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THE IDEA OF 'KARUṆĀ'
IN THE UPANISADIC AND THE BUDDHIST TRADITIONS,
WITH COMMENTS ON THE URGENCY
FOR AN ENCOUNTER OF WORLD-RELIGIONS TODAY

Karuṇā generally translated as compassion, is an idea – I am inclined to believe – present in all the great world-religions. However, it is regrettable that an authentic encounter of world-religions has not as yet happened in a manner that could show us clearly in what sense and with what intent a common path is taken in the sphere of value-orientation, highlighting this great idea of compassion. Given the facts that the world-religions are the primary sources from which the largest aggregates of humanity draw their sense of collective identity and that these fundamental conceptual resources actually nourish socio-ethical norms in diverse cultural settings wherever these traditions happen to prevail, it is now urgent to recognize that the question of values associated with world-religions can no longer be side-tracked. The urgency for a meeting of world-religions need to be highlighted as we begin to search earnestly for common recognition of values and norms as these are embedded in all these traditions. These are of great relevance for designing future course of actions in public space as we confront the challenges of our collective life.

However, while speaking of the existence of common values, one needs to be aware of the variegated implications that can be read into these notions when philosophical reflections on their conceptual contents begin to take shape. These disclose the cognitive and emotive

features that are entailed in these norms, as will be seen in the case of this exposition pertaining to the idea of 'Karuṇā'.

The idea of Karuṇā, indeed, plays a vital role in the Upanisadic and the Buddhist traditions. The ethos of these traditions is reflected on the theoretical construals as well as the practical implications of this idea. Thus, one sees how the cultural pre-occupations with this normative concern have, as existing literature shows, induced deep philosophical analysis of the idea itself in all its theoretical bearing, demonstrating at the same time the far-reaching effects that a genuine practice of Karuṇā has on the lives of individuals and societies. The literature constantly refers to events associated with the lives of exalted personalities who had acted in accordance with the norms and have thus exemplified its transformative power.

In what follows, let me draw freely from well-known texts belonging to the Upanisadic tradition (such as the Bhagavad Gītā and the philosophies of Yoga and Advaita Vedānta) as well as to the Buddhist tradition (such as the literature of the Mādhyamika and Vijñānavāda schools). The aim is primarily to draw attention to a few representative examples in which the conceptual strands touching upon the theme of Karuṇā are woven in these texts. These also enable us to recapture the overlapping contents of the Upanisadic and Buddhist undertakings in this direction. However, before I venture on this, let me urge once more that it remains an important task before us to construe a common frame of enquiry for uncovering similar concern with regard to norms and values as recommended by all world-religions.

With this as a brief introduction, let us recall that many of the well-known narratives that are handed down to us touching upon the lives of great Upanisadic teachers and that of Gautama Buddha, the founder of Buddhism, amply exemplify the content of this norm. I will only refer to a few key ideas that emerged in the process of conceptualizations in these traditions that seem to me to be philosophically intriguing.

Let me first turn to the Buddhist tradition. It has been stated in a number of texts that it is indeed out of 'Karuṇā' for all living beings that the Buddha could win over the initial hesitations while he ponde-

red, immediately upon obtaining enlightenment, whether to pass into Nirvāṇa or to remain among all those who are immersed in suffering and ignorance in order to preach. By adopting the second of the two alternatives, he emerges before us as an outstanding world-teacher. Indeed, he was no 'tight-fisted' teacher who held back anything whatsoever that could be significant for the striving for Buddhahood but – as the tradition describes – the 'compassionate one' who fully disclosed the path by following which an aspirant could attain enlightenment. Apart from this, there are many other stories into which I cannot go here, that speak through the centuries of his great sympathy and of his willingness to toil for the freedom of all subjected to suffering. The idea of universal suffering emerges as the first of the 'Four Noble Truths' that he preached. He pointed out its cause, declared that it can be ended and indicated the path by following which attainment of Nirvāṇa is possible – these being the contents of the second, third and the fourth of the 'Four Noble Truths'.

