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The Purpose of Compassion in Mahayana Buddhist Literature:
The Perfection of Giving as Skilful Means to Initiate the Ultimate Understanding of Emptiness

Compassion is one of the most important pillars of Mahayana Buddhism. It is a characteristic of an enlightened being, a quality to strive for in life, as well as what fuels the Buddha to lead other sentient beings on his path. Other terms directly related to compassion in Buddhism are “the perfection of giving” and “generosity”, which end up being somewhat interchangeable within Mahayana Buddhist literature. These qualities of compassion are taught as the highest conventional characteristics to aim for. In other words in this world, the most admired unenlightened being is one who aspires to act purely and compassionately. However, with every act of generosity comes a level of selfishness; with every act of giving comes an ulterior motive to benefit the self. So, in light of concepts of emptiness and no-self, the purpose of pursuing conventional compassion becomes questionable. Through the analysis of *The Lotus Sutra* as primary source material, along with secondary material by modern Buddhist thinkers, teachings of giving and compassion can be explained as expedient means to lead sentient beings to realize their destinies as Buddhas.

Between the question and the conclusion lies a long chain of logic. This train of thought begins with the unnecessariness of compassion in a world that is empty of self and essence, continuing on to explore the only other plausible purpose of compassion as skilful means. Next, the intent of the Buddha’s skilful means must be explained in order to understand where teaching compassion leads, according to the Buddha’s motives. And finally, through the understanding of the One Vehicle and the potential of the tathāgatagarbha or ‘Buddha womb’ the conclusion can be drawn that in order to lead beings to realize their Buddha potential, they must be made to realize the

ultimate nature of reality. The chain leading to the purpose of the perfection of giving and compassion ends with the conclusion that the strive towards true selflessness serves as an incentive and means to realize the emptiness of the self and of reality in order for one to achieve ultimate wisdom and become a Buddha.

To begin, the perfection of “giving teachings” within Mahayana literature, in addition to being an important bodhisattva stage of perfection (Kawamura 1981, 230-233), has been described through metaphorical stories that draw parallels between the giving of the body and the giving of the Dharma (Ohnuma 1998, 323-359). Ohnuma mostly speaks of stories from the Jataka tales where the Buddha, in his past lives, quite literally gave up his body in various ways to save the lives of other living beings. In these stories, giving and generosity become synonymous with the esteemed model of compassion in Buddhism as the highest quality that a being can possess. Still, at first glance, compassion for other beings seems to be an ideal that can only be justified within a world where people can benefit from the receiving of such generosity. When thinking about a reason to be compassionate, the answer always seems to involve either the benefit of the beneficiary of the compassionate act, or the resulting merit of the good do-er. Both of these processes involve the belief in some kind of permanent self that can benefit from compassion. Because of this, the important Buddhist concepts of no-self, emptiness and impermanence as ultimate reality raise questions about the purpose of teaching compassion as an ideal characteristic of an enlightened being.

In response to this question, a close reading of *The Lotus Sutra* (Lopez and Miles 2015, 960-986), paired with research into Keiji Nishitani’s analysis of the consequences of emptiness on relationships between sentient beings (Asakura 2011, 647-78) suggests that the purpose of compassion in Buddhism lies in its role as skillful means to lead people to the realization of ultimate reality, and not in its conventional reification. Similar to the parallels drawn by Ohnuma between the

giving of the body and the gift of the Dharma, an example can be found in *The Lotus Sutra* when it “declares that the Buddha did not suffer doubts as a prince, did not mortify his flesh through the practice of austerities [...] did not die and disappear into nirvana” (Lopez and Miles 2015, 960). In this instance, the Buddha gave up his body as an indirect way of teaching sentient beings. In this way, he was generously giving up his body and life as expedient means to lead people to enlightenment or as a skillful way of teaching the Dharma: “he only pretended to die to spur his disciples in their practice of the path” (Lopez and Miles 2015, 960).

Futhermore, Keiji Nishitani’s research tells us that within the concept of emptiness, compassion and giving become superficial and somewhat unnecessary. The idea of emptiness means a shift from the opinion that there is essence in the self, to “the standpoint where the self is a means for all other things. This means a complete negation of any standpoint of the morality of a person” (Asakura 2011, 668). While Asakura goes on to say how this leads Buddhists to turn to compassion, another relationship can be formed between the negation of morality and compassion, and that is that without self, or morality, compassion is unnecessary. Arguably, in a world where “the self becomes a *thing* to all other beings” (Asakura 2011, 668), on the conventional level, compassion is impossible and pointless in the larger scheme of things.

