Compassion and the Ethics of Violence

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Definitions

Buddhaghosa, the great Theravāda commentator, defined compassion in a way that might be acceptable to all Buddhists: "When others suffer it makes the heart of good people tremble (*kampa*), thus it is *karuṇā*; it demolishes others' suffering, attacks and banishes it, thus it is *karuṇā*; or it is dispersed over the suffering, is spread out through pervasion, thus it is *karuṇā*" (Jenkins 1999, 31; Warren 1950, 263; cf. Ñāṇamoli 1956, 343). Compassion is part of a complex of interrelated concepts that express empathetic attitudes. Many terms indicating helpfulness, kindness, affection, caring, and empathy are employed to enrich its meaning. Sometimes it is described with negative terms, such as *ahiṃsā*, non-harm, or *akrodha*, the absence of anger, but should not be understood as purely negative. The language of erotic attachment, so important to Hindu *bhakti* traditions, is avoided. However, the most common metaphor is parental affection. This fundamental human attachment, generally seen as a psychological obstacle, is idealized when it is expanded to include all sentient beings. The meditation practices for generating compassion often begin with self-cherishing, perhaps the most basic combination of attachment and ignorance – i.e., passion and self-conception. Self-cherishing is expanded to incorporate ever greater areas, from villages to nations, or ever more difficult types of relationships, from loved ones to enemies. In the formula of the four "immeasurables," friendliness, compassion, and sympathetic joy are amplified to immeasurability, and balanced by the fourth, equanimity, which eliminates discriminating attachment. The passions and attachments regarded as basic problems, rather than simply being extinguished, as in some forms of asceticism, or redirected to a perfect object, as in Hindu devotion, are transformed through expansion into universal and impartial qualities. Compassion practices suggest an evolution or transformation of *tṛṣṇā*, the fundamental "thirst" for life that

drives the wheel of *saṃsāra*, into the compassion that ultimately turns the wheel of Dharma (Jenkins 1999).

Compassion and the Rhetoric of Superiority

Both Mahāyāna and mainstream Buddhism agree that a buddha's compassion is "great" when compared with ordinary compassion. For mainstream Buddhism, this distinguishes the Buddha as a unique being worthy of extraordinary reverence. Meditation on the qualities of the Buddha, including great compassion, was a general practice. But Mahāyānists take buddhahood as a general goal. What was a supererogatory ethic became one of imitation. Language that hyperbolically expressed the superiority of the Buddha's compassion served to express the Mahāyāna's superiority. Buddhists who did not aspire to great compassion were denigrated as inferior, "*hīna*." However, in the early canon and Abhidharma schools, the valorization of compassion for all sentient beings, often with identical phrasing to the Mahāyāna, is pervasive. Here, *mettā*, "lovingkindness," and *anukampā*, empathy, are more common terms than *karuṇā*. *Anukampā* should inform every relationship, from employer and employee to ruler and subject. *Metta-citta*, a "loving mind" for all sentient beings, may be a model for the Mahāyāna's *bodhicitta*. *Metta-citta* is idealized as the essential quality for both monastics and laity. It motivates every aspect of practice, from meditation to philanthropy. Modern characterizations of mainstream Buddhists as concerned only with individual liberation are merely appropriations of the Mahāyāna rhetoric of superiority.

There is one salient difference in the Mahāyāna's conception, a massive relative preponderance of exhortations to social action (Jenkins 2003). Mainstream sources emphasize making merit by giving to monks (Aronson 1980, 37). These are the richest "fields" of merit, and generosity towards them produces the most merit. This instinct does not disappear in Mahāyāna, but here the poor, homeless, disabled, sick, and defenseless are proclaimed as worthy a merit field as the buddhas. Sentient beings in general are regarded as merit fields through which an aspirant attains the massive amounts of merit necessary for buddhahood. Rather than the ideal practitioner being the optimal recipient of generosity, the bodhisattva is conceived as the perfect source of generosity. Mahāyāna *sūtras* clearly differentiated and prioritized material and spiritual giving. The needy should be supplied with basic material needs before they are offered the Dharma. These beliefs, understood through narrative more than philosophical argumentation, were a massive stimulus to charitable works throughout Asia, including hospitals, famine relief, and all kinds of public works, such as road and bridge building (Jenkins 2003).

