaches that final stage.

To summarize, the main point in the system of Middle-way meditation is to meditate in order to understand the true nature of things and to develop the conviction that the nature of things is empty. But before we discuss the actual subject matter of the Middle-way, it is necessary to develop compassion in order to achieve this realization.

That is why compassion is the preliminary practice for the actual meditation of the Middle-way.

Questions

Question: Could you please explain karmic obscurations?

Rinpoche: As you know there are three main obscurations: the emotional obscurations, the cognitive obscurations, and the karmic obscurations. The karmic obscurations mean simply that when you act in a wrong way such as killing out of anger, stealing out of desire or whatever, you accumulate all sorts of negative karma. Once you have accumulated that much bad karma, you will be reborn in a lower realm. If you are born in the hell realms or as a hungry ghost or an animal, you won't have the opportunity to hear the Dharma and practice it.

For example, even if you were born as an animal, such as an ox, in Bodhgaya at the time of the Buddha, it wouldn't help you very much because you couldn't really feel any faith towards the Buddha or make use of his teachings. In this sense, these beings are obscured by their own karma. This is what stops them from being able to practice. On the other hand, somebody who hasn't accumulated that much negative karma can be reborn as a human being and as such will have the opportunity to practice the Dharma.

Question: Couldn't the nirmanakaya manifest as an ox?

Rinpoche: Of course, there are forms of the emanation of the Buddha that can manifest as animals, but we were speaking of what is called the supreme nirmanakaya, which we usually call the historical Buddha. An ox or any other animal couldn't benefit from the presence of the historical Buddha. This isn't the fault of the nirmanakaya. It is the fault of the being. There is a Tibetan saying that if you have a cave that is facing north, that cave will never receive any sunshine inside. This condition isn't because the sun isn't shining; it is just that the cave is facing north, so it just doesn't get any sunlight. In the same way, even though the supreme nirmanakaya may be there and teaching and benefiting all beings without any partiality, if the beings are not able to be receptive to the teachings, they are not able to benefit from them.

Question: If you develop compassion with respect to other beings, you have to relate to them in quite a close way. Isn't this going to create

attachment? Isn't it better to just be on your own and do your practice and try to develop compassion in that way?

Rinpoche: We have to distinguish between what is love and what is attachment. These two questions might look quite similar, but they are in fact very different in their essence. When there is real love, real loving concern, or real loving kindness, there is a very pure motivation that leads to very pure action. This stems from a wish to really help the other person with his problems and suffering, and a genuine wish to help him or her to find happiness and well-being. Attachment may look very similar to love, but behind it there is always an expectation of some form of reward or profit for oneself. Because of this expectation, it isn't a very positive quality. Here we are speaking of trying to develop real loving kindness, real love, not attachment. If we can develop that aspect, it will be beneficial all the way through. This can inspire us to practice the Dharma for the sake of all other beings. If we don't try to develop this, then there is always the risk of falling into the *hinayana* style of practice.

Question: Is there a particular meditation on a particular deity that is particularly beneficial in understanding the Middle-way?

Rinpoche: There are lots of different meditations, but in fact they all have the same purpose. There are meditations on some deities in order to increase our capacity to understand emptiness, compassion, or bodhichitta. But basically because they all stem from these same basic points, when we begin to meditate, it doesn't really matter on which deity we meditate because they all lead to the same thing.

Question: Isn't there a problem with being too compassionate?

Rinpoche: When we try to practice compassion, it doesn't immediately have to be the ultimate form of compassion. It has to be a gradual practice. Sometimes we might feel spontaneously like doing something, but we have to try to see the implications of what we are doing. Would it really benefit others in the long term, because what we think might help right away might not help later on. We might not be able to keep it up. Maybe difficulties we have not foreseen might show up because we didn't think enough. So we have to be careful, being compassionate according to our own capabilities and our own understanding. There is a Tibetan proverb that says, "When somebody is very new in the practice of compassion, he will give butter to a dog." On the other hand when someone is a very seasoned meditator, he or she might make the mistake of turning into very tough leather. So we can make mistakes in both

ways, either because we're too new and overdo it, or we might have practiced a lot, so we become a lot harder than when we started. So there are two kinds of mistakes that can be made in relation to compassion.

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