

Buddhism for Beginners: A Basic Guide Part Two: Benefits & Practices

This is the third part of a series of teachings on Buddhism for Beginners given by H.E. Khangser Rinpoche. July 5, 2015.

The Benefits of Compassion

Today, I will talk about the topic “Benefits and Practices of Compassion.” As you all know, compassion is one of the main content of Buddhism. Buddhism talks a lot about empathy, and we need to understand how vital kindness is, in other words, we need to understand what the benefits of compassion are and how to practice them. In general, when we look back on our life, we can see a recurring theme for the reasons we tend to be sad. Firstly, we get depressed because we do not have what we want. The problem is well known to everyone. The second type of sadness is amusing; the sadness of getting what we do want! So there are two great sorrows in our lives, not getting what we want and getting what we want.

There is a very famous story of a king who asked the gods to make him turn anything he touched into gold. He always yearned for so much treasure. One day, when the king was praying, a god appeared before the king and asked, “What do you wish for?” The greedy king asked the god to give him the power to turn all those everything he touches into gold. The god agreed and bestowed the king with the miracle he desired, turning all that he touched into gold. So, when the king reached the castle, it all turned into gold. All the objects affected by the king turn into gold! The king was ecstatic. Then, the king sat at the table, the cakes that he touched turned into gold. Inadvertently, the king reached for his daughter, and immediately, the princess turned into a golden statue. The king wept bitterly and requested the gods to take away the power that his god gave him and return him to his daughter, making her return to the way she was.

Similarly, in our lives, sometimes achieving what we want leads to tragedy. To have a great and complete experience, we need to have a flawless and correct views and ways of life. I have been too many places and often asked people, “How do you define a perfect life?” A lot of people have come up

with the definition of a perfect life, like being healthy, happiness, achieving success — [People laugh]. On the one hand, those points are very accurate for an ideal experience. I strongly agree with those comments. Being healthy, happy, successful makes a perfect life. But, what role does compassion play in bringing happiness to our life? For example, what role does compassion play to make us healthier? That is a question worth thinking about.

About two or three weeks ago, I was in Europe, during a lecture, I said, “If you ask people how to live happily, you will surely gain a lot of answers. And if you use Google and type in the question of how to live happily, then you can find thousands of answers for this question.” Google cannot share with you the experiences of a human being, just like in life, there is so much knowledge that we can only accumulate through experience. So, when I asked, “How do you define a perfect life?” Many people answered the best they could. Most people think that having health, happiness, and prosperity leads to a perfect life. I very much agree with that view. But my question today is: “What role does compassion play in giving us a happy and healthy life?” One thing we need to understand is that you cannot force ourselves to be happy, we can’t do it. We also cannot force ourselves to be healthy. So the issue here is that we need to find out what role compassion plays to make us happier and healthier. Keep in mind the actual practice I am talking about is not related to religion at all. This topic is mainly about a method, a way of life, to help you have a happy, happy life. In short, whenever we talk about love and compassion, the topic has no ties to any religion.

When we talk about love and compassion, you can see that it is a feeling that is needed even in the animal kingdom. Animals have no religion, nor do they require faith, but they still need love and compassion. So it’s love and compassion, rather than religion that is necessary for animals. Generally speaking, all of us are not born with religious beliefs either. When we are born, we don’t arrive in this world knowing anything about religion, but what we do come with is the need for love and consideration from others. We need the love and compassion of the mother. It’s extraordinary to think about this, but it’s so true that, when infants are breastfed, we can only see the mother’s milk and but we cannot feel the genuine love and compassion the mother is pouring into that baby. Take, for instance, two babies that are born at the same time, one is breastfed, and one formula-fed. Are there any differences in the development of these two babies? The child will need nourishment to survive, but the child also needs love and affection, something that scientists have already proven. Therefore, it is thanks to the attention of the mother that the child has a proper development. The importance of love

is essential. It is not only breast milk or formula that helps a child to grow but also the love and compassion of the mother.

Here's another thing to think about. Imagine if you only had one more day to live. What would you do in those 24 hours? But don't misunderstand me, I don't mean that you only have one day to live [People laugh], what I mean is that if somehow, you are only given one day to live, how would you spend it? Most likely, you will go straight to your loved ones, right? Go home and think about this question. In my opinion, most adults feel that they will return to their parents or children or anyone they are closest to. They will feel the need to do so because they are the people they care about and love.

