

Being Kind to Oneself Means Being Kind to Others: A Buddhist Approach to  
Rational Self-Interest, Selflessness, and Altruism

## 1. Loving-kindness

When I was a young teenager I was very inspired by a passage from the Bible, which I copied out on a piece of paper, carried around in my pocket, and checked periodically each day (at my boarding school here in Oxford). I very much wanted to develop the qualities expressed in it. However, I was disappointed to find myself falling far short of them and eventually gave up checking the passage, though I always kept it in my heart. This famous passage, you may have guessed, is 1 Corinthians 13, which contains a definition of love (*agape*) as follows:

[4] Love is patient and kind; love is not jealous or boastful; [5] it is not arrogant or rude; love does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; [6] it does not rejoice at wrong, but rejoices in the right; [7] love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things; [8] Love never ends.<sup>1</sup>

This passage expressed my young spiritual aspirations, and I continued to look for a way to actualise them. A few years later I embarked on the study of philosophy, which eventually led me to encounter some wonderful Buddhist masters, particularly His Holiness the Dalai Lama and Geshe Lhundup Sopa. The teachings and qualities of Jesus Christ that touched my heart as a teenager appeared to be laid out in detail by Śākyamūni Buddha and very much embodied by these masters. While there are significant differences in doctrine between Christianity and Buddhism, we cannot deny the similarities between certain teachings and spiritual qualities. Here, I would like to draw attention to a correspondence between the qualities expressed in the above passage about love and those presented in Buddhist texts under the heading of mental factors.

Among the mental factors taught in Buddhist texts, there are those that are virtuous, such as joyous effort, and those that are non-virtuous, such as hatred. Some of the virtuous

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<sup>1</sup> 1 Corinthians 13, v.4-8: Revised Standard Version (1952).

mental factors are expressed as negations in opposition to specific non-virtuous factors. An example of this is the mental factor, non-hatred. We can recognize a similar pattern in the above passage, where most of the characteristics of love are expressed as negations, such as *not jealous, not arrogant*, and so on. Within the Buddhist presentation of mental factors, negations such as these do not indicate a mere absence of the non-virtuous attribute concerned, but indicate an experiential state that actively displaces that non-virtuous attribute. I suspect the same principle may apply to the definition of love above. Love here, perhaps, is not merely an absence of jealousy, but an inner experience that prevents it from occurring. In Buddhist texts, the mental factors have precise definitions, which I shall discuss below. But first I should like to say something about the presentation of mind and mental factors in general.

In general, the Buddhist notion of *mind* encompasses all subjective experience: sensual, intellectual, emotional, and spiritual. There are perceptual as well as conceptual types of awareness, and there are gross, subtle, and very subtle levels of awareness. In the *abhidharma / abhidhamma* texts and commentaries, mental phenomena (*nāma / ming*) are analysed into two kinds: primary minds (*citta / sems*),<sup>2</sup> and mental factors (*caitta / cetasika / sems 'byung*). All agree that a primary mind cognises an object, while the mental factors accompanying it cognise specific qualities of that object. Only one type of primary mind can arise in any given moment within a person's mental continuum. However, a primary mind never arises in isolation—it is accompanied by a minimum number of mental factors (the characteristics of which are similar in all traditions, though their number and grouping differ).<sup>3</sup>

A primary mind and its accompanying mental factors mutually condition each other. A common metaphor expressing the relationship between a primary mind and its accompanying mental factors is that of a hand reaching out to grasp something; the primary mind is like the palm, and the mental factors are like the fingers. The palm of the hand cannot grasp something without the fingers; and the fingers cannot function without

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<sup>2</sup> Primary minds are the six sense consciousnesses: eye-, ear-, nose-, tongue-, body-, and mental-consciousness (the latter includes conceptual thoughts as well as non-conceptual mental awareness—such as certain types of meditative concentration and yogic perception).

