

Compassion or gratitude?

by Piya Tan

One of the most memorable counseling cases I have carried out concerned a young girl, Mei (not her real name), freshly graduated from teacher's college in the 1970s when I was still a Theravada monk.

Mei began by asking me if she should support her mother who had neither loved nor supported her. Mei had begun working as a teacher, and wondered if her mother had a change of heart because she was merely eyeing Mei's money.

In the past, said Mei, her mother did not support her in any way, saying that as a Chinese girl, she would marry and bear someone else's surname, and be no more part of her mother's family, and so on. So Mei had to give tuition, and pay her own way through college.

After she has finished telling all that she felt like saying, I began to counsel her in a Dharma-inspired manner. Firstly, I told her, the fact that she bothered to talk about this matter in a counseling session showed that the whole affair, especially her rejecting her mother, troubled her. She had compassion deep inside here.

Secondly, her mother might not really be at fault, even if she told Mei that being a girl she was useless to her and the family. This was probably due to negative cultural conditioning of her mother. She was probably mindlessly transferring her own sad past upon Mei. Moreover, they were a very poor family then. And she had no father, too.

Thirdly, Mei no had a choice. She could rightly reject her mother and not support her in any way. For, since her mother had neither loved nor supported her, there was basically nothing that Mei needed to reciprocate her (except for giving birth to her).

In other words, there was almost nothing that Mei should be grateful for towards her mother. Mei had been rejected by her, and had supported herself ever since, and been a good person despite her mother's rejection. Despite this, Mei only felt sadness, not even blaming her mother for giving birth to her.

However, as a Buddhist, we need to be compassionate, too. To be compassionate is to be kind to someone *even* when she or he does not deserve it, or *especially* when the recipient does not deserve it. We do not deserve the Buddha's compassion, and yet his teachings are for our benefit. The Buddha keeps no secret of his teachings.

Then, there is the matter of karma. Perhaps, Mei's mother's inability to love her, and Mei herself suffering the rejection, were both the fruits of some common past karma. The attending social reality was that her family was too poor to support Mei in the past.

Mei had every right, as it were, to now reject her unloving mother. But then, Mei would only be perpetuating what her mother had done, and maybe what her own grandmother had done to her mother before that. Mei would then be fuelling the samsaric rejection cycle down to her own daughter and beyond.

Yet, the pain could end here. That is, if Mei told her mother that Mei understood her mother's situation (cultural conditioning, poverty, etc), and forgave her as she was still her mother, despite everything. The point is that Mei was now in the best position to help her own mother, and herself, too.

The rejection cycle could end right there—if Mei wanted it. She had the power to break the cycle with her compassion.

She broke down and cried. Then she looked relieved and happy that she now saw the meaning behind all her and her mother's sufferings. The lesson of it all was not to reject loved ones even in the greatest of difficulties, but to see one another's potential goodness.

Here, we are confronted with the significance of two important Buddhist virtues: gratitude and compassion. What are they and how are they different? GRATITUDE is our reciprocal (or retuning) kindness to those who have been kind to us because they *deserve* that kindness.

In Buddhism, a grateful person is said to be “kata~n~nuu-katavedii.” Kata~n~nuu means “knowing what had been done,” that is, acknowledging the good done for our benefit. Katavedii means rejoicing in that action, that is, being joyful in the goodness of others (which is also called muditaa). This way, both the giver and the receiver gain in goodness.

COMPASSION is our effort to show kindness fully and effectively to others, whether or not they deserve it. Compassion is especially potent when it is motivated by WISDOM. For, it is a kind of giving that sees potential goodness in others; that is, the other party could likewise benefit others just. It builds up and enriches the common good and wisdom.

Deep inside, we are all responsible for suffering and goodness, whether in ourselves or in others. That is, if we understand that they both arise from conditions (a network of causes, not just one). If we understand such conditions, we will be able to reduce and stop suffering, and cultivate and promote goodness. This is called right effort, that is, acting with right view.

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