What is of immense importance for the theoretical part of the discussion here is the treatment that the idea of 'great compassion' – Mahākaruṇā – received in the Mahāyāna literature. Indeed, the analysis of this notion in the Buddhist literature deserves the attention of all those who seek to comprehend the impact of this idea on practical life as well as that of those who are concerned with theoretical subtleties such as whether emotion and reason are, two conflicting sources, seeking to control and guide human actions. Now to go directly into the topic, note that the ideal of Bodhisattva, which is repeatedly discussed in the Mahāyāna literature, is one in which wisdom/Prajñā and compassion/Karuṇā are said to coincide. No trace of any conflict between reason and emotion can be detected in the analysis.

Indeed, the great compassion of the Tathāgata becomes a major theme in the Mādhyamika and Vijñānvāda philosophical discourses. Here we come across a notable difference in the way the ideal of Nirvāṇa itself is understood. While ideas related to the striving for achieving Nirvāṇa through self-effort as well as the attainment of the ideal state of an 'Arhat' were much discussed in early Buddhist literature, the emphasis in the Mahāyāna literature came to be gradually laid on the 'Bodhisattva' ideal. In the Mādhyamika thinking, the ultimate freedom that Nirvāṇa stands for is not to be understood simply

as an elimination of suffering and that of the possibility of rebirth (Kleśāvaraṇa) but also in terms of a removal of ignorance (Jñeyāvaraṇa). In other words, the goal of the attainment of Nirvāṇa is perceived not only to be a case where the aspirant is striving to become an 'Arhat' by obtaining freedom from rebirth and suffering, but as an aspiration to be a 'Bodhisattva'. A Bodhisattva aspires for "a universal unconditional deliverance of all beings" - as Murti¹ puts it.

For a deeper philosophical appreciation of the march of Buddhist thought, it is very important to notice that Advayavāda - in one version or another - along with the ideas of Mahākaruṇā and Trikāya of the Tathāgata came to play an absolutely major role in all subsequent Buddhist conceptualizations. All these ideas merit a detailed study. However, it may be observed here briefly that this development has enriched the Indian cultural soil in a considerable manner just as it has had a profound impact on all other regions of the world where Buddhism still remains a major influence. Gradually the idea of Karuṇā came to receive - as one witnesses while perusing the literature - a profound and a subtle treatment in the hands of the philosophers who brought out the rich and varied nuances of the notion. One of the texts, for example, says that this great compassion of the Buddhas is so profound that it does not brook with any such distinction as that which is generally drawn between those who deserve it from those who do not. Moreover, it is also said that this great compassion is not limited only for a specific period of time. In other words, it is directed to all (not only to a chosen few) and it is a bestowal on humanity that continues for ages and ages. Indeed, the compassion of the Buddhas is not only for their contemporaries or only for their own kinsmen nor is it only for those who alone deserve it - the 'great compassion' knows of no boundary of space and time.

Note, in this connection, that the theistic schools within the Vedic tradition have also explored the ideas of compassion and grace (Karuṇā and Kṛpā) with great sensitivity. Enormous material is available on this. In this connection, it is also of great interest to observe

1. T.R.V. MURTI, *The Central Philosophy of Buddhism*, Allen & Unwin, UK, 1974.

how similar a role the idea of Tathāgata plays in the context of the Buddhist discussion of the idea of Trikāya of Buddhas when compared to that of Īśvara in the religious consciousness of the theists. It may be mentioned here that the appellation of 'Bhagavan' - as can be seen in the expression 'Bhagavan Buddha' in certain important passages - is ascribed especially to one who is seen as endowed with perfections, powers and splendors - not unlike the God of the theists. What is of special significance in the context of the present discussion is that what entitles him to that appellation 'Bhagavan' is above all his great compassion - Mahākaruṇā. In this connection, it is also important to perceive that both the Tathāgata in Buddhism as well as the Īśvara of Yoga are worshipped as Teachers who show the path by following which ultimate freedom becomes possible for others. Indeed, it is out of great compassion or Karuṇā for all living beings that they teach. Hence, Īśvara in Yoga literature is venerated as the ultimate teacher i.e. the teacher of all teachers (Parama-Guru).