The Benefit of Self and Other

Stories of incredible generosity, such as the Buddha giving his life for a hungry tigress, resonate strongly with Christian sacrificial concepts. However, Buddhists of all traditions recognized a reciprocal interrelation between altruism and self-benefit. The trope

svaparārtha, "the benefit of self and other," broadly pervades Buddhist texts. Mahāyāna and mainstream sources elucidate *svaparārtha* with a formula of four types of persons (Jenkins 1999, 55–62). First are those interested only in self-benefit. Second are those uninterested in benefiting anyone. Third are those interested only in benefiting others. This seems to be the Buddhist ideal; however, this too is rejected. The ideal is interest in benefiting both oneself and others. One who fails to benefit herself is less capable of benefiting others. Someone who does not love herself cannot even begin the meditations for generating love. Compassion for all includes oneself. When the Buddha enters the jungle to sacrifice his life to a tigress, he declares that this is a vast opportunity, and the story ends by describing his dramatic acceleration towards buddhahood. Such behavior should be understood from a multiple life perspective rather than as self-termination. Pursuit of one's highest empowerment is motivated by the intention to benefit others, and benefiting others leads to one's highest empowerment. As Śāntideva famously put it:

> Upon afflicting oneself for the sake of others, one has success in everything. The desire for self-aggrandizement leads to a miserable state of existence, low status, and stupidity. By transferring that same desire to someone else, one attains a fortunate state of existence, respect, and wisdom. . . . All those who are unhappy in the world are so as a result of their desire for their own happiness. All those who are happy in the world are so as a result of their desire for the happiness of others.
>
> (Wallace and Wallace 1997, 105–6)

This circularity is expressed in the bodhisattva vow, sometimes misunderstood as a self-abnegating renunciation of enlightenment. A bodhisattva vows to attain the supreme self-benefit, buddhahood, for the sake of benefiting others. At the same time, actions that benefit others generate the merit required to achieve that supreme self-benefit. Neither self-interested nor self-abnegating altruism fit as definitions here. If self-interested pursuit of merit becomes the motivation, then no merit is attained. The circularity here is similar to the capitalist conception that individualistic pursuit of self-interest ultimately benefits all; however, the energy in this circuit runs in the opposite direction. Instead, pursuit of others' interests ultimately benefits the individual and the general pursuit of self-interest leads to common misery. To relieve both our own suffering and that of others, we should dedicate ourselves to others (Wallace and Wallace 1997, 106).

Compassion benefits the compassionate. Although compassion that actually benefits others generates more merit, even compassion that benefits no one else generates merit for those who have it. Similarly, anger is damaging to the angry, whether others are harmed by it or not. Lists of the benefits of compassion cover everything from prosperity to a good night's sleep. The *Mettā Sutta*, which advocates compassion for all creatures as if they were your children, is recited today by Theravādins to ward off snakebites. Compassion can even make one bulletproof. There are tales of arrows bouncing off their compassionate target, only to strike home when the victim became enraged, or of kings who could not be struck by an arrow until the precise moment their compassion lapsed. This explains why Mahāyāna scriptures exhort bodhisattvas to take up the "armor" of compassion.

Compassion and Ontology

Buddhist deconstructions of the self raise doubts about the status of the object of compassion. Abhidharma thinkers recognized this problem, but quickly dismissed it. They deconstructed the naïvely conceived self, but affirmed a causal continuity of incessantly self-renewing, ephemeral, and microscopic elements referred to as *dharmas*. The strength of that karmic continuity, *santana*, is the basic challenge of the Buddhist path and the basis for conventional references to persons. They do not, however, resort to ideas of interconnection or interdependence. Compassion is conventional; the *dharmas* revealed as ultimate truth are not an adequate object of compassion (Jenkins 1999, 165–83, 247).

The standpoint of emptiness makes this problem more challenging, since even the evanescent elements of the psychophysical continuum dissolve under analysis. This problem is well recognized in Mahāyāna sources. The *Perfection of Wisdom Sūtras* repeatedly declare that the single most difficult thing for bodhisattvas is that they vow to save beings, even though those beings do not ultimately exist (Jenkins 1999, 165; Conze 1973, 259). In the Madhyamaka school, this problem takes its strongest form. Whereas Abhidharma thinkers found referents for language in the basic components of reality, for the Madhyamaka the process of deconstructing referents for language is bottomless. The instinct to pursue ultimate referents for language, and thus validate "reifying thought," is the fundamental problem. Linguistic designations, such as self or *dharma*, reduce their referents to a simple static objectivity that obtains only in language itself. We think in linguistic concepts and we see as we think. Thus we are bound to the illusion that reality is composed of a field of objective phenomena that can be labeled. The Madhyamaka's insistence that all things dissolve under analysis means that the objective structures of language do not ultimately have referents. Objects are a mode of thinking, not the way things are. Simple static objectivity itself is a human fantasy, a mere mental construction. This is the *sūtra*'s meaning in saying that, ultimately, no sentient beings exist. This is nihilism only if we insist that, if reality does not exist according to linguistic rules, it must not exist at all, a remarkably anthropocentric conceit. The fact that reality is ultimately empty of objective entities does not mean that the world as such does not exist, nor does it negate the value of conventional language. Although Buddhist thinkers debunk various levels of objectivity, they regard objective language as necessary and useful. Though they may be ultimately deconstructed, the objects of compassion are conventionally meaningful. The continued appearance of sentient beings and other objects for an enlightened person is often compared to the continued appearance of an illusion to the magician who produces it. The appearance remains, but without being mistaken for something objective.

