

The supreme worship

On 1st January this year (2015), a Singapore Dharma-worker and his wife decided that their first good deed of the year is to visit a single-mother family. She lost her husband to a deadly virusinfection some years back, leaving her to support their only child, a Secondary One schoolboy (13 years old). They have no other close relatives, except for her frail elder sister, in her 70s, with Parkinson's, and living alone. Let's call the boy Kumara.

Kumara's family lives in a 4-room flat in the next neighbourhood. His mother decided not to work so that she can dedicate all her time and energy to raising him. She supports herself and Kumara by renting out their two spare rooms. Kumara was born with some physical and learning disabilities, but with sustained therapy, he is coping well. Understandably, as he approaches adolescence, he occasionally feels some frustration over such disadvantages, and sometimes vents it out on the only person he is close to, his mother.¹

The good thing is that Kumara seems to connect well with the Dharma-worker, and his mother with the Dharma-worker's wife. Reflecting on this, we can say that "the moment has seized them."² The Dharma-worker was overwhelmed with samvega, a sense of spiritual urgency. Samvega is a powerful feeling when we know that what little we do can mean a great deal for others. On the other hand, it would be unconscionable not to help those who need help and whom we can help.

It is like when we see someone walking on a dark path which we know well, and that person is heading for a deep pothole. If we do nothing to warn that person, are we not to blame, too? Yes, we may have not caused him to fall, but we could have prevented his fall and hurt, even death. In other words, we are still a condition for that person's misfortune. This understanding of causes and conditions are fundamental to being truly human and compassionate.

We often pride in **gratitude**, which is kindness returned to kindness shown, a kind of pay-back. We might feel relieved, even uplifting, that we have "paid back" a good done, like settling a debt or transaction. But can a good deed be measured? Is it sufficient for us to return just one good deed with another? This would be to assume that goodness can be measured, almost like a lex talionis idea of "an eye for an eye." Karma works exponentially, like a key opening a door. A single kind act may open up a wide range of opportunities for good.

One of the profound implications of the Buddhist teaching of non-self is that good cannot be measured. Kindness is really immeasurable, and should remain so. When an action is strained or measured, it is probably a "service" or "business," and those who measure such actions must then be called "servants" or "traders"! Yet, we can still joyfully serve others without measure, with a boundless heart.

This is the meaning of lovingkindness. It begins with accepting people as they are: it's the most natural place to begin. If we don't accept others in this way, we are probably judging and measuring them. This is the most common reaction we have towards others when we do not really know them.

However, as we begin to know people really well, we learn not to judge or measure them. This is the path of love, which means a non-judgemental acceptance of others with a desire for their immeasurable happiness.

¹ See Reflection, "[Don't try to stop changing](#)," R360, Singapore, 2014.

² See Reflection, "[Let the moment seize us](#)," R376, Singapore, 2014.

When we measure others, we are inevitably also limiting ourselves. When we reject others because they are perceived as being poor, or useless, or dull, or ugly, or “lacking class,” we are tacitly admitting that we are either afraid of them or unable to cope with them. Once, a Buddhist professional asked me, “How many rooms has your house?” “A three-room HDB,”³ I replied. The conversation suddenly ended, and we never spoke again. Who is the one really disadvantaged here? What is the real problem we need to work with here?

Kindness, as such, should not be measured, given as a sort of tit-for-tat. Then, it is a matter of pride and political correctness, rather than celebrating goodness. We might even say that when someone does us some good, there is no way we can really return it, except to keep returning it. There are very good reasons for doing this.

We often and easily forget the numerous acts of kindness that others have shown us. We might not even know that someone has been kind to us, or even reject such an act, simply out of pride (the giver is of a “lower” class), or the fear that we would “owe” something. We often see this attitude being inculcated in traditional communities. The positive reason for such an attitude is clearly to avoid being a leech to others, to be self-reliant, and to respect the fact that others deserve to enjoy for themselves the fruits of their own hard-earned labour.

If we understand the fact that there is really no way we can return, measure for measure, the kindness shown to us, then we should also accept the fact that we need to keep on being kind to others, especially when we are able to do so. Or, when we do not do so, the other party would remain disadvantaged, or fall deeper into difficulty, or head towards certain disaster in time.

We could argue that there are welfare and social agencies that can give effective help and support for vulnerable families and disadvantaged individuals. However, there is nothing that surpasses a healing and helping friendship. In the same spirit, the saddest thing we can do (or not do) is to reject those people whom we see as needing our help or friendship, simply because they are of no use or no fun to us. If such an attitude is widespread, then we have a pathological community.

We do not need vows to save all beings, or even to save the world. Can we possibly save “all beings,” those living in the past, the present and the future? The painful irony is that much of the world’s sufferings have been caused and sustained by those who want to change the world or convert others, instead of solving their own personal problems.

Better than praying for the happiness of others, is to humbly work, even in small ways, to make a wholesome difference in the lives of others. This is the “supreme worship” or “highest prayer” the Buddha declares during his last days:⁴ practise Dharma so that we know ourselves, understand others, and are empowered to help them effectively.⁵

If we carefully study the early Buddhist texts on the Buddha and buddhahood, we would understand that he does not “vow” to become the Buddha to save the world. In the stories of the Buddha-to-be or Bodhisattva’s distant past lives, we see him meeting a past Buddha. Inspired by the Buddha’s example of wisdom and compassion, he is moved to emulate him.

Nowhere in the early Buddhist texts do we see Buddhas as many as the sands of the Ganges river. If diamonds were like sand, they would have sandy value. We should not trivialize the Buddha and buddhahood. Imaginative vision may be helpful in meditation, but in real life,

³ HDB = Housing Board Development (Singapore); here referring to affordable housing. Such a question is a Singaporean way of measuring the wealth and status of another.

⁴ See **Maha,parinibbāna Sutta** (D 16) §§5.1-3 @ [SD 9](#).

⁵ See Reflection, **Buddhas dies if we worship them**, 2011: [link](#).

we see only sand. Even in the sadhanas or deity meditations of Vajrayana, we always return them to their realms, while we ourselves return into the earth, water, fire, wind, space and consciousness that we really are.

Historically, we can see the Bodhisattva (the Buddha-to-be), in his last life, as a perceptive human being, seeing deep into the true realities of decay (an old man), disease (a sick man) and death (a dead man). These visions do not move him to vow to save all beings or the world, but to emulate the fourth sight, that of a renunciant, to seek for himself the answer to these cosmic pains.

When Siddhattha becomes the Buddha, he is happily awakened, to say the least. He spends 7 weeks enjoying the bliss of liberation and awakening.⁶ Emerging from his meditation, he reflects on the difficulties of teaching the Dharma to a world that is drowned in frivolities: anyone who endeavours to teach the suttas is likely to have a taste of this same vision, too.

The Buddha has both wisdom and compassion. His wisdom is the ability to see true reality, and compassion is what he naturally does on account of that vision. The Buddha is often compared to a healing doctor. A wise doctor who understands the presence and nature of diseases, and knows how to cure them, would not watch idly on the suffering.

The Buddha lets the moment seize him. This is famously and piously presented by the High God, Mahā Brahmā, himself, appearing before the Buddha, supplicating him to teach the Dharma.⁷ So, too, each time, we see someone who needs help and we are able to help, that is our Brahma's invitation (a call from God, if you like), not to worship God or the Buddha, but to humbly give that help. This is the supreme worship.

R378 Simple Joys 269

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⁶ On the Buddha's first 7 weeks, see **Dhamma & Abhidhamma**, [SD 26.1 \(5\)](#).

⁷ See **Why the Buddha "hesitated"?** [SD 12.1](#).