

Bodhisattva's Compatibility of Wisdom and Compassion

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Abstract

This study attempts to investigate the relationship in terms of the compatibility between wisdom and compassion, the two key qualities of a bodhisattva in the Mahayana Buddhism. While most tend to describe wisdom and compassion as coherent, some others view their relation as contradictory. The findings show that wisdom and compassion are compatible based on the arguments: 1) wisdom and compassion complement each other to enable a bodhisattva to work and practice; 2) they have shared focus in the realization of 'emptiness'; 3) the bodhisattva who is skilled in means shows the congruence of wisdom and compassion; 4) the bodhicitta of the bodhisattva reflects the aspiration to the perfection of wisdom out of the compassion for other sentient beings; 5) they are aspects of ultimate reality in the sense that both of them neither exist; 6) according to Tibetan Buddhism (Vajaryana), which is the form of Mahayana Buddhism that developed mainly in Tibet, wisdom and compassion reinforces each other and are symbolized by a union.

Keywords: bodhisattva; wisdom; compassion; Mahayana Buddhism

Introduction

Wisdom and compassion are two key qualities of a bodhisattva, a being who generates his aspiration to help and helps other beings to attain Perfect Buddhahood prior to himself/ herself. According to the Mahayana Buddhism, wisdom and compassion are perfections that a bodhisattva practices, along with other perfections, to advance along the Bodhisattva path. While a few Mahayana sutras in early Buddhism focus on these two qualities, wisdom in

particular such as in the Prajñāparamita sutras, prevalent texts and articles, both academic-oriented and practitioner-oriented, also give importance to these two qualities. In early Mahayana Buddhism, wisdom is seen as being adequate for the realization of emptiness whereas the first five Perfections are not essential; the latter are necessary if one wishes to benefit other beings (Tenzin, 1994). In later periods, however, compassion became more significant and be at the same level of importance as wisdom for the bodhisattva who practices to attain perfect Buddhahood. With regard to Theravada Buddhism, the term “bodhisattva” in Pali canon is primarily referred to the Gotama Buddha in his present and penultimate life and to a lesser extent to the previous and future Buddhas. Though the bodhisattva ideal in Theravada Buddhism is also associated with the quality of compassion such as that stated in the Sutta Nipata, the cultivation of wisdom is a focus. Along the Arhant path to enlightenment, compassion may supplement wisdom but it is not a necessary quality for the attainment of nirvana.

Despite the difference between the Mahayana and Theravada Buddhism in their emphasis of the bodhisattva ideal, i.e., for the former, the bodhisattva ideal becomes a goal that applies to everyone; for the latter, the same ideal is reserved for the exceptional persons such as the Buddhas, (Jeffrey, 1997) the qualities of compassion and wisdom are considered significant by both doctrines. This study focuses in the doctrine of the Mahayana Buddhism where both compassion and wisdom are core characters of the bodhisattva ideal.

Though compassion and wisdom are key practices of a bodhisattva, the relation between these two qualities has been described variedly. While most tend to describe wisdom and compassion in terms of their coherence, some others (e.g., Conze, 1957) view their relation as opposing. Due to the significance of these two key qualities for a Bodhisattva and the view of their close relationships, this article uses the method of documentary research to investigate further the nature of their compatibility. The results should bring about more understandings about these two supreme qualities.

Wisdom (Skt: *Prajña*)

Wisdom or *Prajña* has been used specifically by Buddhist texts to indicate correct discernment of the true situation, the ultimate way of things. *Prajña* is sometimes used to mean a meditative absorption, the content of which is the ultimate truth, the way things really are. (Williams, 1989) A distinction is made, with regards to knowable things, between the conventional and the ultimate truth, as Śantideva (695-743) states that:

Conventional and ultimate-

These the two truths are declared to be.

The ultimate is not within the scope of intellect,

For intellect is said to be conventional. (Tenzin, 1994)

Wisdom that becomes perfection is said to be a state of consciousness which understands emptiness (*Śūnyata*): the idea of all things as being 'empty' of 'Self'. Nothing exists absolutely, with an absolute nature; 'things' only arise in a mutually conditioning network of processes, the principle of Conditioned Arising. The 14th Dalai Lama referred to the Four Hundred Verses which states that:

The seed of existence is consciousness;

Phenomena are the field of consciousness.