The Western study of Buddhist ethics has focused on how selflessness, emptiness, interconnection, or a matrix of interrelativity serve as more compelling ontological perspectives for compassion. However, dependent origination is not used as a basis for personal interrelation, and is only problematically interpreted as interconnection. Indian Buddhist texts do not make ethical arguments based on a matrix of interrelativity or webs of interrelations, and yet this view is even projected on the Madhyamaka.

Compassion is the basis of the aspiration to realize higher truths, and so must precede them and be strong enough from the start to be the foundation of the path. Compassion is more a cause of enlightenment than its result. The question becomes how compassion can continue, or be developed, in the light of those realizations. It was recognized that only an elect few understood such ideas. A Buddhist ethics based on elite philosophical perspectives would be challenged to motivate cultures and polities. Central concepts, such as the benefit of self and other, far from dissolving the distinction between self and other, take that distinction as a basic predicate for ethical thought. A related trope, the sameness of self and other, refers not to ontological sameness but to psychological sameness – i.e., that all beings dread suffering. Suffering is the fundamental presumption of Buddhism, and it is commonly assumed that the key to generating compassion is recognizing that all beings dread it just as we do.

The Western sense of moral selflessness is often conflated with the Buddhist sense of ontological selflessness, but the meanings are completely different and are not necessarily correlated. One cannot attain selflessness or become selfless as often stated; selflessness is simply the way things are. From a Mahāyāna perspective, the *arhats*, who are identified with realizing selflessness (and often emptiness), are specifically faulted for their lack of compassion. As noted below, their failure in regard to compassion is often attributed to a premature realization of emptiness.

A possible exception is found in a touchstone for Western readings of Buddhist ethics, Śāntideva's *Bodhicaryāvatāra*. The eighth chapter, much of which is of uncertain origin (Ishida 2010), offers a meditation for generating compassion based on abhidharmic contemplation of sufferings as ownerless phenomena. Because there is no self, no sufferings have an owner. So bias towards one's own suffering makes no sense, and all suffering should be treated equally. Interestingly, Śāntideva does not apply emptiness analysis by taking the next step and deconstructing the ownerless sufferings as nonexistent. As a meditation practice, the Mahāyānist utilizes an abhidharmic perspective of ownerless phenomena in a way that Abhidharmists had ruled out. It is a mistake to read this as a typical Buddhist argument. In contrast, Buddhaghosa's elaboration of compassion meditation never refers to deconstructive perspectives until he uses them (after trying several other things first) as an antidote to overcome anger that arises when attempting to generate compassion for an enemy. The point here, though, is not to advocate interconnection, but to show that attitudes such as anger make no sense once they are seen to have no meaningful object. He playfully asks: are we angry with the hairs, nails, or perhaps the urine? (Ñāṇamoli 1956, 331–2; Warren 1950, 253–4; Jenkins 1999, 169). The same argument would also eliminate an object for compassion, and Abhidharma sources generally agree that impersonal *dharmas* cannot function as the object of compassion (Jenkins 1999, 165–83). Compassion requires a conventional perspective. Śāntideva's argument here is the subject of rich debate, with Gómez, Williams, and Siderits concluding for different reasons that it is unsound (Gómez 1973, 365; Williams 1998; Siderits 2007, 83). No doubt this is why Buddhists generally do not use it. It may be important to recognize the context as a chapter on meditation practices, in which Buddhists often creatively visualize things that are not true for a specific purpose.

In the next chapter on wisdom, the commentator, Prajñākaramati, offers a rich discussion of the question for whom there can be compassion, if sentient beings do not exist (Gómez 1973, 363–6; Jenkins 1999, 219–31). To explain Śāntideva's answer that compassion is for illusory beings, he resorts to the common theme of the three objects, *ālambana*, of compassion. Each object of compassion is correlated with a different stage of the bodhisattva path. At the outset of the path, compassion is for undeconstructed sentient beings. Compassion is the means, *sādhana*, of realizing ultimate truth and precedes the realizations that negate sentient beings. Compassion is not a response to selflessness; it is a prerequisite for acquiring such wisdom. Compassion must be compelling without being based on the deconstruction of the self. In his own treatment, Candrakīrti praises this type of compassion most highly of all as the basis for the entire Buddhist path (Jenkins 1999, 210).