<sup>3</sup> The *Theravāda* tradition lists fifty-two mental factors, divided into six groups. Vasubandhu's *Abhidharmakośabhāṣya* (*ADKBh*) lists forty-six mental factors, divided into six groups. Asaṅga's *Abhidharmasamuccaya* lists fifty-one mental factors, divided into six groups.

the palm. Together they make up the hand as a whole, which functions through a co-operation of its parts. Likewise, what Westerners commonly call “mind” is, from a Buddhist point of view, made up of many parts and functions through a co-operation of those parts—each of which is in flux. Primary minds and mental factors are all changing every moment. They arise in dependence upon previous moments of mind along with other causes and conditions. A primary mind is very much affected by its accompanying mental factors, just as a clear glass of water is coloured and clouded by the addition of a few drops of milk. Because of this, it is most important for a Buddhist practitioner to be able to identify within his or her own mental continuum any positive, negative, and neutral mental factors that are arising, abiding, and passing away in any given moment. Only then can it be possible to counteract negative tendencies of mind and cultivate a virtuous, peaceful, stream of awareness.

At the behest of His Holiness the Dalai Lama, a select group of Geshe has recently composed a series of Tibetan texts presenting the teachings given in the great Indian Buddhist commentaries (2<sup>nd</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> centuries A.D.) upon which Tibetan Buddhism is founded. Provisionally called *Kuntue Compendium*, the second part of volume one says:

On the one hand, among the fifty-one divisions of mental factors, both love and compassion are in the nature of the mental factor, non-hatred. On the other hand there is a difference between them: compassion arises upon observing sentient beings to be suffering and has the feature of wishing them to be free of that; love arises upon observing them in terms of happiness and has the feature of wishing sentient beings to possess that.<sup>4</sup>

This expresses the specific characteristics of compassion, wishing sentient beings to be free from suffering, and the specific characteristics of love, wishing sentient beings to be happy. Both of them are in the nature of non-hatred. Here, as mentioned above, *non-hatred* does not indicate a mere absence of hatred; it indicates a force that counteracts hatred. Love and compassion are mental factors that dispel hatred.

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<sup>4</sup> *Kuntue Compendium*, Chapter 8, section 4(d), (forthcoming: 2017).

Let us look at a selection of mental factors in relation to some of the qualities expressed in the definition of love above. Among these qualities, I would like to highlight the following: love, patience, and non-resentfulness. *Love*, as we have just noted, is a mind that wishes beings to be happy. It is also called *loving-kindness* in Buddhist texts, which we shall come to below. Within the presentation of mental factors, it is often expressed as a negation: non-hatred. Here we should note that while certain mental factors may be expressed as negations, their definitions often explicitly state positive, affirming qualities. Thus, to understand what a particular mental state actually involves, one must always examine its definition. *Kuntue Compendium* defines non-hatred as follows:

This is a mental factor that, upon perceiving any of the three objects that give rise to anger, destroys the arising of anger and functions to prevent any wish to harm, and so on. The three objects that give rise to anger are: sentient beings; manifest suffering; and circumstances that produce manifest suffering.<sup>5</sup>

*Patience* is much like love. *Kuntue Compendium* cites a Mahāyāna Buddhist sutra that characterizes it as follows:

“Mañjuśrī said, ‘Daughter, how do you explain *non-hatred*?’ His spiritual daughter replied, ‘Mañjuśrī, it is that which stops hatred arising in the mind and prevents the harming of any object; this I understand to be *patience*.’”<sup>6</sup>

There are three kinds of patience discussed in Buddhist texts: patience in not retaliating when deliberately harmed; patience in accepting pain and difficulties; and patience in ascertaining the truth. The latter refers to an understanding of *selflessness*, or *emptiness*, which we shall come to below—and you will need plenty of patience for that! For a detailed teaching on patience, I highly recommend reading volume 3 of Geshe Sopa’s commentary, *Steps on the Path to Enlightenment*, which also references the classic work, *Engaging in the Bodhisattva’s Deeds (Bodhisattva-caryāvatāra)*, by Śāntideva (8<sup>th</sup> century A.D.).

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<sup>5</sup> *Kuntue Compendium*, Chapter 8, section 3.

<sup>6</sup> *Kuntue Compendium*, Chapter 8, section 4(c), citing *Play of Mañjuśrī Sūtra (Ārya-Mañjuśrī-vikrīḍita-nāma-mahāyāna-sūtra)*

In relation to the third characteristic of love that we are considering here, *non-resentfulness*, let us look at what Buddhist texts have to say about its opposite: resentment. *Kuntue Compendium* says:

This is a mental factor, included as part of anger, that does not let go of the wish to inflict harm. Since it tightly holds a continuous grudge, it is called *resentment*, or literally, *holding a grudge*. *Compendium of Knowledge* says, “What is resentment? Included as part of anger and following in its wake, it does not let go of harmful intent; it functions as a basis for impatience.”<sup>7</sup>