It is noteworthy the way the Buddhist tradition has highlighted the idea of Tathāgata-Garbha, conveying the idea that the germ of Buddhahood is present everywhere. It has been insisted upon that the striving for Buddhahood is entirely for manifesting that which is present in the seed-form. This is why the sacred function of the Buddhas, the possessors of 'knowledge of equality' (Samatājñāna) is to unceasingly, untiringly pursue to help free all creatures in bondage. This is a superb analysis that touch upon the crucial question regarding how exactly wisdom and compassion can go hand in hand².

The Upanisadic thinkers have demonstrated as well with great philosophical dexterity, how the attainment of knowledge and compassion are closely linked together. It is not only the theists but also the Advaitins, who propounded the idea of the essential ontological non-duality, have engaged themselves in that task. In fact, even in recent years, one encounters examples of what compassion really entails in day-to-day life. Indeed, how the idea of non-duality has been understood in the Advaitic tradition can be seen exemplified in recent times in the life of Swami Vivekananda. Swami Vivekananda,

2. For a complete discussion on all the five wisdoms, see OBERMILLER, *The Doctrine of Prajñāparāmitā*, "Acta Orientalia", vol. 11.

an enthusiastic interpreter of the Vedantic tradition in late 19th century, was inspired by the Vedantic teaching not only to go ahead and vigorously propagate that message but was prompted to work tirelessly for an implementation of the ideal of compassion, which he saw as an integral part of Vedānta. This led to the program for social upliftment which he described as 'Practical Vedānta'. This deserves special mention as it is one of the finest examples that demonstrate how to employ a value-oriented religious concept into the sphere of daily practical life for the benefit of all those who are marginalized.

This is precisely why lessons – derived from diverse religious traditions – concerning norms such as compassion, are valuable both for comprehending how reason and emotion are harmonized as well as for figuring out a way of acting in everyday world. The possibility of envisioning a harmonious collective life today calls for setting up of a forum where an awareness can be created about the overlapping contents in value-orientations in the context of religious pluralism. Due to the absence of this forum, the presence of religious diversity tends to engender more conflicts than compassion.

Now let me turn to another important facet of a philosophical analysis that lies in the endeavor to comprehend the idea of compassion both in cognitive and emotive terms. This leads one to assess the role that certain emotions and volitions can be said to play in the moral and spiritual advancement of humankind and more crucially, can be regarded actually as a help toward attainment of knowledge by dispelling ignorance.

For a closer look at these questions, let me refer to texts belonging to the Yoga school. In Patanjali's Yoga philosophy, for example, it is clearly mentioned that purification of the mind (Citta-parikarma) is necessary for getting rid of a disturbed state of mind. It has been repeatedly said that without the attainment of serenity and one-pointedness, the pursuit of Yoga is not possible. But the question that arises here is how exactly does one attain that purification? An answer to this question can be found in the important statement indicating that apart from meditating on God (Īśvara-pranidhāna), there are indeed other courses that help the aspirant to achieve this.

For discerning what these courses are, let me now refer to the Yoga Sūtra 1.33 where it is recommended in unambiguous terms that

'the mind becomes tranquil by the cultivation of amity, compassion, goodwill and indifference towards those who are happy, miserable, virtuous and vicious respectively'. (cf. *Maitrī-karuṇā-muditopekṣā-nām sukhaduhkhaṇyāpūṇyaviṣayāṇām bhāvanātaścittaprasādanam*).

What is most relevant for the sake of our present discussion is first to note the question that is asked, viz. 'On whom should compassion be bestowed?' An answer to this question is given and elaborated in subsequent Yoga literature. The well-known commentary by Vyāsa states that an aspirant of Yoga needs to practice compassion toward all those who are suffering. (cf. '*Duhkhītesu Karuṇām*')

In what follows, let us discuss the questions that are further raised in connection with this enquiry. More precision is demanded regarding what exactly does the notion of Karuṇā really entail and who precisely are these sufferers ('dukhīs') that the text is referring to? I will return to this question shortly.