If we see the no reality of things,

We destroy the seed of existence.

The Dalai Lama explained that the ignorance of believing that phenomena truly exist constitutes one of the twelve independent links; this gives rise to samsaric existence, which in turn is another of the twelve interdependent links. The seed of this samsaric existence is the kind of consciousness that has objects, or phenomena, as its field of experience. If these objects are understood to be devoid of ultimate reality, this seed of existence is undermined, and it is completely destroyed when the wisdom of realizing that phenomena are without true existence is perfectly developed (Tenzin, 1994). In other words, the perfection of wisdom is achieved when emptiness is understood.

Wisdom in its perfection is also described as coming through non-conceptual and therefore non-dual awareness to equal the content or object of

such an ultimate awareness, that is, in this context emptiness itself (Williams, 1989). The quality of emptiness is also equated with nirvana, for this is empty of the possibility of being adequately described in words, and empty of any-thing to do with the delusion of ‘I am’.

The well-known Mahayana sutra that reflects the aspect of the perfection of wisdom is the Prajñāparamita. The position of the Buddha in this sutra is that absolutely nothing has any inherent or ultimate existence, but only remains in terms of conventional truth.¹ Generally, the perfection of wisdom means that wisdom which goes beyond the wisdom of the world. The perfection of wisdom is described as relating to the awakened mind as follows:

The paramita of wisdom is inconceivable, inexpressible, and indescribable.

It is not born; it does not cease; it is like space.

Only the awakened mind can comprehend it.

Before the Mother of all the Buddhas, I bow down!

The perfection of wisdom is stated as primary to other perfections; it is said to lead the other perfections as a man with eyes leads the blind (Madhyamakavatara 6:2). Some later writers, however, are sensitive to the suggestion that wisdom is sufficient unto itself and the other perfections are unnecessary.² Williams (1989) referred to Candrakīrti who distinguishes between mundane or ordinary perfections, and supra-mundane perfections and gave an example of the supra-mundane perfection of giving which is giving with no conception of the inherent real existence of giver, gift or receiver, that is, it is giving in the light of perfect wisdom. In other words, the perfection of wisdom does not precede the perfection of giving but that they occur concurrently. The possible explanation to compromise these two seemingly contrary views may be that wisdom (not yet supra-mundane) can guide other qualities of perfections, such as giving, along the bodhisattva path up to the supra-mundane level (the perfection of wisdom) where emptiness is understood and the act of giving with that kind of wisdom becomes the perfection of giving. Wisdom may prevail over other qualities of perfection but wisdom itself is not sufficient for a

¹ Loc.cit.

² Loc.cit.

bodhisattva to advance in career since the main task of a bodhisattva is to help other beings. Eventually, the perfection of wisdom (supra-mundane wisdom) occurs in concurrence with the bodhisattva's act of giving, the act out of great compassion.

Compassion

Compassion is a virtue which is of importance in all schools of Buddhism but which is particularly emphasized by the Mahayana. Compassion indicates the qualities of the heart—love and respect for all living beings. Compassion is indicated as the basis and motivating force of the Bodhisattva, and from compassion springs the entire edifice of the Mahayana. Williams (1989) referred to Kamalaśīla who states that “The Buddhas, the Blessed Ones, attained to their omniscience by embracing compassion; and they so rejoice in the welfare of the world that they remain therein, nor do the Blessed Ones abide in nirvaṇa, because of their compassion” (trans.in Beyer 1974:100).

Nowadays, compassion has been the core theme which the Fourteenth Dalai Lama (Tenzin Gyatso) has addressed. The quotes from the Dalai lama regarding compassion are, for example,

Every single being, even those who are hostile to us, is just as afraid of suffering as we are, and seeks happiness in the same way we do. Every person has the same right as we do to be happy and not to suffer. So let's take care of others wholeheartedly, of both our friends and our enemies. This is the basis for true compassion...

Whether you believe in God or not does not matter so much, whether you believe in Buddha or not does not matter so much; as a Buddhist, whether you believe in reincarnation or not does not matter so much. You must lead a good life. And a good life does not mean just good food, good clothes, and good shelter. These are not sufficient. A good motivation is what is needed: compassion, without dogmatism, without complicated philosophy; just understanding that others are human brothers and sisters and respecting their rights and human dignity.

