

Chapter 12

The Significance of Compassion in the Contemporary Practice of Buddhism

Arjia Rinpoche

*Editor's introduction: The 8th Arjia Rinpoche, Lobsang Tubten Jigme Gyatso, is considered by Buddhists to be a re-incarnation of the father of Je Tsongkhapa, the great master of Tibetan Buddhist philosophy and practice, and founder of the Gelugpa school of Tibetan Buddhism. Born in 1950, the 8th Arjia Rinpoche is perhaps the most eminent living lama of Mongolian descent. Trained in Amdo at Kumbum Monastery, which he later headed, he enduring the Chinese cultural revolution and for decades managed to astutely support Tibetan Buddhism within China. He fled in 1998 after the Chinese attempted to draft him to become the tutor of their hand-picked "replacement" of the Panchen Lama. In the process, he became one of the highest lamas to escape China in decades. His memoir is *Surviving the Dragon: A Tibetan Lama's Account of 40 Years of Chinese Rule*. In his contribution here, Arjia Rinpoche simply and yet profoundly highlights, in the contemporary Mongolian context, the significance of Buddhist compassion. Noting the importance of social and humanitarian outreach, the difficulties of modern materialism, and the importance of social open-mindedness, he concludes by emphasizing the importance of compassion not just as a focus of meditation or prayer, but as a daily, practical practice.*

At the very heart of Buddhism are wisdom and compassion. These have been important spiritual values for human beings—including Tibetans and Mongolians—for thousands of years. The cultivation of wisdom, as seen by the development of medicine, the study of cosmology, and the creation of monasteries, stupas, and other forms of Buddhist art, satisfies not only our spiritual yearnings, but also our material needs. However, what I'd like to discuss in this paper is not wisdom, but its counterpart, compassion. In Buddhism, compassion means loving all beings and bringing happiness to all. What then is its significance in contemporary Buddhist practice?

Sword in hand, Chinggis Khan once conquered a vast area across Asia and Europe. His success became legendary in the world, and even today it remains the pride and dream of the Mongols. However in the twenty-first century, whether a country has the strength to conquer or not no longer depends on the power of force or the size of its territory. People leave their homes and their loved ones to travel to other countries. What takes them there? Is it the vast territory or the strength of the military? Obviously not. It is the freedom, equality, and rule of law these countries offer that conquer the minds of others. In these countries, the value of individual life is respected, so that everyone is likely to maximize his strength and potential. This is, in fact, the practice of compassion. No doubt, what a Buddhist seeks and has always sought are the same goals as those important to members of a modern civilized society.

We have to admit that the regimes of the Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China have brought a destructive impact upon the world, especially the Eastern civilizations, including Mongolia. Today, as Mongolia seeks modernization, politicians, economists, entrepreneurs, multinational corporations, and others often give top priority to the accumulation of material wealth. This is a grave challenge to

the Mongolian Buddhist philosophy. In fact, if a society pays no attention to compassion, the conduct of its people will fall into extreme chaos, posing a direct threat to social ethics.

Compassion is profound. Politicians need to follow the concept of compassion to draft laws and regulations that care for and protect society and aim to eliminate the gaps between different classes of people. Future generations should follow the rule of loving kindness to guarantee clean air, clear water, and ensure the balance of the biosphere. Mining people, as they accumulate great wealth, also need to follow the concept of compassion in order to avoid serious damage to the natural environment and maintain the pristine beauty of the earth. In short, it is compassion that can soothe not only the spiritual world but also the material world of those who are impacted by social change. The practice of compassion can satisfy all aspects of human life and environmental requirements. It helps to maintain society in a normal and healthy cycle.

How do we nurture our spirit of compassion? How do we make our society more humane? Buddhists will propose, quite naturally, to rebuild temples and restore the traditions of Buddhism. Yes, we are duty-bound to protect our traditional culture, but just to repeat the past is not enough. We have to bring forth the newest concepts and provide the best service for mankind. For example, in the past, our temples were places for monastics to worship, meditate, and study the sutras. But today, we need to open their doors to welcome all people to enter and meditate and study Buddhism. The temples need to give shelter to the homeless, to offer the poor a chance for a practical education, and become community centers where people can meet, socialize, discuss their problems and find solutions.

In Mongolia, the political upheavals of the last century have caused many people to lose their jobs, become homeless, and suffer from illnesses that are inadequately treated. As a

result, Buddhists, as well as practitioners of other religions, have started to explore providing employment opportunities for persons with disabilities, giving adequate education for school children of poor families, as well as establishing orphanages. This is the cultivation and practice of compassion.

In 2009, I visited Mongolia and began thinking about the situation there. I have often worried about what will happen if nomads lose their grazing grass. If a man doesn't have a job; if a woman doesn't have food; and if the children don't have the care of their parents, then what is the value of our Six Perfections and the Eight-Fold Path to Enlightenment?

In recent years, I have paid particular attention to charity work and medical conditions in Mongolia. Although the Mongolian government and the civil society have made many efforts to improve the situation, many of Mongolia's medical facilities are relatively old-fashioned, and many people must go to Korea, Thailand, and China just for physical checkups and for treatments. Recently, I have had conversations with people about the most pressing needs of Mongolia. They have told me that the country must have more up-to-date medical equipment and advanced medical personnel. The Country needs to adopt modern medical management systems.

When I was in Kumbum Monastery, we set up a Red Cross Chapter. We had a Tibetan hospital and did a good deal of charity work. When there were natural disasters, such as heavy snows or earthquakes, we went to the surrounding towns and country areas, to help the survivors. We also organized donations, clothing and drug distributions, and the chanting of prayers for the dead and suffering.

Because of this experience, coupled with the support of the government of Mongolia and the encouragement of friends, my spiritual students and I are now planning to build a Wellness Plus Medical Clinic in Ulaanbaatar. Then, if conditions allow, we will upgrade the services and create a

full-sized hospital. Our aim is to provide medical services for all, including people who live in the nomadic areas, and even those who do not have money. We will regularly send medical vans and take preventive measures to safeguard the health of the people who live in remote areas.

Compassion is not just for meditation and prayers. Compassion should be a daily, practical practice. In other words, the Pure Land is not just for visualization. We should make it a reality and transform samsara into nirvana—we should make a heaven on earth. As a Buddhist, I think this is the real meaning of compassion in contemporary Buddhist practice.