Regarding the importance of compassion, there are two things we need to recognize. Mainly that empathy plays a huge role in bringing happiness and secondly for the physical health issues related to understanding. So, how can compassion bring us joy? In general, when you want to live a happy life, there are some vital points to follow: First, to identify whether you have a happy life or not, you need to think about the rise of your disturbing emotions. Emotions like feelings of anger, selfishness, and the like -The less of these negative emotions that you have, the happier you are. Secondly, you need to have very healthy relationships, such as functional relationships with your family, spouse, with friends. Third, you must have a sense of discipline because this will also bring happiness to you. This means that you must set clear goals and the right ways to achieve them in life. Here's an analogy is about the man driving down a road that came up to a roundabout. He asked a pedestrian where the road led to; the man quickly responded that he had no idea because he didn't know where to go. Then go any way you want to because they all lead to the same place, replied the pedestrian. So you see, setting goals is what we need so that we know where we are going.

Part 2 - How to Practice Compassion

When you have healthy relationships with your parents, spouses, friends, children, and the like, what else do you need? When you want to build good relationships, first of all, you need to make sacrifices, which is very necessary. By sacrifices, I mean sacrifices related to nourishing your relationships. For example, once, when I was sitting in a restaurant in Taiwan, I saw a couple sitting and talking passionately and holding hands intimately, in a different corner of the restaurant, I saw a couple sitting together, but they did not speak much, they just focused on their smartphones. It was then that I thought that, out of those two couples, one must have been around each other for a long time because

they were barely paying attention to one another. So, to maintain a good relationship, you need to make sacrifices, even if it means to put your mobile phone down to give the other person your undivided attention. This reminds me of a quick story about a boy who often receives a weekly allowance of 10 dollars from his parents. One day, he decided to ask his dad how much he got paid for a day's worth of work. "I earned \$50 a day going to work." His father answered. Hearing that, the boy asked his father again, "Father! Can you give me another \$10?" The father was annoyed because his son had just learned about this salary, wondered if his son's expectations increased after learning how much he makes a day. But very lovingly, the boy explained that he had \$40 and, if his dad only gave the boy \$10 more, he would be able to pay for his dad's full day's work so he could stay home with his for his birthday. And so it goes that good relationships are mostly due to sacrifice, but here's the issue, you can only sacrifice when you understand compassion. Without realizing compassion, sacrifice turns into hard work. Once you understand empathy, you can make a lot of sacrifices, and then, your relationships will be long-lasting. These can be of friendships, spouses, or the affection between parents and children, but you must have compassion to sacrifice. I know this first hand because I thought that I had made sacrifices most of my life I can say that because I had to experience this myself, I had to sacrifice many times but don't Google that because Google will only give you the meaning of the word, but it will not supply you with the experience you need to gain! [People laugh]. My father used to always refer to a standard Tibetan saying: "The lazy person always feels that practicing Dharma is easy to do, but true practitioners don't get much time to rest." [People laugh] The saying is pretty accurate because to become a right Dharma practitioner, you have to sacrifice a lot. To become a monk, I have to obey the 253 precepts, which means I have to sacrifice 253 different things. [People laugh]. Most importantly, we need to have the wisdom to know what is worth sacrificing for and what isn't.

Second, compassion is one of the essential practices that help us reduce all negative emotions because these can bring a lot of trouble to ourselves, and they tend to ruin our joy and happiness. When you make decisions for yourself, be it at work or in your personal life, you make the decision based on your perspective of what you want the outcome to be, correct? Yet most of us don't do that. Most of us make decisions to satisfy our egos. It's the same for when you argue with someone, you often use powerful words that can often be hurtful, and that is because of your ego, not because of something more extensive. Your decisions are only to satisfy your ego.

My experience in some Southeast Asian countries, I have never met any Southeast Asian who told me, “I don’t know” when talking about different topics. [People laugh] People always try to impose their own knowledge and ideas. Then, something interesting happened to me while in Switzerland. At that time, I discussed with a group a series of topics on how to best manage and operate different things. We chatted a lot with each other, and a Swiss gentleman in the group confided to me that he didn’t know how to do this. He said that he didn’t know how to do it. This surprised me and shocked me all at the same time. Sometimes, because of the ego, we appear to know it all, know very much. There is a fascinating saying in English, which is: “The person who thinks he knows everything he needs to learn the most.” [People laugh] So, sometimes, the feelings of sorrow in our hearts, like pride and anger, can make us make a lot of mistakes than if we were humble about it. Therefore, to reduce the risk of making mistakes, we must practice compassion.

