REVIEW OF RESEARCH
ISSN: 2249-894X
IMPACT FACTOR : 5.7631(UIF)
VOLUME - 14 | ISSUE - 12 | SEPTEMBER - 2025

THE NATURE OF COMPASSION (*KARUNĀ*) IN BUDDHISM

Komala
Ph.D. Research Scholar, Department of Buddhist Studies, Acharya Nagarjuna University, Nagarjuna Nagar, Guntur, AP, India.

ABSTRACT

This article examines the concepts and practice differences between selfishness, apathy, empathy and sympathy, empathy and compassion, paying special attention to its treatment in Buddhist philosophy, contemporary moral theory and neuroscience. Although empathy and sympathy are often confused with compassion, the Buddhist scriptures define Karunā as an ethical character cultivated in the goal of reducing and preventing misery, transcending pity and emotional contagion. Contemporary thinkers support this distinction: empathy is biased and parochial, and at the same time expresses compassion as an evaluation and judgment involving undeserved pain and sharing flourishing. Neuroscientific studies confirm these claims by distinguishing empathy's activation of pain circles with compassion and adjacent and pro-social networks.

KEYWORDS : *Compassion, love-kindness, non-self, emptiness, dependent origination, apathy, sympathy, empathy, pity, emotional cotagion, affective resonance, preventive ethics, responsibility, charity, universal love, ethical action, emotional resonance, moral responsibility, cognitive effort, neuroscience of compassion, prosocial networks.*

INTRODUCTION

This discussion of compassion has long been oscillated between religious, philosophical and scientific frameworks, but the concept often risks conflation with adjacent terms such as sympathy and empathy. While popular psychology and common discussion use these terms interchangeably, both classical Buddhist sources and contemporary moral philosophy rely on precise distinctions. To define compassion only as an affective resonance with suffering, or as "empathy in action", is to hide its unique structure as an ethically cultivated disposition that surpasses the limits of instinctive response. Paul Bloom observes in his criticism of empathy, empathy can be biased, parochial and short-sighted, while compassion is more distant, deliberative and constructive. That's why compassion is not just a psychological phenomenon, but also a normative orientation. Within Buddhist thinking, compassion (karuṇā) takes a central role as one of the Brahmavihāras, the divine abodes, but it cannot be reduced to pity or emotional contagion.

Buddhaghosa's Visuddhimagga describes it as the characteristic of being moved during the suffering of others, its function is to remove their suffering, its manifestation or non-cruelty, and its

closest cause to see helplessness in those who are overwhelmed by suffering. Such an account shows that compassion is not exhausted by affective resonance, but requires voluntary commitment to prevent and alleviate suffering. Neuroscientific studies further underpin this distinction by showing that empathy activates neural circuits associated with personal pain, while compassionate affiliative systems are associated with love and positive influence.

Thus, an integrative analysis is necessary - one that draws from Buddhist philosophy, Aristotelian-inflected theories of emotions such as Martha Nussbaum's, and contemporary psychological accounts. Such a framework shows us that compassion is not only an intensification of sympathy or empathy, but a qualitatively distinct phenomenon: a cultivated, resilient and action-oriented disposition aimed at relieving and preventing suffering. As the Mettā Sutta explains, "Just as a mother would protect her only child with her life, so one lets cultivate a boundless love for all beings." This metaphor of boundless, maternal care underlines the fact that compassion cannot be reduced to instinct or sentimentality, but represents the highest ethical state of mind.

BODY:

Selfishness or egoism is not to be brought back to an ontological claim about the self, but rather describes an ethical orientation in which the pursuit of benefit of the subject occurs at the expense of the suffering of others. To equate selfishness to anattā—as if the latter only meant "no strong and stable self" is philosophically misleading. The Buddhist doctrine of anattā is directly not a moral quality, but an ontological negation of substantial self, as articulated in the Anattalakkhaṇasutta: "Bhikkhus, form is not a self, feeling is not self, perception is not a self, voluntary formations are not even, awareness is not itself. If, bhikkhus, form itself was, then this form would not lead to misery, and it should be relating to form: 'Let my form be like this; let my form not be like that.' But because form is not itself, leads form leads to suffering..."

