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Compassionate Contemplation

Unlike other methods of practice where you concentrate your mind on numbers, breathing, or a part of the body, this method uses abstract contemplation. Compassionate contemplation helps eliminate anger and gives rise to compassion for sentient beings.

Practice of compassionate contemplation involves realizing the suffering of sentient beings and seeking to help them alleviate this suffering. One strives to bring happiness to sentient beings, either by helping with their daily lives or by helping them to leave the three realms of birth and death and reach Nirvana, the highest stage. Someone who is practicing this contemplation with a Bodhi mind would seek to help sentient beings free themselves from suffering in the physical and psychological realms and if causes and conditions are correct then help them derive happiness from the Dharma.

There are five aspects of compassionate contemplation. The first is contemplation of sentient beings. This is done by observing how we generally divide sentient beings into three groups: those who are beneficial to us, those who are harmful to us, and those who are neither beneficial nor harmful. We usually relate to people in terms of one of these three categories.

The second aspect of compassionate contemplation is to contemplate oneself. When we interact with sentient beings there are two types of feelings and perceptions. The first is enjoyment of the interaction and the second is dislike of one's contact with sentient beings. We have to investigate why we have these feelings. These feelings are based upon the perceived benefit or harm this interaction will have upon our bodies and minds. It is only because we have bodies and minds that we have feelings of like and dislike. But we should know that our bodies and minds are merely an unending succession of ever changing materials and thoughts. Bodies and minds are false perceptions and illusions. Therefore there is no need to be attached to them and no reason to feel like or dislike in our interactions with sentient beings because these feelings are based upon the erroneous perception of body and mind.

The third aspect of compassionate contemplation involves a closer investigation of what really happens in our interaction with sentient beings. We should contemplate these interactions as the physical contact of one body with another. Praise or rebuke are only sounds or vibrations entering our ears. The actions of others, such as a smile or frown, are only light rays perceived by our eyes. Just as the body is false and an illusion so are these external, material phenomenon also unreal. Once we realize this we no longer give rise to feelings of like or dislike and we treat all sentient beings as equal. But at this point there is still no true compassion. How is it possible to have compassion towards unreal external sensations and beings who are related only to a false body and mind?

The fourth aspect of the practice of compassionate contemplation again involves the contemplation of sentient beings. However, this time the contemplation is different; it focuses on the suffering of sentient beings. They are suffering because they are ignorant. They don't know why they do things. They may be happy or angry but not knowing why they are subject to these moods. They are attached to things and are fearful of losing them. So they have suffering.

In addition, we should realize that sentient beings are not free in body and mind and this is another cause of their suffering. People know that they shouldn't do certain things but still they

want to do these things and possibly in the end they will do them anyway. Sometimes it's as if there are two selves inside us struggling towards different ends.

Sentient beings also suffer in that they are born, grow old and eventually die. In the very short life span of each sentient being one has to endure all kinds of suffering and affliction of body and mind. This is very pitiable. Because of the suffering they undergo we should have compassion for sentient beings.

The fifth aspect of compassionate contemplation also entails contemplating sentient beings, but now we view them as all being equal; combining the three groups of those who are beneficial, harmful, or neutral. How is this done? It involves realizing our relationships with sentient beings are neither fixed nor unchanging. In terms of the three times, past, present and future we cannot say that those with whom we share a close affinity in the present were not once our enemy at some time in the past, or vice versa. There is no definite, unchanging relationship of closeness or adversity. Seen from the perspective of the three times, all sentient beings have had some interaction with us in the past and will probably have some interaction in the future. From this point of view we can see all sentient beings as equal and can feel compassion for them.

From a lecture given by Master Sheng Yen
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