The Bodhisattva's compassion is closely related to **bodhicitta**. In the first chapter of Bodhicaryavatara (Bca), Śāntideva (695-743) praises compassion

as gold-making elixir which transforms the unclean body into the priceless jewel of a Buddha-Form, therefore firmly seize this Awakening Mind. Bodhicitta or literally the awakening mind is explained as the altruistic aspiration to perfect enlightenment for the benefit of all sentient beings (Williams, 1989). In other words, compassion is understood to lead to resultant bodhicitta.

Śantideva states in Bca (I.9 and I.10) that the arising of bodhicitta is a life-transforming experience as shown in the stanza:

The moment miserable beings bound in the prison
Of uncontrollably recurring aara develop a bodhicitta aim,
They're called spiritual offspring of the Blissfully Gone
And become figures to be honored by the gods of this world, as well as
by men.

Like the supreme creation of a gold-making elixir,
This unclean body, having been taken, will be transformed
Into the priceless gem of a Triumphant One's body.

So, firmly gain hold of what's known as bodhichitta. (Berzin, 2005)

The Bodhicitta is explained as having two aspects: aspiration and application. Aspiration is wishing to attain enlightenment for all beings, the desire to pursue the path. Application begins with taking the vow of Bodhicitta and promising to put into action. According to the 14th Dalai Lama, "Aspiration is like simply wanting to go somewhere; application is actually going". For the Bodhicitta to arise, it is frequently said that a very specific and sustained series of meditations are to be practiced.

The Compatibility of Bodhisattva's Wisdom and Compassion

Bodhisattvas are described as those who have spontaneous, sincere wish to attain Enlightenment for the ultimate benefit of all beings. Through wisdom, they direct their minds to Enlightenment, and through their compassion, they have concern for beings (Tenzin, 1994). It can be said that a bodhisattva is a living who has to develop simultaneously both wisdom and compassion to attain Enlightenment. Wisdom and compassion can be considered compatible based on the following notions:

1. Wisdom and compassion **complement each other** to enable a bodhisattva to perform his/her work. While the work of a bodhisattva is to aid beings in numerous ways, wisdom and compassion are key qualities that the bodhisattva uses in performing this work. Wisdom has been proposed by some as precedence to other qualities. Harvey (1990) states that wisdom leads [a sentient being] to becoming an omniscient Buddha who can teach and aid beings in countless ways; it also ensures that compassionate action is appropriate, effective, and not covertly self-seeking; it strengthens the feeling of solidarity with others, by insight into the 'sameness of beings', there is no ultimate difference between them. Similarly, some views that compassion is not being able to precede wisdom. Oldmeadow (1997) states that "Compassion, at least in its full amplitude, cannot precede wisdom; it is a function of wisdom." (Oldmeadow, 1997) With regard to the role of compassion, compassion is stated to aid wisdom in undercutting self-centeredness, by motivating a life of self-sacrifice and active service for others. In a sense, wisdom and compassion play complementary roles along the bodhisattva path to Enlightenment.

2. Wisdom and compassion **have compatible focus**. While some scholars viewed that wisdom and compassion are contradictory because of their different focus, this study opines that the focus of wisdom and compassion are compatible. The former view belongs to, for example, Conze (1957), an English scholar and translator who was famous for his translations of Buddhist texts and his published book 'Buddhism'. Conze states that there is a logical contradiction between the method of wisdom, which sees no persons at all, but only Dharmas, and the method of the Unlimited which cultivates relations to people as persons. While the method of Dharmas leads to boundless contraction of the self because everything is emptied out of it, the method of the Unlimited leads to a boundless expansion of the self because one identifies oneself with more and more living beings. A Bodhisattva is seen as a being compounded of the two contradictory forces of wisdom and compassion. "In his wisdom, he sees no persons; in his compassion he is resolved to save them. His ability to combine these contradictory attitudes is the source of his greatness, and of his ability to save himself and others" Similarly, Sangharakshita (2008), a British Buddhist teacher and writer, pointed out that in order to gain

Enlightenment, the Bodhisattva ideal must develop both wisdom and compassion, both the self-regarding and the other-regarding aspects of the spiritual life. He claims that wisdom and compassion is a polarity: “This is the basic polarity: Enlightenment within, through wisdom, manifesting without, through compassion.”