The second basis, *dharma-ālambana*, deconstructs beings into streaming masses of components. This is correlated with advanced bodhisattvas at stages prior to the realization of emptiness and is the perspective used in Śāntideva's meditation. Prajñākaramati does not say that this is a vision that supports compassion but states, as in Abhidharma, that the components serve as a basis for the conventional designation of a self that functions as the object of compassion.

The last, *nirālambana*, or no basis, is correlated with the full realization of emptiness. This does not mean compassion for a void; each perspective is associated with the appearance of sentient beings. In this case, sentient beings are perceived as empty of inherent existence. As Candrakīrti put it elsewhere, their appearance is like a reflection of the moon on shimmering water (Jenkins 1999, 209–15). Conventional appearances do not disappear and conventional designations are accepted for practical purposes. This perspective is correlated only with the highest-level bodhisattvas. For many *sūtras*, the realization of emptiness is connected to *nirvāṇa* and is thus a dangerous moment for compassion. It is precisely the mistake of *arhats* to terminate the path to full buddhahood by realizing emptiness. The *sūtras* are pervaded with exhortations not to realize emptiness prematurely. According to the *Daśabhūmika Sūtra*, which laid out stages of the bodhisattva path, at the moment of realizing emptiness, were it not for the exhortations of the buddhas and the power of former vows, all activity for sentient beings would cease (ibid., 142). There is no automatic relationship between emptiness and compassion here. Compassion, through the power of the vow and the intercession of the buddhas, assures that the bodhisattva continues on to attain all the empowerments and omniscience of a buddha. Prajñākaramati never resorts to the idea that emptiness or non-self actually provides a rationale for compassion, particularly not through a conventional perspective of interconnection, interdependence, or interrelation (ibid., 225). If this were the connection, it would present itself broadly and explicitly in the literature. However, Mahāyāna and Abhidharma sources agree that higher philosophical perspectives contribute to compassion by revealing more subtle types of suffering, providing the wisdom necessary to relieve suffering, and enabling the ability to remain in *saṃsāra*. Concepts such as the universal desire to avoid suffering, *svaparārtha*, and merit-making, richly elaborated in narrative literature, are the primary bases of Buddhist ethics.

The Ethics of Violence

There is increasing awareness of a dissonance between historical practices and perceived Buddhist values. Buddhist polities generally had horrific penal codes that included capital punishment, and Buddhist kings went to war ostensibly for the sake of the Dharma with relics in their scepters and carrying buddha images into battle. In many cases, monks themselves were warriors and even fought with other monasteries. To some degree this merely shows that Buddhist cultures are as human as any other, none of whom have lived up to their religious ideals. However, there is also a sense in which the historical record is at odds only with Western fantasies of Buddhist pacifism. The power of those fantasies has obscured a far more nuanced ethics of violence than has yet been explicated.

In the *Cūḷasaccaka Sutta*, we find the Buddha making an argument based on the fact that kings have the right and are worthy to execute criminals. When his non-Buddhist interlocutor refuses to concede this, the Buddha's bodyguard threatens to kill him by smashing his head with his hand-weapon, a *vajra*. The debater is described as visibly terrified (Ñāṇamoli and Bodhi 1995, 322–31). This armed bodyguard, Vajrapāṇi, is understood in both mainstream and Mahāyāna scriptures to follow the Buddha everywhere and often appears in artwork. He is identified with the Vedic deity Indra, who represents the ideal king and models royal behavior towards the Buddha. Vajrapāṇi came to be increasingly important throughout Buddhist history, and his sidearm became, in addition to body armor, the most important symbol of the power of compassion. Other protector deities in Abhidharma traditions smash mountains down on the enemies of Buddhism or wipe out entire armies. In *Jātaka* tales, the most important source for Buddhist ethics, the Buddha is portrayed in past lives as a minister who cleverly lures a siege into a crocodile moat, a weapons-master, a warhorse, a battle elephant's mahout, etc. Killing evil ascetics, vicious animals, and unjust kings is praised. In a Mahāyāna *Jātaka*, the Buddha is born as Indra himself and leads a bloody battle against demonic beings, once again modeling ideal kingship (Jenkins 2011). In the narrative literature, Śākyamuni himself occasionally manifests fire *samādhis* to drive away unwanted peoples or subdue demonic beings.