Here we see a causal connection between resentment and impatience. *Kuntue Compendium* further explains that, “Love functions to pacify resentment, rage, and harmful intent based upon perceiving sentient beings.”<sup>8</sup>

The natural love that human beings experience, such as the love between parents and children, can be very powerful and passionate. Most people have been fortunate enough to experience the love of a parent or carer in their childhood. This kind of love, though limited to specific individuals and vulnerable to changing conditions, can act as a basis for a more universal and stable kind of love that is generated by means of spiritual training. One such spiritual training is the *loving-kindness* (*mettā*) meditation practice found within the Buddhist tradition. This meditation practice is the first of a four-part recollection designed to develop the following qualities within oneself: love, compassion, joy, and equanimity. The loving-kindness meditation is usually divided into four stages in terms of its object of focus: (1) oneself, (2) a dear friend, (3) a neutral person, and (4) a hostile person. The love that arises naturally towards oneself or one’s friend is steadily directed equally towards the neutral and hostile beings; then it is gradually expanded to encompass all living beings. As a prerequisite to beginning the loving-kindness meditation practice, one recollects the danger in harbouring hatred, which causes one to harm living beings, and the advantage in sustaining tolerance, which prevents one from harming living beings. Then, in order to reduce the danger and increase the advantage, one embarks upon the development of loving-kindness. As the famous Buddhist commentator, Buddhaghosa (5<sup>th</sup> century A.D.), explains in his *Path of Purification* (*Visuddhimagga*):

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<sup>7</sup> *Kuntue Compendium*, Chapter 8, section 6.

First of all it should be developed only towards oneself, doing it repeatedly thus: ‘May I be happy and free from suffering,’ or ‘May I keep myself free from enmity, affliction and anxiety, and live happily.’

If that is so, does it not conflict with what is said in the texts? For there is no mention of any development of it towards oneself in what is said in the Vibhaṅga: “And how does a bhikkhu dwell pervading one direction with his heart filled with lovingkindness? Just as he would feel lovingkindness on seeing a dearly loved person, so he pervades all beings with lovingkindness.” (Vbh. 272); ...

It does not conflict. Why not? Because that refers to absorption. But this [initial development towards oneself] refers to [making oneself] an example. For even if he developed lovingkindness for a hundred or a thousand years in this way, “I am happy,” and so on, absorption would never arise. But if he develops it in this way: “I am happy. Just as I want to be happy and dread pain, as I want to live and not to die, so do other beings, too,” making himself the example, then desire for other beings’ welfare and happiness arises in him. And this method is indicated by the Blessed One’s saying:

I visited all quarters with my mind  
Nor found I any dearer than myself;  
Self is likewise to every other dear;  
Who loves himself will never harm another.<sup>9</sup>

This final line, “Who loves himself will never harm another,” is worth noting and keeping in one’s heart. The phrase, “will never harm,” means, “would not harm,” and is translated elsewhere as “should not harm.”<sup>10</sup> Thus it may be interpreted as either descriptive or normative. I prefer the descriptive interpretation. This suggests that a person who harms another living being does not genuinely love himself. In other words, being kind to oneself means being kind to others. We can reflect further on this below.

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<sup>8</sup> *Kuntue Compendium*, Chapter 8, section 4 (b).

<sup>9</sup> Buddhaghosa, *Path of Purification (Visuddhimagga)* IX: 8-10, trans. Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli (1991). Buddhist Publication Society: Kandy, Sri Lanka. Citing S.i, 75; Ud. 47: *Sabbā disā anuparigamma cetasā / Nevajjhagā piyataramattanā kvaci / Evaṃ piyo puthu attā paresaṃ / Tasmā na hiṃse paraṃ attakāmoti //*

<sup>10</sup> *Samyutta Nikaya* I,171-2 [75], trans. Bhikkhu Bodhi (2000). Wisdom Publications: Boston, USA.