Thus, anattā indicates the structural impossibility of finding a permanent, autonomous self within the aggregates, not a psychological disposition of selfishness or altruism. Egoism as a moral phenomenon instead comes from the persistence of ego-construction and posessive attachment or mine-ness, which are rooted in ignorance, craving and feeling adore to one's belongings. Sāntideva in the bodhicaryāvatāra sharply criticizes this egocentric disposition: "All the suffering in the world comes from the search for pleasure for oneself, while all the happiness in the world comes from seeking the happiness of others" Here, selfishness is not equated with the absence of self, but is understood as a result of the delusion of selgrimage. The corrective is therefore not to misidentify selfishness with anattā, but to recognize selfishness as precisely the failure to internalize the truth of anattā. Moving on to apathy, one must carefully distinguish it from both compassion and neutrality.

Apathy or disinterest indicates emotional dissolution of the suffering of others, often arising from exhaustion, nihilistic resignation or cynicism. Unlike selfishness, it cannot exploit the suffering of others directly, but still remains ethically problematic because it neutralizes the possibility of compassion. As Damien Keown observes, "the absence of compassion is not morally neutral, because in Buddhism the failure to respond to the suffering of others even a form of moral blindness is based on ignorance" However, apathy should not be confused with Buddhist non-adherence of neutrality, often incorrectly translated as indifference, is in fact a cultivated balance of mind in the face of pleasure and pain, achieved through insight into perception and non-self. Visuddhimagga explains: "neutral equanimity to beings means the state of mind that looks impartial, as one a stranger, all beings, whether they are neutral, hostile or dear" Thus, neutral balance is not a cold detachment, but a non-preferred openness that enables compassion without participation. To confuse apathy with neutral balance is to confuse ignorance-driven emotional exhaustion for wisdom-driven non-attachment.

Although apathy is regarded as being calm, it is not caring for oneself and others since it needs sophisticate diagnosis. True apathy, in the pathological sense, is neither compassion nor wisdom. It is a stunted affective reaction, which can arise in situations of despair, trauma, or desensitization. It can

coexist with self-satisfaction, which explains why those engaged in superficial charitable acts without real compassion can appear indifferent, even when performing socially sanctioned rituals of giving. Nevertheless, Buddhism would not classify such apathy as morally neutral, because indifference in the face of suffering still retains saṃsārical ignorance. In short, selfishness comes from sticking to the illusion of self, while apathy is derived from the erosion of compassion and misunderstanding of neutral balance. Both deviate from the Buddhist path, although in different ways. To misunderstand selfishness or anattā or to combine apathy with upekkhā or neutral balance to happiness and woe risks that collapse different doctrinal and ethical categories. The Buddhist philosophical task is precisely to show that liberation involves the dismantling of selfishness through wisdom, overcoming apathy through compassion and perpetuated balance.

In both Western moral philosophy and Buddhist thought, compassion (karuṇā) cannot be reduced to the mere recognition of suffering without affective involvement. Sympathy with mere-recognition of suffering actually resonates more with pity, which in many traditions is treated as a limited or distorted response to suffering. Aristotle, for example, distinguishes pity (eleos) from other emotions, and defines it as "a kind of pain at an apparent evil of a devastating or painful species that someone who does not deserve it, and that one can expect, or one of the friends, to expect to suffer" This shows that sympathy represents recognition of suffering, but is rooted in projection and anxiety, rather than the ethical openness of compassion. In contrast, in Buddhism, karuṇā is not external recognition, but an affective and existential attitude to relieve the suffering.