Although the method of wisdom is referred to as ‘self-regarding’ whereas the method of the Unlimited (or the method of compassion) is referred to as ‘other-regarding’ aspect, wisdom and compassion are not polarity; rather they can be seen as interacting in a friendly way to advance a bodhisattva along the path to Enlightenment. The Skill in Means (*Upaya*kauśalya) sUtra, for example, illustrates this point. The sUtra states that the bodhisattva gives a gift with the point of reference as the nature of things-- he cannot envisage any phenomenon that performs the act of giving, to whom something is given, or who will enjoy a karmic reward; this is his perfection of wisdom. In other words, the bodhisattava’s wisdom while performing the act out of compassion indicates neither ‘self-regarding’ nor ‘others-regarding’ aspect since both are not existent. The focus of wisdom and compassion are not incongruent; rather they have the shared focus, the focus of the realization of ‘emptiness’.

3. The **skill in means** is seen as the simultaneous presentation of wisdom and compassion. The Skill in Means sutra narrates a few stories which describe a bodhisattva who is skilled in means as the one who uses wisdom and acts out of compassion in order to bring sentient beings to maturity, the merit of which he dedicates to omniscience. The sutra describes that the bodhisattva who is skilled in means can fulfill all six perfections in giving a gift. The sutra does not make any indication of the contradiction between wisdom and compassion; rather it denotes the congruence between wisdom and compassion. The concept of ‘skill in means’, however, has been used by those who view that wisdom and compassion are contradictory in nature, i.e., they explain that a bodhisattva handles these contradictions by using the ‘skill in means’. It was stated that when the Pañca redefined the two poles of the bodhisattva path as discernment [wisdom] and compassion, it also redefined tactical skill [skill in means] to accommodate these new poles; tactical skill is

the ability to gain discernment into the teaching of emptiness without abandoning compassion for all living beings, and vice versa. Robinson, Johnson, & Thanissaro Bhikkhu (2005) elaborated on this statement that: “In other words, tactical skill is the ability to pursue two potentially contradictory motivations without being attached to either one in a way that its implications would interfere with the other (Robinson, 2005).” As a matter of fact, the concept of ‘skill in means’ can be viewed as a tool for a bodhisattva to reach out to sentient beings by showing his/her compassion and in the process of converting the sentient beings, the skills and wisdom are used. The skill of the bodhisattva enables him/ her to advance both in wisdom as well as compassion to the perfect level; this implies that wisdom and compassion are not necessarily contradicting in their nature.

4. The **bodhicitta** embraces the notion of wisdom and compassion. The initial step for a bodhisattva to be on the path to Buddhahood, where the perfection of wisdom is achieved, is to have an arising bodhicitta. Śāntideva describes the bodhisattva path in three stages: entrance, training, and accomplishment. The entrance involves taking the Bodhisattva vow and conceiving for the first time the aspiration for enlightenment, which is called bodhicitta. As previously mentioned, **bodhicitta** is the aspiration to perfect enlightenment for the benefit of all sentient beings. This means that compassion prevails since the entrance stage of bodhisattva path as it underlies the bodhicitta whereas wisdom is practiced along the path accordingly. Wisdom and compassion are thus compatible in their functions for a bodhisattva. It should be elaborated here that bodhicitta is not limited to an aspiration only for the sake of others.

There was an assertion that bodhicitta has two types- the ultimate and the conventional [relative] bodhicitta. Ultimate bodhicitta is beyond this world whereas conventional bodhicitta is of moral or mundane nature. Ultimate bodhicitta seems to be relevant to the perfection of compassion whereas conventional bodhicitta is relevant to mundane compassion. This is comparable with mundane wisdom and supra-mundane wisdom where the former signifies the conventional one and the latter is the ultimate one. A bodhisattva who arouses conventional bodhicitta based on their compassion practices to attain

the perfection of wisdom along with the perfection of compassion. In other words, the bodhisattva strives to achieve the ultimate truth as well as the ultimate bodhicitta. Both wisdom and compassion are compatible up to the end of the Bodhisattva path.

5. Wisdom and compassion are **aspects of ultimate reality**. Along the bodhisattva path, a bodhisattva practices mundane wisdom along with mundane (or conventional) bodhicitta with the goal of reaching the ultimate level, where the truth is ultimate rather than conventional. When a bodhisattva reaches the level of ultimate truth or reality, the level of perfection of wisdom, he/she does not consider that there is any ultimately, inherently existing being who helps or is helped nor there is any help. This is the notion of ‘emptiness’ where there is neither ‘own self’ nor ‘the other’s self’. Emptiness is the absence of inherent existence itself related to the object. Emptiness is the ultimate truth (*paramarthasatya*) in the sense that it is what is ultimately true about the object being analyzed, whatever that object may be (Williams, 1989).