When I talk about practicing compassion, many people misunderstand this. I am not saying that you have to give things to others. I am not telling you to do that. There’s a story of a man who tried to practice compassion but misunderstood the entire concept. This man told his friend he wanted to increase practicing compassion. One of his friends heard that and said to him, “Oh, great, you’re about to practice compassion!” He continued by asking, “So, if you have any two horses, are you willing to give one of the horses up for someone without a horse?” “The man answered,” Yes, certainly because I am practicing compassion.” The friend continued to ask the man, “If you have two cows now, are you willing to give a cow to someone who doesn’t have a cow?” The man answered, “Yes, certainly because I’m practicing compassion.” Responded to the man, and so the friend asked again, the friend asked, “If you have two donkeys, are you willing to donate one to someone who does not have one because you are practicing compassion?” The man promptly replied, “No, I do not.” The friend was surprised that the answer was different from the other two answers you just gave me. Why wouldn’t you want to give away one of your donkeys if you have two?” The Responded that he meant that hypothetically, “because I really do have two donkeys, and I don’t want to give these away.” [People laugh]

So when you practice compassion, this does not mean that we must take immediate action and try to give away your belongings. In terms of work, you do not need to do anything but start using your mind to practice compassion, and then action can follow. By using your mind, I mean that practicing compassion is also used to reduce afflictions, and you need to know that if we are angry at someone we dislike, or angry with the enemy, for example, that anger will always hurt us first, not the enemy. We all

know this well! The anger not only destroys your happiness but also extinguishes the well-being of family members. We know this well, but we still can't stop doing it! I always remember when I was a kid when my father went to work and came back home with a lot of stress that caused him to be in a bad mood. He was never quiet about it, and he would take out the anger on my mother. This is not an isolated case because this is also prevalent in other families as well. Even though we do a lot of chanting and do many rituals in the traditional Tibetan families, it doesn't do much for us if we get angry and don't practice compassion. Keep in mind that practicing compassion and reaping the benefits of compassion are not tied to a religious belief at all. When the Buddha talked about compassion, and he never made it a point to say this was tied in with religion or a doctrine. Buddha spoke about compassion and the relation it has with our minds to help us find inner peace and help us live happier lives. It is a way for us to create happiness in our daily lives; Buddha had no intention of creating a religion at all.

It's commonly known nowadays that even modern medicine and scientists have experimented and discovered that our way of thinking and our spirit has a significant influence on our bodies. Our psychological health and physical health are closely related because, in this 21st century, everyone works a lot and is under enormous amounts of pressure at work. If we always put these stressors on our minds, they will significantly affect our physical health. At the beginning of this year, I was in Bangalore - a developed city in India, a town that specializes in the information technology industry. While there, I met a man who told me the story about a doctor who was then assigned as the head doctor for an IT company. This doctor was in charge of medically testing all employees of the company; his surprise, all the employees at that company suffered from heart disease. All but two, one was the driver, and the other one was the waiter. What's most alarming about this story is that all employees were between the ages of 25 and 40. If we want to avoid this, we have to understand that our moods will significantly affect our physical health at a much more significant impact, something that has already been documented and gained worldwide recognition in recent times. Most people think that the food we eat is the most important, and they are right to a certain degree, but there are other aspects besides food that have a direct link with our health. Every country I go to, I am told that their food is so good for our health. For example, when I was in South India, Indians often said that eating in South India is good for my health, and every country says the same thing. But what about the stress? How can this be reduced? By practicing compassion.

As you can see, our mental health and our physical health are equally influenced by our moods. Negative emotions like anger will cause a lot of trouble for your health. If we know how to practice compassion and how to increase it, it can have a tremendous positive impact on our health. I know someone very active in social work, and he campaigns for people living with HIV. He told me about being in contact with AIDS patients in the late stages and how their moods and mental state affects their physical health during these critical periods. According to my friend, it seems that women with HIV or AIDS had a longer life span compared to men with HIV at the same stage of disease development. In the same final stage, women live longer than men. He told me that he could not understand why this happened. He wondered if it was due to the female immune system possibly having a better immune system than the male immune system, so women live longer and have better disease resistance than men. In my opinion, I feel that there is another reason which is the mental state of women. Women have greater compassion than men, women are indeed able to feel more compassion than men do. A compassionate mind affects the immune system, making the immune system work better and better coping with disease. That is my opinion.