Here, there are several important points to appreciate. Firstly, emphasis is laid on the fact that it is through practice of compassion, one gradually transcends the barrier between the self and the other, between us and them. Secondly, this practice also needs to be seen as one of the primary means for overcoming all tendencies to vile others (*para-apakāra*). Finally, a sincere cultivation of Karuṇā in speech, thought and action, is not only to be seen as having an exclusively socio-ethical goal. It is indeed an integral and indispensable part of that process of striving for achieving a state of one-pointedness (*ekā-gratā*) without which discriminatory knowledge (*viveka-jñāna*) cannot be obtained. In this way, it is also serving the salvatory goal.

Now, since it is recommended that compassion must be shown toward the dukkhis or the persons who are undergoing suffering, it may be asked here more specifically, whom does the word 'dukkhi' actually refer to? This question has been mentioned earlier. By this word, is it meant that compassion is to be practiced only when we find that our friends and relatives are undergoing suffering? Collectively speaking, the question can be posed as to whether this recommendation is designed exclusively for our allies, with whom we have clearly drawn out pacts for guarding our common interests, so that we think it to be worthwhile to bring help when they and only they seem

to suffer say, from flood or famine, or from civil war or are being attacked from outside whereas we can simply remain indifferent if these happen to 'others'- no matter how this 'otherness' is construed?

Sri Harihararanya further answers this question by commenting on the same sūtra in the following manner: (cf. *Sarveṣu duḥkhīteṣu amītramitreṣu karuṇām bhāvayet - teṣām dukhe upajāte tan pratyā-nukampām bhāvayet*).

Using Anukampā as a synonym for Karuṇā, he further emphasizes that by the word Duhkhī what is implied is not only those who are considered to be friends, what is meant here are both 'mitra' and 'amitra', i.e. both friends and not-friends thereby including our opponents and enemies.

Within the compass of this short paper, I can hardly discuss the other important aspects of this profound topic that has been a matter of reflection for centuries. However, let me mention here that it has been repeatedly urged both by the Buddhist and the Upanisadic thinkers that compassion (Karuṇā), just like the other great vows of non-violence (Ahimsā) and kindness (Dayā), need to be practiced in speech, thought and action (*Kāya-mana-vākya*). It is fascinating to read the discussions on how in the scale of virtues and vows that are recommended, Karuṇā is highlighted as the highest. Those thinkers who hold Karuṇā to be the highest value point out that great as the value of 'Ahimsā' may be, it has nevertheless a negative tinge, as the very construal of the word literally suggests. The literal meaning, they say, primarily hinges upon prohibiting to do violence (A-himsā). On the other hand, 'Dayā' i.e. mercy, or kindness, is defined as the volition to remove the suffering of others (*Paraduhkhamocana-icchā*). Again, it has been commented that although 'Dayā', undoubtedly a benevolent and deep feeling, still entails an attitude toward the recipients of mercy where the latter are perceived as being in an inferior situation or as being in a state of deprivation compared to the agents upon whom it is incumbent to practice Dayā. In contrast to these, it has been claimed that 'Karuṇā' is a positive value. Unlike Ahimsā, it is not just refraining from a certain undesirable practice; unlike Dayā, it does not bear any suggestion to perceive its objects as in any sense less than oneself.

All these readings bring out clearly the overlapping contents in the theoretical analysis of the recommendations regarding the practice

of Karuṇā that prevail within the Upanisadic and Buddhist traditions - especially noteworthy is the recognition that those who are the genuine practioners of compassion perceive the unity of being with those on whom compassion is bestowed. Striking indeed is the fact that not only these traditions are unanimous in recognizing that this great value of Karuṇā is not just a fleeting sentiment but that it is firmly based on the knowledge of unity of all beings. The exalted beings who truly practice compassion do it for the sake of all living beings without any discrimination and there is no question of any self-seeking or egoistic goal that motivate or persuade them in this matter.

