

Having looked, in previous weeks, at the qualities of compassion (*karunā*) and sympathetic joy (*muditā*), this week we change our emphasis a little and consider how our culture of individualism can hamper our development of such qualities. We also take a brief look at how Buddhist traditions place a very high score on compassion.

## **1. The relationship between individualism and compassion**

It could be argued that the prevalent theme of our society is individualism (you might ask yourself to what extent you agree or disagree with this statement). We can certainly say that Western society in the 21<sup>st</sup> century has hugely different values from those of the Buddha's time and place. Whilst there are countless benefits of modern technology, medicine, education and democracy, there is also a consensual assumption that the 'rights of the individual' are sacrosanct. This sounds reasonable in its own terms, but to what extent does this focus detract from our ability and willingness to act in harmony with our fellow human beings or, for that matter, with the planet that is our only home?

It's important to understand that what Buddhism has to offer the world is radically different from this 'common discourse'. In terms of the focus of this course, the practice of compassion can be seen as radical because it goes beyond, and weakens the hold of, the 'self-clinging' that we mentioned last week, and which essentially provides the root of our culture of individualism. This radical difference works on our internal view of ourselves, but it's also a model for a radically different way for members of society to interact. Maybe the individual doesn't necessarily come first – maybe, through the exercise of compassion, we can recognise that we have many opportunities to change the lives of people around us for the better – and gain great personal benefit in so doing. Maybe we can even argue that our **responsibilities**, in this respect, are more important than what we regard as our **rights**. Discuss!

## **2. How individualism manifests in current affairs**

At any time in our current era it should be possible to test the arguments made above in the context of current affairs. We can look at our own experiences where we live or work, or news stories on a local, national or international level. In the discussions that may then follow, do we see a tension between the forces of individualism on the one hand, and the 'common good' on the other? Is there a place for the exercise of compassion in these dynamics?

For example, at the time of writing (late 2021), prices of groceries, fuel, travel and other commodities and services are rising sharply in the developed world, and politicians (we can assume) ponder how these pressures will be viewed by their electorates. Some

people may have a view that they have a right to access these aspects of 'lifestyle' at the lowest possible prices – but is that the whole story?

The coronavirus pandemic is still very much with us (maybe it will be history by the time you read this!). Society tries to grapple with the seemingly impossible balance of public health and economic wellbeing – not to put things in too crude a light. Within this complex debate we hear the arguments that we should be able, as individuals, to go where we like, when we like – and also to choose whether or not to be vaccinated against the virus. Can we see the same tension, between individualism and social responsibility, in this discourse?

Then we could add another crisis that probably won't be going away any time soon – that of climate change and environmental damage. Of course the issues here are painfully difficult, but can you see the influence of individualism at work? Can you imagine what a more compassionate response would look like?

### 3. The transcendental quality of compassion

In the legacy of Buddhist scriptures we can see more than one way in which the importance of compassion is strongly emphasized. In early Buddhist writings (usually referred to as *suttas*) compassion can be seen in the personal, practical examples of the Buddha and his disciples. We're told, in some of the earliest scriptures, that the Buddha urged his first five followers to go forth and teach out of *anukampā* for the world. *Anukampā* is another translation for compassion, derived from 'shaking with' or 'trembling with'. We can understand this as, when the Buddha truly comprehended the suffering of living beings, such was the depth of his response that he physically shook or trembled.

Still in those early writings, the Buddha is recorded to have said: 'Anyone speaking truly of me would say, "A being not liable to intellectual confusion has arisen in the world... out of *anukampā* for the world"'. It is also said that, out of *anukampā* for his disciples, he put before them the aim of becoming heirs of the Dharma, not heirs of the material things of the world. Again, in pointing out to them empty places in which to meditate, he encouraged them, on a number of recorded occasions, with the words: 'All that teachers can do out of *anukampā* for their disciples, that I have done for you; meditate, monks'.

In later approaches to interpreting the Buddha's teaching, the *Mahāyāna* school (which is usually translated as the 'Great Vehicle', reflecting its vast mythological scope) contains very large numbers of writings (*sutras*) that regard compassion as not just practical, but transcendental, inasmuch as it is indistinguishable from wisdom. The *Mahāyāna*, always rich in symbolism to help communicate its message, brings us the vision of the *bodhisattva* – a mythic being who has gained Awakening, but chooses to employ it for the relief of the suffering of all beings. There are many such *bodhisattvas* introduced by the *Mahāyāna*, including Avalokiteśvara, whom we met in week 1. They are united in their common vow that they will use all means at their disposal in the effort to overcome suffering – a truly 'cosmic' undertaking.