Now, the section of the *Path of Purification* in which the above passage occurs is primarily discussing the cultivation of *immeasurable* loving-kindness, which is a transformation of the mind that depends upon a special meditative concentration or absorption called *jhana*. Using loving-kindness meditation as one's practice, absorption can only be developed by focusing on another being as the meditation object; it will not arise by focusing on oneself alone. This exemplifies the important role that others play in one's own spiritual development. An individual gains lasting happiness through training the mind in accordance with instructions and inspiration from his or her spiritual teachers. And other beings who fall into any of the three categories—friendly, neutral, or hostile—are also essential for one's progress. In this case, both oneself and others are needed as meditation objects in order to develop immeasurable love. However, they are needed at different stages of development. At the beginning one focuses on oneself alone; then one focuses on the friendly, the neutral, and the hostile persons as well; finally one extends this to encompass all living beings. Engaging in this practice on a daily basis will eventually enable one to develop genuine love towards all beings equally. This will arise quite naturally when all the causes and conditions are present. It is simply a matter of cultivating one's mental continuum in a gentle way.

## 2. Self-interest versus self-grasping

Genuine love towards all beings includes love towards oneself. A genuine wish for oneself to be happy is surely an expression of self-interest. There are various types of self-interest listed in Western dictionaries of philosophy. Here, I have highlighted Rational Self-Interest in particular. This is because I recently came across some talks of Ayn Rand and found the notions of *self-interest* and *altruism* presented in her theory of Objectivism very surprising. Rand's chosen successor, Leonard Peikoff, writes:

The Objectivist position can be indicated in three words. The ultimate value is *life*. The primary virtue is *rationality*. The proper beneficiary is *oneself*.<sup>11</sup>

Based on these three points, Rand argues that *altruism* is irrational and therefore immoral. While there are aspects of Rand's theory that I wholeheartedly appreciate, such as the

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<sup>11</sup> Leonard Peikoff (1991: 206), *Objectivism: The Philosophy of Ayn Rand*, Meridian: New York.

importance of rationality and of self-esteem, and that everyone is worthy of happiness and worthy of living, I suggest that her notion of *altruism* is too limited. She places it in opposition to *self-interest*, which she identifies as sustaining one's own welfare by an act of choice and as a matter of principle. *Altruism*, Peikoff informs us, "is not a synonym for kindness, generosity, or goodwill, but the doctrine that man should place others above self as the fundamental rule of life."<sup>12</sup> According to the Objectivist position, *altruism* entails *self-sacrifice*, which is equated with a total *lack of self-esteem*. Peikoff offers an explanation of sacrifice as follows:

A "sacrifice" is the surrender of a value, such as money, career, loved ones, freedom, for the sake of a lesser value or of a non-value (if one acquires an equal or greater value from a transaction, then it is an even trade or a gain, not a sacrifice).<sup>13</sup>

The Objectivist notions of *self-interest* and *altruism* are very different from those employed in Buddhist theory and practice, which I hope will become clear as we proceed. First I would like to point out that, from a Buddhist perspective, *self-interest* and *altruism* are not theories; they are experienced states of mind. The Buddha primarily showed human beings how to develop a peaceful, virtuous stream of awareness. While logical analysis is indeed required in order to develop certain virtuous states of mind and to uproot the inner cause of suffering, this kind of philosophical activity is a spiritual exercise, not a theory.

Wishing oneself to be happy may be labelled a type of *self-interest* in Buddhist discourse. However, it is very different from *self-grasping*. The former is rational and brings peace within one's mind-stream. The latter is irrational and creates disturbance within one's mind-stream. One problem here is that the term "self-interest" is ambiguous. It can be employed in English language Buddhist discourse to refer either to *self-grasping* or to genuine *self-love*. Therefore, instead of using the general term "self-interest," I shall use two separate terms—*self-love*, and *self-grasping*. We already touched on *self-love* in section 1 above, so now let us turn to the uniquely Buddhist notion of *self-grasping*.

What is *self-grasping*? It is a mental factor, as outlined earlier, that is an instance of a particular distorted understanding. This distorted understanding is called *viewing inherent*

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<sup>12</sup> Leonard Peikoff (1991: 240), *Objectivism: The Philosophy of Ayn Rand*, Meridian: New York.