Let me cite here important statements from both the Upanisadic and the Buddhist literature to exemplify these ideas. In the Bhagavad Gītā³, we come across the idea of work born of unmotivated compassion. In the chapter, entitled Karma yoga, Sri Krishna says: 'There is nothing in all the three worlds which I do not already possess; nothing I have yet to acquire'. (*Na me Pārthāsti kartavyam triṣu lokeṣu kinca-na* etc. 22/3 - 25/3). In other words, all His work is for the sake of benefit of humankind (loka-samgraha). This is Karuṇā at its highest level of expression.

It is also worth recalling in this context, the answer that one finds in the Bhagavad Gītā, to the question: Who is the greatest yogi? The Gītā says that one who makes the happiness and suffering of others his own is the greatest yogi. (*Ātmaupamenya sarvatra samam paśyati o Arjuṇa, sukham vā yadi vā dukkham sa yogī paramo mataḥ* 32/6). These views hardly need any further elaboration to be appreciated.

Again, this idea of benign intention as entailed in the practice of Karuṇā by the enlightened ones is emphasized as well by the well-known Buddhist scholar Aryadeva. He writes:

"No exertion or activity of the Buddhas is without meaning or purpose, their very breath is for the good and welfare of all beings" (*Na ceṣṭā kila Buddhānām asti kaścīd akāraṇa; nihśvāso'pi hitāyaiva prāṇīnām sampravartate*)⁴.

3. *Catuhśatika*, Fragments, ed. by H.P. Sastri,

4. The *Bhagavad Gītā*, any edition.

Before concluding this brief presentation on the idea of compassion as discussed within the Upanisadic and the Buddhist philosophical traditions, let me now observe that it has been repeatedly said by the proponents of various world-religions that the practice of compassion is recommended in their respective traditions. However, due to a lack of an authentic encounter of world-religions – as I have remarked in the beginning – we have failed to perceive the commonalities in the teachings of the world-religions. Given that the largest aggregates of humankind continue to derive their sense of identity, their sense of direction in life from one or another of the principal world-religions, it is indeed urgent that an endeavor is made in all sincerity in this direction. Instead of underplaying the importance of these traditions, an effort needs to be made to uncover the many ways in which the social, the ethical and the religious dimensions of the idea of compassion have been interpreted and explored in the diverse cognitive enterprises associated with world-religions.

It seems to me that so far living in a technological civilization has meant that we have achieved an unprecedented power to cross geopolitical boundaries in short span of time but really not much progress has been made with regard to removing the ‘hard boundaries’ that thwart a mutual understanding among the adherents of diverse world-religions. A genuine sense for what it is to perceive ourselves as members of a global community cannot be achieved through mere repetition of such catch phrases as the new world-order’⁵. It does not seem to be possibly to try to simply bypass the need for an authentic encounter of world-religions today, as all present day events causing terror and bloodshed bear witness to. Instead of fostering of violent attitudes that are defended in the name of religious differences, one could perhaps watch with amazement why such universal value like compassion are not only geared to ‘other-worldly’ goals but have profound implications for all human affairs in this world itself and how these teachings can show us the path to transcend the perpetual conflict between the good of one, good of some and the good of all. It

5. See my essay entitled “Cross-cultural Conversation and the Emergence of a Global Communication”, in *Social Development between Intervention and Integration*, ed. by Rendtorff, Diderichson & Kemp, Copenhagen, 1997.

is evident that if we seek to take upon ourselves a sense of social responsibility and shared accountability⁶ for human suffering, we need to know more about where lie the overlaps in the value-orientations among the teachings of the great world-religions and how secular values constantly tap from these sources.

I believe that this challenge can be met only through a common effort to defy any provocation to continue to play these traditions against each other. Instead, let us share the timeless messages of the world-religions that provide incentive for the welfare of all through practice of Karuṇā, despite all the differences in their metaphysics, iconography or other components of belief-systems that unfolded in the course of history.

6. Cf. LAURENCE J. O'CONNELL, *Social Responsibility and the New world Order*, in *Social Development between Intervention and Integration*, ed. Rendtorff, Diderichson & Kemp, Copenhagen, 1997.