These examples do not contradict the general Buddhist concern to avoid harm. But, when read together with passages that seem to suggest unqualified pacifism, they reveal a more complex picture. The Buddha notably denied that warriors who die in battle automatically go to heaven. Instead, warriors with the intention to kill will go to hell. But, the intentions are the key here. Military heroes are glamorized in narrative literature, but only in a few cases do they deliberately set out with the intention to kill (Jenkins 2011). Accounts of the Buddha's past lives as a war hero glorify winning through trickery or diplomacy rather than violence, capturing the enemy alive, the decent treatment of abusive captives, and avoidance of unnecessary killing. The importance of intention can lead to the common misinterpretation that karma is merely based on intention. If this were true, then the mere intention to kill would suffice for the karma of murder. However, the analysis of killing generally presents the belief that killing must include an actual death; even a failed attempt to kill does not produce the karma of killing. On the other hand, unintentionally killing or, in

Mahāyāna contexts, killing with a compassionate intention does not produce the karma of killing (ibid.).

In the famous case of King Duṭṭhagāmaṇi from the Theravādin epics, a gathering of saints relieved the king of his remorse for killing many thousands in his war to spread the Dharma. They tell him he has actually killed only one and a half persons, the rest are no more than animals. The one and a half are counted according to their commitment to Buddhism. This is an unusual example, but it shows that the moral status of the victim is as crucial as the intentions of the killer. Killing a saint is a far different matter from killing an enemy of Buddhism or executing a murderer. The "quasi-canonical" *Milindapañha* advocates torture, death, and dismemberment as punishments for criminals, arguing that these are the result of the victims' karma (Rhys Davids 1963, 254–7; Jenkins 2011). However, Theravādin tradition does not offer the logic of compassionate killing found in the Mahāyāna. Even in the case of a king who apparently relishes executing a criminal, there must be some subtle level of revulsion and therefore negative karma (Gethin 2004).

Mahāyāna sources emphasize that compassionate killing, including warfare and animal euthanasia, can produce great merit. The touchstone for this idea, known throughout contemporary Mahāyāna cultures and cited by many great classical thinkers, is the *Upāyakauśalya Sūtra's* tale of the Buddha's past life as the ship captain "Greatly Compassionate." Captain Compassionate stabbed to death a thief who intended to murder his passengers. Everyone, including the thief, benefited. Captain Compassionate saved the thief from suffering in the hell realms for murder. He saved the passengers from either angrily killing in self-defense or suffering murder. Because of his compassionate intentions, he himself made great merit and enormous progress towards buddhahood. The story is double edged in employing compassionate murder to protect someone from the karma of murder. This logic validated everything from mercy sex to prevent a suicide to unseating vicious rulers. The analogy of amputation by a physician showed that sometimes violently inflicting pain may bring benefit. An antecedent is found in the early canon, where the Buddha's use of harsh speech, technically a form of violence, is compared to clearing a choking child's throat, even if it draws blood (Jenkins 2011).

The broadly cited *Satyakaparivarta Sūtra* advises a fierce king on compassionate violence (Zimmerman 2000). He may imprison and torture criminals, but he should not maim or execute them. He may go to war to protect his family and his people. But he should systematically attempt to avoid war by first using bribes, diplomacy, and intimidation. He must carefully consider how his policies are responsible for the arising of enemies. A king is protected by his benevolent cultivation of the well-being of his subjects, vassals, and neighbors. If they are happy and secure then, instead of becoming enemies, they will be allies when enemies do arise. A benevolent king will enrich his treasury through gifts and the general prosperity of his realm, while a rapacious king will engender a culture of tax evasion and become poor. A king should go to war with three intentions: to care for life, to win, and to capture the enemy alive. Even if he kills the enemy, as long as he avoids the destruction of life, infrastructure, and nature, he will be blameless and produce great merit. The concern to care for life involves the well-being of all innocents, including animals and the spirits that dwell in trees and water. Burning homes or cities, destroying reservoirs or orchards, confiscating the

harvest – i.e., harming infrastructure or the environment – is forbidden. There is no sense that the king, his warriors, or law-enforcement officials must be bodhisattvas, quite the opposite (Jenkins 2010).

In general, compassionate killing is a supererogatory ethic, not one of imitation. It is double edged in opening the possibility for murder precisely to prevent its horrific karmic outcome. The everyday examples also suggest something commonsensical about compassionate violence. They draw on issues and choices that doctors, leaders, parents, or pilots may face in everyday life and derive their force from the fact that they appeal to natural human responses to protect children and companions. In regard to power politics, compassion serves the purposes of domination, pacification, national security, and enrichment. Compassionate policy, rather than being an awkward extension of ascetic idealism into practical political realities, was understood to support the acquisition and retention of power.

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