*identity (satkāyadr̥ṣṭi)* and is also known as *self-grasping*. There are at least two levels of this type of grasping, and more than one interpretation of them. However, here we shall be considering the most subtle level as presented by the great Indian Buddhist masters, Nāgārjuna (2<sup>nd</sup> century A.D.) and Candrakīrti (7<sup>th</sup> century A.D.). *Self-grasping*, at a subtle level, is a naturally arising mental factor that grasps the self as bearing its identity from its own side, independently of a mind perceiving or conceiving it. It functions at such a fundamental level of awareness that most people are quite unaware of it and of its pervasive influence, though they may be aware of the disturbances it generates. This distorted understanding, *self-grasping* or *viewing inherent identity*, is discussed at length by Candrakīrti who identifies it as the fundamental cause of suffering, and outlines how to remove it from the mind-stream, in the following verse from his root text, *Entering the Middle Way (Madhyamakāvātāra—MA 6:120)*:

Seeing with wisdom that all afflictions and faults  
Arise from *viewing inherent identity*,  
And having understood the self to be its object,  
The *yogin* negates the self.<sup>14</sup>

*nyon mongs skyon rnams ma lus 'jig tshogs la*  
*lta las byung bar blo yis mthong gyur cing*  
*bdag ni 'di yi yul du rtogs byas nas*  
*rnal 'byor pa yis bdag ni 'gog par byed*

In this context, what does it mean to negate the self? Candrakīrti's verse, and his commentary on it, situate this negation of the self firmly in its place as a meditative realization that gradually destroys *viewing inherent identity* and its unwelcome effects. The realization of selflessness is a mind of supreme meditative wisdom that perceives the absence of the self that is the object of this distorted understanding, *self-grasping*. Here, the object of *self-grasping* does not concern simply *what* is held, but *the way in which* it is held. The *absence of self*, according to Candrakīrti, is equivalent to *emptiness*, the absence of inherent identity; and *self-grasping* is a mental factor that wrongly holds its object to bear

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<sup>13</sup> Leonard Peikoff (1991: 232), *Objectivism: The Philosophy of Ayn Rand*, Meridian: New York.

its identity from its own side. This type of grasping, especially when focused upon oneself, functions as the root of all the other mental afflictions and their resultant uncontrolled rebirth (*saṃsāra*). The supreme wisdom of meditative equipoise seeing *emptiness*, or *selflessness*, acts as the direct antidote to the habitually-arising afflicted mind *grasping at the self* thereby gradually removing it from the practitioner's mind-stream. Since the root cause of any non-virtuous thinking, any disturbing emotion, and any painful experience is *self-grasping*, or *viewing inherent identity*, the basic goal of a Buddhist practitioner is to eliminate it completely.

### 3. Selflessness

Notions of “who I am” *per se* are not the problem. Even the Buddha speaks of himself, and identifies himself, in normal discourse, as do other masters.<sup>15</sup> So, to negate the object as held by afflicted *self-grasping* does not mean that the self is denied in a conventional sense. According to Tsongkhapa's interpretation of Candrakīrti, the object held by *self-grasping* is the self held to exist from its own side, not the self *per se*. Thus, we have a self that is negated, and a self that is affirmed. The affirmed self, a ‘mere I’ conventionally imputed upon the aggregates, enables a spiritually advanced person to maintain “a sense of who I am” without holding it to bear its identity objectively.

Generally speaking, all Buddhist systems accept that the self is imputed upon the aggregates of appropriation. Several masters, including Candrakīrti, quote the following Early Buddhist *sutta/sūtra* verses as their source:

In saying, ‘self,’ O Māra,  
You are viewing [wrongly];  
The aggregates are empty of it;  
There is no sentient being here.

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<sup>14</sup> *Madhyamakāvatāra (MA)* 6: 120. Cited in *Prasannapadā (PP)* (La Vallée Poussin's Sanskrit edition, then incorporating de Jong's adjustments): *PP (LVP/dj)* (340.8-11): *satkāyadr̥ṣṭiprabhavān aśeṣān kleśāṃś ca doṣāṃś ca dhiyā vipaśyan / ātmānam asyā viśayaṃ ca buddhvā yogī karoty ātmaniṣedham eva //*

<sup>15</sup> This is born out by Candrakīrti's commentary on *MA* 6: 127-8 where he negates the *Sammitīya* view that the self is the same as the aggregates; it would follow from their view that the Buddha would not have taught “at

Just as a chariot is named  
 In dependence upon the group of parts  
 So, in dependence upon the aggregates,  
 We have the term, ‘sentient being.’<sup>16</sup>