Visuddhimagga declares: Compassion has the characteristic of being displaced during the suffering of others. His function is to remove their suffering. Thus, to give empathy or compassion as "just recognition" is philosophically wrong since the latter is inseparable from both emotional resonance and practical orientation towards relief. It is ovious that the treatment of empathy as "deeper than sympathy" is more accurate, but still requires clarification. Empathy indicates a participatory awareness of someone else's affective life, not only recognition.

As Edith Stein describes: "In empathy we gain experiences that are not lived by ourselves become, but by others, yet they are given to us in such a way that they are still present." Unlike sympathy, which can remain external, empathy is exactly co-feeling or resonance that bridges inner and outer dimensions. True empathy does not include simply imagining the pain of another, but affectively participating in it without invading self-other boundaries. Empathy comes from a Buddhist lens, but does not fully correspond to Karuṇā, yet. While empathy may remain a common affective resonance, karuṇā integrates both affective motion and voluntary orientation to action.

Sāntideva writes in the bodhicaryāvatāra: "Whoever wants to quickly give protection to himself and others must practice that holy secret: the exchange of self and others." This shows that compassion not only requires resonance, but also transformative ethical commitment. Empathy can waver in passivity with irresposibility that feels like someone else will do it, while compassion requires overcoming such selfish effortlessness. Finally, the account of motivation and non-motivation in empathy comes into line with contemporary psychology, but finds richer articulation in Buddhist analysis of favorable and unfavorable mental states or kusalākusaldhammas.

The Saṃyutta Nikāya emphasizes that mind is the forerunner of material and immaterial things; it is their head, they are made of mind. This implies that affective resonance of sympathy and empathy must be combined with deliberate cultivation of favorable dispositions, otherwise it risks disappearing into inactive or selective care. Such is the correct distinction as follows: pity is recognition with projection, sympathy a reconition of suffering, empathy a participatory resonance while compassion is the ethically cultivated transformation of empathy into action with wisdom to dissolve the problems and their roots. To combine these, nuanced philosophical categories are to be differentiated. Compassion in Buddhism is not to be reducible to instinct, nor only for samādhi; it is the deliberate cultivation of an affective-cognitive-volitional structure that transcends the limitations of both sympathy and empathy.

Compassion as the other side of the coin compared to empathy rightly indicates that it transcends the usual mirroring of someone else's suffering, but it risks misrepresenting the Buddhist view by reducing compassion to pragmatic solution search. Compassion (*karuṇā*) in Buddhist thought is not simply instrumental, but is defined with the characteristic of serious attention to suffering of others, its function is to remove their suffering, its manifestation or non-cruelty, and its nearest cause seeing helplessness in those overwhelmed by suffering.

In this sense, while Western psychology and philosophy distinguish between empathy or resonance and compassion as proactive relief, Buddhism stands for the inseparability of affective openness and voluntary commitment. Paul Bloom claims that "empathy can be biased, parochial and short-sighted, while compassion is more distanced, deliberative and constructive." He highlights the danger of equalizing moral life with just emotional contagion. Compassion, in contrast to empathy, is not exhausted by the mirroring of suffering in the anterior cingulate cortex or the mirror-neuron system, but is aligned with affiliative emotions rooted in oxytocin release.

Neuroscientific research supports this distinction by showing that empathy for pain activates brain circles involved in one's own pain, while compassion activates networks associated with affiliation and positive influence. This neurological distinction remarkably corresponds to the Buddhist emphasis on *mettā* (loving-kindness) and *karuṇā* (compassion), which are not passive reflections, but cultivated dispositions that transmute the suffering in active benevolence.

Martha Nussbaum captures this normative dimension when she claims that compassion requires the judgment that the suffering is serious, the belief that the suffering is not deserved, and the thought that one's own bloom is connected to that of the sufferer. This triadic structure is parallel to the Buddhist idea that compassion includes not only recognition, but also insight into non-self (*anattā*) and interdependence (*paṭiccasamuppāda*). So compassion does not stop feeling, but turns into an evaluative and ethical attitude aimed at prevention and relief. The focus on preventing the suffering that hasn't happened, yet resonates with Śāntideva's insisting that the bodhisattva wishes to remove the suffering of others as if it were his own and to avoid future suffering before it arises. In both traditions, compassion is essentially prospective and preventive rather than reactive alone. The mother's metaphor of compassion in Buddhism further underlines this point.