How to meditate on compassion

To all the newcomers in the audience today, I want to give you the necessary steps to practice meditating on compassion. You can go home to practice within a month if you practice and find it beneficial, continue to practice this method. If, after you have practiced for a month, you see nothing happening, you can stop. For these simple steps, every day, you only need to practice for 10 to 15 minutes, no need to practice for too long. Even if it only takes 10 to 15 minutes, someone probably thinks, "Oh, 10 to 15 minutes is too long, it's impossible to find a free time of 10 to 15 minutes in a day!" Reduce your internet use by 10 minutes or watch TV for 10 minutes less! [People laugh]. Talking about time, sometimes I find myself without time, I sometimes find myself having a lot of time. When you say you have a lot of time or don't have a lot of time, it is not about how much of your time is spent, but how it is related to managing your time to get time to work what you want done. If you manage your time well, you will always have time; if you don't manage your time, you'll never have enough time.

In the first step of practicing compassion, I will show you some critical steps for you to practice for a month, and every day you need to spend about 10 to 15 minutes. Morning, 5 minutes; evening, 5 minutes; at work, 5 minutes. Just like that, spend 15 minutes a day, and you practice like that

continuously for a month to see if this method works or not. If, after a month, you feel this method has a positive effect, such as you find yourself more relaxed, calmer, and feel peaceful inside, then continue to practice the technique. If you think there is not much difference, stop. But one thing we need to know is that it's much better to try it than to do nothing. The critical practice points in the method I speak here are for those who are just beginning to learn about Buddhism.

The first essential step is to close your eyes and think about the people we love, such as family, parents, children, friends, etc. and wish them a happy and blessed life without any suffering; also wish for all their pain to dissipate. Please do so. This is the first step - a wish for everyone to be happy. When you do that, think about how much happiness you can bring to them. Think of their suffering as a type of black light entering your body; the bliss and the joy in the form of white light that is absorbed into the people you love. So at this point, close your eyes and think about those you love, such as your parents, your family, you ... you believe that you will receive all their suffering in the form of black light - when you breathe in, their pain will take the form of black light that penetrates and penetrates inside you. When you exhale, exhale all your inner bliss and happiness in the way of white light and this white light will go out, permeating into the body of your loved ones when you think of them. Please practice it like that. Penetrate with light the bodies of your loved ones when you think about them. Please practice it like that.

When you think that you take away all the sufferings of your loved ones and give away all your happiness, then you should not be afraid, because what you believe is not reality, meaning that all their suffering does not penetrate your being. So do not be scared, but continue to do so to practice compassion. For example, if you see a rich and happy king, you close your eyes and think that you inhale that entire king's happiness on your side, will you achieve satisfaction? Is that good or not? No, of course not. Just like that, when you think of someone, assuming that you will receive all his or her sufferings on your own does not mean that you genuinely receive all their pain.

There are two verses: "Let us pray for all the beings of the parents in the six paths to be happy, and pray that all the sentient beings of the six paths are liberated from suffering." Think about those two verses. On the way, when you encounter any person suffering, any animal suffering or any being suffering, then pray for that sentient being, for that person, for that animal or insect to escape the pains and pray for those beings to be happy, to be at peace. When you go home, or to your office, whenever you have free

time, think like that, you should pray for everyone else to be happy, pray for all beings to be free from suffering. The ultimate goal of practicing compassion is not to understand how others feel, but to be able to feel what others are feeling. These are essential points for you to practice compassion, and you should try to practice for a month, taking 10 to 15 minutes a day to practice. Please practice these methods that will not cause you any form of loss. Continue this practice like this for a whole month and see what results this gives you.

Scientist Thomas Edison, the inventor of the electric light bulb, said, "I didn't fail. I only found a thousand ways that didn't work." He had tried it so many times and never thought he would fail at all. When he had unsuccessful experiments, he said he had not failed but that he had found a thousand ineffective ways. Similarly, when you practice 10-15 minutes daily for one month, but it does not work, it does not mean that you failed; you only know that the method used wasn't successful. [People laugh] So if you see the practice working, it is perfect, and if you do not succeed, it is good, because you will know that this method is not practical for you. However, I think the success rate of this method will be very high!

* * *

* Dipkar U.S. Editorial Board translated and revised this text for the second time on 10/20/2019.

May the profound Dharma of Shakyamuni shine forever.