

# Book Review



## **The Path of Compassion: Writings on Socially Engaged Buddhism (Revised Second Edition)**

Edited by Fred Eppsteiner, Parallax Press, 1988.

Reviewed by Edward R. Canda, Ph.D.

*The Path of Compassion* is a powerful call to join insight and compassion with action. The book was developed by the Buddhist Peace Fellowship in Berkeley, California. According to the organization's statement of purpose, it was founded in 1978 in order to promote "peace and protection for all beings." "Compassion" and "saving all beings" are common refrains in Buddhism. But a common criticism of Buddhism throughout history has been the tendency of some practitioners to become "other worldly" or reclusive because of a preoccupation with seeking personal enlightenment. In such a case, the vow to save all beings becomes a platitude, while social injustice and personal suffering go unattended. *The Path of Compassion* is a collection of essays by contemporary Buddhist monks, nuns, and lay people from Theravada, Mahayana and Vajrayana traditions, both East and West. The essays suggest that a Buddhist movement is growing to become more actively engaged in action for social service and social justice.

All of the essays emphasize that compassion is a natural expression of a clear mind. Nelson Foster recounts the 89th case of the Blue Cliff Record: to paraphrase, Ugan asked Dogo, "How does the Bodhisattva of Compassion, Kanzeon (Kwan Seum Bosal, Korean), use the thousand hands and eyes?" Dogo's answer: "It is like someone asleep adjusting the pillow in the middle of the night." Compassion is the natural and reflexive response arising from clear mind.

But this can be tricky. Jack Kornfield cautions us to see through the masquerade of egoistic feelings: love is not attachment; compassion is not pity; equanimity is not indifference. Joanna Macy, drawing on her study of Theravada social action, explains key

interrelated terms. "Metta" means having loving kindness for all beings. "Karuna" means compassionate joining in the suffering of others. "Muditha" means having joy and creative involvement with others. "Upekkha" means a stance of equanimity from awareness of one's interdependence with all else. These qualities must all be cultivated together.

As the Dalai Lama points out, truly compassionate service is not just a matter of concepts. It is a fruit of mindfulness and self-awareness. Mind must be clear in even the harshest of circumstances for compassion to manifest. The Dalai Lama speaks from the perspective of an exiled religious leader of oppressed and colonized Tibetan people. Similarly, Maha Ghosananda emerged from the "killing fields" of genocide in Cambodia to pray, "The suffering of Cambodia has been deep. From this suffering comes great compassion. Great compassion makes a peaceful heart." He prays that the effects of the peaceful heart continue out to make peace in the family, community, nation and world.

The Vietnamese teacher, Thich Nhat Hanh writes in his poem, "Please Call Me By My True Names," that he is mayfly, bird, frog, starving Ugandan child, raped refugee girl, pirate who commits atrocity, and politburo member; he wants to hear all his laughs and cries at once. He writes, "Please call me by my true names, so I can wake up, and so the door of my heart can be left open, the door of compassion."

Compassion leads one to attend to the personal suffering of oneself and others. The Vietnamese nun, Cao Ngoc Phuong, recalls her sister nun's act of self-immolation to protest the war in Vietnam. Judith Ragir points out that taking care of oneself is also compassion. She recounts how Buddhist practice gave her "the staff with which to walk through this experience" of having been raped.

Compassion also leads one to attend to societal problems and injustice. Robert Thurman summarizes how Buddhist principles have offered guidance for governing society. For example, the Indian emperor Asoka, in the third century BCE, issued edicts that advocated for cultivation of morality, nonviolence toward all sentient beings, religious pluralism, institution of social welfare activities, and delegation of government authority. Sulak Sivaraksa links traditional Buddhist precepts to the contemporary ideal of "small is beautiful," proposed by the Buddhist economist E. F. Schumaker. Sivaraksa says, "World dukkha (suffering) is too immense for any country, people, or religion to solve. We can only save ourselves when all humanity recognizes that every problem on earth is our own personal problem and our own personal responsibility."

I believe this is an important book, especially for American Buddhists, because it sounds a clarion call for compassionate action while American Buddhism is still in a formative state. It is a reminder to avoid the pitfalls of subtle egotism or escapism. Compassionate service is itself practice of the dharma. It is not a mere add-on to meditation, chanting, or kong-an practice. Right now, at this moment, compassion is a matter of life and death for countless beings!

The famous Korean monk Wonhyo said in the seventh century that the individual's predicament of suffering is like a person being trapped in a burning house with little time to escape. So Wonhyo exclaimed about finding a way out, "Isn't it urgent?! Isn't it urgent?!" Our contemporary planetary situation is one in which we are all literally trapped in a world burning with personal and societal violence, exploitation of poor by rich and destruction of the ecosystem. The fire is all around if we have eyes to see. So if someone says, "Why should Buddhism be socially engaged, isn't that just a distraction?," just point anywhere and say, "Isn't it urgent?!" And ask the person to read this book. ☸