Analysing the relationship between the self and the aggregates forms the heart of the spiritual exercise here, and Candrakīrti, following Nāgārjuna, uses this analysis as a template and applies it to everything else as well. Moreover, in accordance with Nāgārjuna’s analysis, Candrakīrti argues that unless the aggregates are also understood to be merely imputed, one cannot escape from believing that the self bears its identity from its own side. He explains at length in his *Commentary on “Entering the Middle Way”* (*Madhyamakāvātārabhāṣya*—on MA 137) that the imputation of the self upon the aggregates is mutual:

Just as an object (*las*) is imputed in dependence upon an agent (*byed pa po*) and an agent likewise in dependence upon an object, so an appropriator (*nye bar len pa po*) is imputed in dependence upon the appropriated (*nye bar blang ba*) and the appropriated likewise in dependence upon the appropriator. Nāgārjuna [MMK 27:8] says:

Thus, it is not other than the appropriated,  
 And it is not the appropriated itself,  
 The self is not [ascertained] without the appropriated,  
 And it is not ascertained as simply non-existent.<sup>17</sup>

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that time, in that situation, I was king Māndhātṛ”—whereas, in fact, he did teach this (and Candrakīrti presents it as unproblematic—as indeed does Tsongkhapa).

<sup>16</sup> This is one of three verses attributed to the *arhantī* Śailā in Vasubandhu’s *Abhidharmakośabhāṣya* (AKBh) 9. I have found three slightly different versions of these verses, quoted by Vasubandhu, Bhāvaviveka, and Candrakīrti respectively, the last of which reads (*Madhyamakāvātārabhāṣya*, MABh: 246): *ji ltar yan lag tshogs rnams la / brten nas shing rtar brjod pa rtar / de bzhin phung po rnams brten nas / kun rdzob sems can zhes bya’o* / A version of this teaching is also found in *Samyuttanikāya* I: 552-4 (where the order of the nuns’ names differ). Kapstein (2001: 78-9) *Reason’s Traces: Identity and Interpretation in Indian and Tibetan Buddhist Thought*, (Wisdom Publications: Boston, USA) comments: “These verses attributed to the nun Vajirā are among the canonical passages most frequently cited in the whole of later Buddhist philosophy; for we find condensed here as nowhere else the fundamental themes that are interwoven throughout the Buddhist inquiry into the reality of the self and the nature of persons.”

<sup>17</sup> *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* (MMK) 27:8: *de ltar len las gzhan ma yin / de ni nyer len nyid kyang min / bdag ni nye bar len med min / med pa nyid du’ang de ma nges // Skt: evaṃ nānya upādānān na cōpādānam eva saḥ / ātmā nāsty anupādāno nāpi nāsty eṣa niścayaḥ //*

From this we should understand that there is no object without an agent. However, some sources say:

There are acts and ripened results, but an agent is not perceived.<sup>18</sup>

We should understand that this negates an agent that is an inherent nature (*rang bzhin du gyur pa*); we should not understand that it negates something dependently imputed that is part of conventional nature (*tha snyad kyi yan lag tu gyur pa*). For, it has been widely taught:

This person influenced by ignorance also performs virtuous acts.<sup>19</sup>

Candrakīrti, in an earlier part of this passage, gives a linguistic analysis showing that the term *appropriation* (*upādāna / nye bar len pa*) is ambiguous between the act of appropriating and the appropriated object. He explains at great length that *appropriation* often means *the appropriated* (*nye bar blang bya*)<sup>20</sup> in Nāgārjuna's verses. Candrakīrti does not reject the appropriator and replace it with the act of appropriating. Rather, for Candrakīrti, the crucial point is to generate an insight into the interdependence between the appropriator and the appropriated, and to see that neither bears its identity from its own side.

Candrakīrti invokes what we might call a notion of *sortal-concepts* in refuting Buddhist Realists who say that, while analysing a chariot, a *yogin* does not see the chariot but sees its parts. Candrakīrti argues that seeing the parts as parts of a chariot depends entirely upon whether the person seeing them has already developed the concept 'chariot.' If not, then such a person would think of those pieces simply as wholes, not as parts of something else. More importantly, he argues further that the wisdom-mind realizing selflessness negates inherent identity—it burns up the object of self-grasping; and the projection of inherent identity cannot survive the flames of that wisdom—no matter what that projection may be based upon (a person, a *dharma*, a stream of *dharmas*). This gradual burning away of the