The Mettā Sutta explains: "Just as a mother would protect her only child with her life, let one thus cultivate a boundless love for all beings." This image cannot be reduced to instinctual empathy, but represents the paradigmatic form of compassion: an all-encompassing, self-transcending care that universally expands. Nevertheless, tointerpret compassion as only empathy in action risks falling into a narrower psychological mechanism. True Buddhist sympathy integrates empathy and sympathy, but surpasses both through its deliberate, cultivated and boundless orientation towards the hapiness well-being and welfare of all beings through the help to overcome their suffering.

CONCLUSION:

The analysis shows that compassion, well understood, cannot be collapsed in sympathy or mere recognition of suffering, nor in empathy or affective resonance. Sympathy risks reduction to compassion as rooted in projection and anxiety, while empathy has the risk of staying a form of emotional contagion that is a bias, parochial and short-sighted. Compassion in its highest form, in contrast, forms an ethically cultivated orientation that integrates feeling, cognition and volition in a way that neither pity nor empathy can sustain From the Buddhist perspective, karuṇā is not exhausted by emotional identification, but is rooted in the deep ontological insight of anattā and paṭiccasamuppāda. It has the characteristic of the suffering of the suffering of others, their function is affectively and pragmatically to remove their suffering, and its manifestation. It is not reactive, but preventive, and extends beyond the present suffering to the effort to avoid future suffering. Philosophically, compassion as serious recognition of suffering, the judgment of one's undeservedness of misery, and the realization that one's blossoming is intertwined with that of others.

Nevertheless, Buddhism goes further, even the category of selfhood deconstruction and thereby radicalizing the ethical horizon: it is not only care for another individual, but the living recognition that oneself and others who should eradicate the attachment to any intrinsic essence, universalizing it by reducing babaric instinct and rooting it in cultivated boundlessness. Thus, compassion arises as the highest ethical state precisely because it transcends both instinctual influence and narrow self-interest. It is not reduced to neural mirroring nor limited to cultural recipes, but forms a cultivated mode of being that unites cognitive clarity, affective resonance and practical commitment. As sympathy recognizes and empathy resonates, compassion changes: it is the philosophical and ethical movement from passive recognition to active responsibility. In this sense, compassion is not only the core of Buddhist practice, but also a bridge on traditions, which unites philosophical, theological and scientific perspectives in the recognition that human blossoming is inseparable from the relief of suffering in all beings.

REFERENCES:

1. Keown, Damien. The nature of Buddhist ethics. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 1992.
2. Aristotle. On Rhetoric: A Theory of Civil Discussion. Translated by George A. Kennedy. New York: Oxford University Press, 1991.
3. Bodhi, Bhikkhu, trans. The Connected Discussions of the Buddha: A Translation of the Saṃyutta Nikāya. Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2000.
4. Śāntideva. the bodhicaryāvatāra. Translated by Kate Crosby and Andrew Skilton. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995.
5. Stein, Edith. About the problem of empathy. Translated by Waltraut Stein. Washington, D.C.: ICS Publications, 1989.
6. Bloom, Paul. Against empathy: the case for rational compassion. New York: Ecco/HarperCollins, 2016.
7. Bodhi, Bhikkhu, Trans. The Numerical Discussions of the Buddha: A Translation of the Aṅguttara Nikāya. Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2012.
8. Buddhaghosa. The path of purification (Visuddhimagga). Translated by bhikkhu ñāṇamoli. Seattle: BPS Pariyatti Editions, 2010.
9. Nussbaum, Martha C. Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001.
10. Singer, Tania, and Olga M. Klimecki. "Empasy and compassion." Current biology, vol. 24, no. 18, 2014.