# BUDDHIST CONCEPT FOR TODAY'S LIVING (12)
# BUDDHIST COMPASSION
# REMOVING SUFFERING AND GIVING JOY

## The Daishonin Took the Sufferings of All Living Beings As His Own

There is a "self-centered" part of us that is constantly functioning — thinking first of ourselves, and then of others only when necessary.

This is not necessarily a bad thing; it's an important part of being alive. When self-interest becomes the dominant force in our lives, however, it can cause us to act insensitively and even harmfully toward others. It has the potential to make us selfish and, if unchecked, even criminal.

On the one hand there are times, especially in emergencies, when failure to look out for ourselves may have catastrophic results. While we all have to solve our own problems, there are some problems that we cannot solve alone. We must rely on the help of others.

On the other hand there are times when, by extending a hand to others, we can help them in ways that they may not be able to help themselves. What is needed in such situations is compassion.

In Chinese and Japanese Buddhist texts, including Nichiren Daishonin's writings, the word for compassion comprises two Chinese characters. It is pronounced *ci bei* in Chinese and *jihi* in Japanese. The first character, *ci* or *ji*, is a translation of the Sanskrit word *maitri*, meaning "to give happiness." The second, *bei* or *hi,* comes from the Sanskrit *karuna*, meaning "to remove suffering." Taken together they describe the function of relieving living beings of suffering and giving them happiness.

Almost anyone can feel kindness toward someone who shows them kindness. It is the spirit of Buddhism to develop a sense of compassion toward all people — toward any person. It is in this spirit that Nichiren Daishonin wrote: "The various sufferings experienced by all living beings are without exception Nichiren's own sufferings" (GZ 758).

## The Behavior of a Bodhisattva

The compassion of Buddhist enlightenment — the desire to "remove suffering and give happiness"— is expressed in the human behavior of a Buddha or bodhisattva. Nichiren Daishonin also writes, "Even a heartless villain loves his wife and children. He too has a portion of the bodhisattva world within him." (WND, 358).

This statement makes it clear that anyone and everyone possesses the potential of a bodhisattva — the potential to behave with compassion toward another person. Yet, it is an ordinary human tendency to place concern for ourselves first and foremost. This may be the strongest human impulse. Furthermore, there long have been those who hold the view that compassion is a sign of weakness; that generosity only spoils the receiver of kindness.

There may be a grain of truth to this assertion. Kindness that does not empower the receiver creates little lasting value. From the Buddhist view, true compassion is that which has the power to root out the cause of misery in people's lives and direct them to the cause of happiness. Such compassion by its very nature requires courage and strength.

How then can ordinary people, who are governed by the impulse for self-interest, express compassion in a constructive and meaningful way?

A natural example is the actions of a mother toward her child. A mother will do anything she can to protect her child, even if it means braving flames or flood.



Title: (12) Buddhist Compassion
Subject: Living Buddhism 04/00 v.0 n.4 p.5 LB0004p05
Author: Shin Yatomi
Keywords: Attitude Behavior Buddhist Compassion Concepts Dates Encouragement Guidance Human Relationships Study Terms Today

### The Kindness of a Parent

Nichiren Daishonin wrote, "I, Nichiren, am sovereign, teacher, and father and mother to all the people of Japan" (WND, 287). He made this statement to convey his state of life as the original Buddha — a state of life capable of embracing all people with the compassion of a parent toward his or her children.

Now this is not an easy thing. We sometimes even lose patience with our own children, let alone strangers. Since that is the case, most of us without assistance tend to be lacking in the quality defined as Buddhist compassion.

What can we do about it? Well, to state the conclusion first, we can expose our hearts and minds to the very state of compassion manifested by the Buddha. When we believe in and chant Nam-myoho-renge-kyo to the Gohonzon, which embodies the compassionate state of life of the original Buddha, we stimulate and bring forth a source of boundless compassion latent within us.

Taking a lesson from the Daishonin's writings, it is also useful to apply the model of a parent — or teacher — in developing compassion for others.

Any successful parent or teacher knows the importance of seeing things from the child's perspective. They exert themselves in caring for and educating their children, wanting to see them grow and develop their humanity.

Such people transcend divisions of self and other to view the sufferings and joys of their children or students as their own. Constant is their concern for the children. Always thinking of them, they are eager to offer help, protection, and an opportunity to learn. This sort of concern will certainly reach the hearts of others, be they children or adults. The Nobel-prize winning French author André Gide (1869–1951) put it clearly: "True kindness presupposes the faculty of imagining as one's own the suffering and joys of others" (*Pretexts, "Portraits and Aphorisms"* [1903]).

Compassion also includes the ability to recognize in others strengths and capacities that we ourselves may be lacking, and our wish to learn from those qualities. While it is easy to identify another's weak points, it is harder than we may think to clearly recognize and appreciate that person's strong points. If we focus on the strong points, however, we will naturally come to appreciate, feel closer to, and even develop a fondness for him or her. As a result, we may find ourselves thinking of that person more often and feeling concerned about his or her well-being.

We practice Buddhism for our own happiness and that of others. These two aims of faith cannot be separated. When our thoughts for others' well-being become part of our daily prayer, we transcend the innate impulse to be concerned only with ourselves, and illuminate the fundamental ignorance that is the source of suffering with the light of our innate Buddhahood. ❑

By Jeff Kriger, managing editor, based on *Yasashii Kyogaku* (Easy Buddhist Study), published by the Seikyo Press in 1994.



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