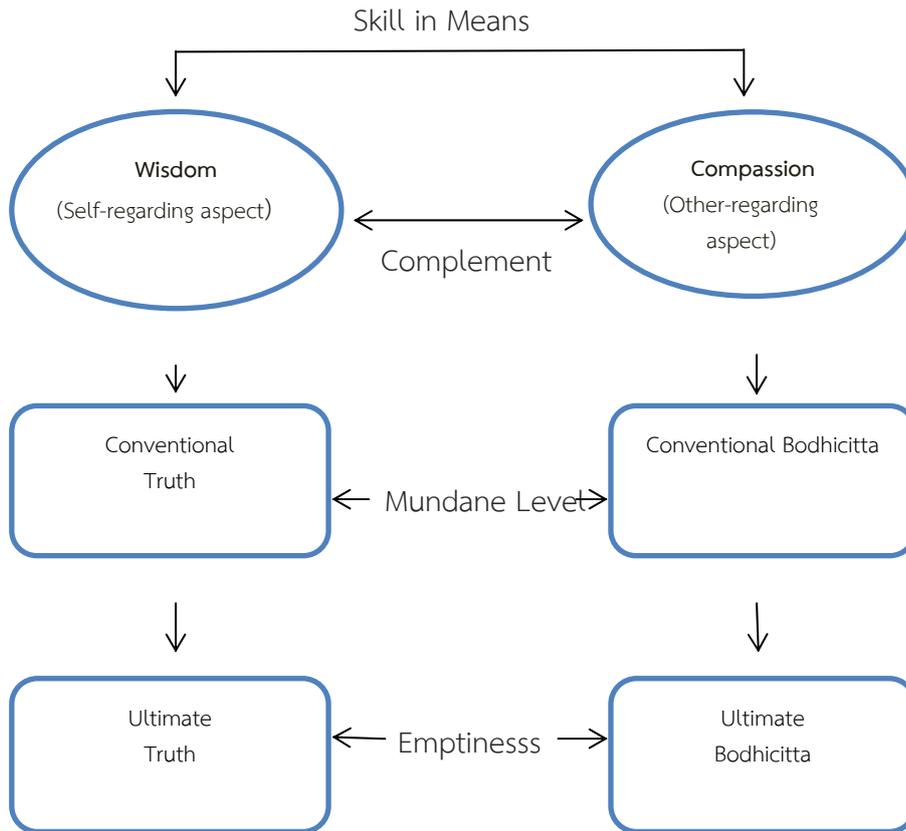
6. Wisdom and compassion **reinforces** each other and are symbolized by a union. According to Tibetan Buddhism, wisdom and compassion are considered the two most important aspects of practice; both will reinforce each other. Milarepa, one of Tibet's most famous yogis and poets, sang that wisdom is “an open sky of pure love,” in which “the clouds of compassion gather perfectly, sending down a steady rain of enlightened activity” (He-ru-ka, 1488). This love and compassion flow both to oneself and to others. For oneself, wisdom holds one’s experiences in deep acceptance and loving embrace. It does the same when it beholds the beings, events, and phenomena of the outer world.

Conclusion

In a nutshell, the compatibility between wisdom and compassion can be summarized as in the following figure.

Figure 1

The Compatibility of Bodhisattva’s Wisdom and Compassion



Source: own

According to Figure 1, wisdom and compassion of a bodhisattva are compatible in that each complements one another to facilitate the bodhisattva's work and practices, the focus of which is the realization of emptiness. The bodhisattva can use the skill to effectively manage the practice of wisdom along with compassion in order to benefit others. Though wisdom is concerned more about self-development whereas compassion is concerned about the development of others, the process of helping others also cultivates a bodhisattva's wisdom, the advancement towards omniscience. The compassion for other suffering beings results in the arising of bodhicitta, wherein the mundane level is compatible with the wisdom of conventional truth. The perfection of wisdom is explained as sunyata, the emptiness or non-existence; compassion and wisdom are of no essence.

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