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<sup>18</sup> Tsongkhapa cites this as: *The Sūtra of Ultimate Emptiness / don dam pa stong pa nyid kyi mdo / Paramārthāsūngalāsūtra: byed pa po ni ma dmigs kyi las kyang yod la nam smin pa yang yod do /*

<sup>19</sup> Unidentified source in MABh: 262: *ma rig pa dang rjes su 'brel ba'i gang zag 'di ni bsod rnams mngon par 'du bya ba yang mngon par 'du byed do /*

<sup>20</sup> No Sanskrit equivalent is given in sources that I have consulted.

grasped object happens in the context of very subtle meditation practice. While the ordinary notions of a chariot and its parts disappear during meditative equipoise, what is actually burned away is the habitual tendency to reify them. So when the *yogin* arises from that meditation, he sees chariots and their parts again—but he knows they do not bear their identity objectively, as they appear to. Therefore, the *yogin* does not change his conceptual or linguistic practices; he does not start speaking or thinking in terms of chariot-parts, or chariot-processes, rather than chariots.

Candrakīrti's point is that *parts* and *wholes* have the same ontological status. Each is imputed upon the other, and both dissolve in the light of the wisdom realizing the selflessness of the whole. Conventional things *per se* are not denied in this process (so there is no need to invoke another kind of metaphysics here, such as 'process metaphysics'). After arising from this meditation, and for as long as its influence lasts, conventional things appear and are individuated in the same way—but their identity is understood *not to come from the side of the object*. Their conventional identity is imputed by the mind using specific sortal-concepts, reflected in the use of language; and Candrakīrti emphatically preserves ordinary language. This preservation of ordinary language is evident in *Theravāda* sources too, for the sub-commentary on *The Discourse on the Root of Existence* says:

*Objection:* If the conventional expression is applied, what is the fault? Don't ariyans also make use of the conventional expression, as when they say: "This, venerable sire, is the great earth," etc.?

*Reply:* It is not the mere employment of the expression that is intended here, but the wrong adherence which occurs through the conventional expression.<sup>21</sup>

It is 'wrong adherence' that is the fault—not ordinary language. Wrong adherence is precisely what Candrakīrti has identified as the operation of our innate *viewing inherent identity*. Ordinary language need not be jettisoned; indeed, it is useful. We only need to eliminate our innate *self-grasping*, which is done *on the basis of* ordinary language and concepts (such as by analysing and seeing the interdependence of *agent*, *action*, and *object of action*).

There are various ways in which a mind may hold its object wrongly. The distorted mind of *self-grasping* generates other distorted ways of grasping, known as inappropriate attention, which superimpose certain attributes onto the object that are not true of it, such as holding the object to be a source of happiness in its own nature. Such misconceptions give rise to further mental afflictions, as Geshe Sopa explains:

What is the difference between love, which is a virtuous mind, and attachment, which is not? What is the difference between renunciation, which is a virtuous mind, and aversion, which is not? When ordinary people see something nasty, they think, “This is not good, I must get rid of it.” Buddhist yogis think this way about their mental afflictions, suffering, and samsaric conditioning. They think of liberation and enlightenment as beautiful, and desire to attain them. What makes one desire virtuous, and another desire non-virtuous? Desire has two directions. If desire arises on the basis of inappropriate attention, which holds its object in a distorted way, then it is attachment, which is a non-virtuous consciousness. In contrast, if desire arises on the basis of a mind that holds its object correctly, then it is a virtuous consciousness. So the difference between them concerns whether we hold the object correctly or not.<sup>22</sup>

#### 4. Altruism

The philosophical notion of *selflessness* found in Buddhism may appear very different from the notion of *selflessness* most commonly found in the West, which is that of a profound *unselfishness*. However, it may be argued that, from a Buddhist perspective, the two are intimately connected. As far as I can tell, there are at least two categories of *selfishness* addressed in Buddhist sources. The first includes the various types of mental afflictions—such as attachment, hatred, jealousy, and so on. Mental, physical, and verbal behaviour motivated by such afflicted thoughts or emotions is generally deemed *selfish*. Given that these mental afflictions are rooted in *self-grasping*, we can say that meditation on *selflessness* uproots this type of *selfishness*, since it uproots *self-grasping*—the source of suffering targeted by all Buddhist traditions. However, there is a more developed notion of *selfishness*

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<sup>21</sup> *The Discourse on the Root of Existence: The Mūlapariyāyasutta and its Commentaries*, trans. Bhikkhu Bodhi (2006: 47), Buddhist Publication Society: Kandy, Sri Lanka.