The only purpose, then, for teachings of the perfection of giving and the encouragement of compassion by all sentient beings must be that of skilful means. Michael Pye’s discussion of skilful means in *The Lotus Sutra* first outlines how the sutra encourages regular people to strive towards the ideal quality of compassion in an enlightened being when he presents the passage, “and perfecting hearts of great compassion, [they] have all attained the Buddha-way” (Pye 2017, 28). Moreover, he emphasizes the importance of expedient means in their purpose to lead sentient beings away from suffering and into enlightenment. He highlights that “the universal intention of the teaching [of the

Dharma] is formulated in the ‘original vow’ of the buddhas [which reads]:

‘As to the Buddha-way which I tread,

I desire universally to cause all living beings

To attain the same way along with me.’⁸³” (Pye 2017, 31)

So, focusing on the purpose of the teaching of giving and compassion as skilful means, its purpose is then extended to include the goal of skilful means itself — to lead all living beings to enlightenment.

Now that a purpose has been fully determined the question remains as to how teaching generosity can lead sentient beings to enlightenment. *The Lotus Sutra* not only supports teachings of compassion in their form as expedient means, but presents a process through which the strive towards compassion may guide one on the path to enlightenment (Lopez and Miles 2015, 960-986).

Remembering Ohnuma’s argument on the parallel metaphors of giving the body and giving the Dharma, *The Lotus Sutra* is stock full of examples of both of these forms of giving (Lopez and Miles 2015, 960-986). For example, the parable of the burning house represents the giving of the Dharma (Lopez and Miles 2015, 962), while the death of the Buddha by his own supposed choice represents the gift of his body (Lopez and Miles 2015, 960). Not only do these examples illustrate compassionate skilful means as the Buddha’s way to teach his lessons, but as goals for every follower who is destined to become a future Buddha: Thanks to the Buddha’s fluent explanation of the pure Dharma in understandable, conventional terms, Shariputra proclaims, “I will definitely become a Buddha... I will turn the wheel of the highest Dharma and lead and inspire bodhisattvas” (Lopez and Miles 2015, 966). There is only one way for him and all other beings to realize their potential as future Buddhas, and that is to realize the highest perfection of wisdom. This, the perfection which allows the Buddha to see reality as it is and be so skillful in his teachings, is the key to freeing the tathāgatagarbha within each living being, resulting in their enlightenment and imminent Buddhahood.

Here we realize that the enlightenment of a śrāvaka or ‘hearer’ is not enough. The ultimate goal of the one vehicle is to lead all living beings to their eventual Buddhahood (Lopez and Miles 2015, 962), thus requiring that each living being attain the perfection of wisdom.

Upon contemplation of this reading, one may derive that the desired outcome of these skillful means is in fact to lead people to the fulfillment of the perfection of wisdom. The perspective of the perfection of giving as a bodhisattva perfection provides some insight into the relationship between generosity and wisdom. Kawamura explains that a Pure Land practitioner who tries to imitate the Buddha’s compassion will always do so with selfish ulterior motives: “whatever good he may do is always rooted in his selfishness” (Kawamura 1981, 232). He also articulates that the vow of Amida Buddha and the perfections of Bodisattvas were “established for the sole purpose of leading such a person to enlightenment” (Kawamura 1981, 232). Looking at previous evidence presented, it is reasonable to say that pushing one to realize their own selfishness in every compassionate action can work as skillful means to provide an incentive to develop one’s understanding of no-self and emptiness. For only when one understands no-self can one act with complete generosity and selflessness. Therefore, the smaller, seemingly more attainable goal of living compassionately is one that leads beings to question their ideas of the self, for in order to achieve this important and esteemed characteristic in its purest form, one must understand emptiness. Consequentially, when one understands emptiness, the goal of compassion as skillful means will have carried out its purpose in leading one on the path of the Buddha.

To conclude, the chain of the purpose of compassion begins with the pointlessness of conventional generosity and ends with the higher goal of leading living beings to the perfection of wisdom and therefore giving them the potential to not only become enlightened, but to realize their own Buddhahood. As a part of this complicated process are links of skillful means in *The Lotus Sutra* and the role that its intent plays in the overall purpose of teachings of giving. Finally, drawing connections between Kawamura’s idea of the

selfishness of giving (Kawamura 1981, 232) and concepts of emptiness and skillful means allows for a proposed model that explains how the teachings of generosity as an ideal quality can spark the realization of ultimate reality by igniting the realization of one's own emptiness as one strives towards selflessness. Surely, if we act compassionately and aim for true altruism, we will all become Buddhas, having attained compassion and wisdom in one fell swoop.

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