<sup>22</sup> Geshe Sopa, *Steps on the Path to Enlightenment*, vol. 5, ch. 8, (forthcoming), Wisdom Publications: Boston, USA.

(*rang gces 'dzin*) frequently spoken of in Mahāyāna Buddhist texts. This developed notion of *selfishness* refers to a so-called *selfish* motivation to gain liberation from one's own inner causes of suffering only, based on the Hīnayāna path, rather than a so-called *altruistic* motivation to gain full enlightenment in order to help others become free from their inner causes of suffering, based on the Mahāyāna path. The goal of the first is known as liberation, and the goal of the second is known as enlightenment.

Now, what is purified from the mind-stream in the process of attaining each of these goals? There are two types of obstacles to be removed: (1) the obstacles to liberation, which are the mental afflictions together with their seeds; and (2) the obstacles to enlightenment, which are the imprints left by those seeds on the mind-stream that cause an appearance of inherent identity. (1) When one has removed the mental afflictions and their seeds from one's mind-stream, then one has gained liberation from one's own inner cause of suffering. That is final goal of the Hīnayāna path. (2) When one has removed not only the mental afflictions and their seeds from one's mind-stream, but also their imprints that cause an appearance of inherent identity to arise, then this false appearance, which blocks omniscience, is removed and one attains all the qualities of a fully enlightened Buddha. It is only by becoming a Buddha that a person can most effectively help others to become free from their inner causes of suffering. So this is the final goal of the Mahāyāna path. The tool that removes both these types of obstacles is the supreme wisdom of meditative equipoise directly perceiving *selflessness*. The same object is perceived in both cases: *selflessness*. However, there is a difference in the power of the meditative wisdom itself, which depends upon the power of the motivation. Thus it is with an *altruistic* aim to attain enlightenment for the benefit of all beings that a Mahāyāna Buddhist practitioner meditates on *selflessness*. This is the basic connection between *selflessness* and *unselfishness* in a Mahāyāna context.

The compassionate determination to attain enlightenment for the sake of others' liberation is called *bodhicitta*, or *the will to enlightenment*. The mental training that goes into producing *bodhicitta* is very forceful. It goes right against the grain of limited self-interest. The meditator employs a variety of reasons to change the way of seeing any situation in which an attitude of self-interest might arise; this new way of seeing transmutes genuine self-love into an even more powerful love for others. This *will to enlightenment* for the sake of others is not a mere intention; it is a fundamental transformation of consciousness. We should

bear in mind how mighty the force of attraction to liberation, the complete freedom from suffering and its inner cause, will be when the conditions giving rise to that result are fully gathered. How can one resist entering into that blissful state? The mind of *bodhicitta* is what resists it; this is what carries one forward to complete the work of removing the subtle imprints left within one's mind-stream. Upon completion of that task, one becomes a fully enlightened, omniscient Buddha.

## 5. Conclusion

These Buddhist notions of *loving-kindness*, *self-interest*, *selflessness*, and *altruism* presented above may appear rather technical. We may wonder, "How can they help improve modern lives and society?" Here, the emphasis is on inner development. Modern life, however, seems more focused on outward development. Yet it is clear that without this kind of inner development, a peaceful and harmonious society cannot take shape and remain stable. *Kindness* is the key factor in any harmonious society, and *kindness* comes from within each individual. No amount of coercion can force someone to feel kind. Although much needed laws are imposed to regulate the expression of its opposite—*selfishness* rooted in *self-grasping*—the actual antidote to *self-grasping* arises within each person's own mind. Genuine *self-love* is an expression of *kindness*; this is not damaged by uprooting *self-grasping*—indeed, it is enhanced. We need to understand the difference between *self-love* and *self-grasping* in order to cultivate our own inner peace and happiness. We also need to understand that others are just like oneself—wanting happiness and not wanting suffering. When we become deeply familiar with this understanding, kindness towards others naturally arises. Transforming our own minds in this way allows us to contribute most profoundly towards a peaceful and harmonious society.

I would like to close now with a verse much loved by His Holiness the Dalai Lama from Śāntideva's *Engaging in the Bodhisattva's Deeds* (10: 55):

As long as space remains,  
As long as sentient beings remain,  
Until then, may I too remain  
And dispel the miseries of the world.