

Christian 'Love' and Buddhist 'Compassion'

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It is widely accepted that Christianity is the religion in which 'Love' is regarded as the most important ethical principle, while fundamental ethical principle of Buddhism, especially Mahayana or Northern Type, can be said to be 'Compassion.' This concept of Buddhist Compassion has been studied by various Christian theologians in order to compare it with the concept of 'Love' in Christianity. In this paper, I would like to introduce some interpretations to both 'Love' and 'Compassion' from the Christian side, and then, to have a glance at the historical development of the concept of Buddhist Compassion as one means to have a research on the difference between the way of thinking in Christianity and that in Buddhism.

Before I go any further, it must be mentioned here that the term 'Love' used in this paper includes all types of love in Christianity: *agape*, *philia*, and *eros*, while the term 'Compassion' used includes both *maitrī* (which is usually translated as compassion or universal love) and *karuṇā* (which is usually translated as loving-kindness or mercy).

First of all, in order to understand what the concept of 'Love' is correctly, some passages are quoted from the New Testament in the following.

"Teacher, which is the great commandment in the law?" And he said to him, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with your all soul, and with your all mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it, You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the law and the prophets¹⁾."

Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for he who loves his neighbor has fulfilled the law. The commandments, "You shall not commit adultery,

1) Matthew 22: 36-40 & Mark 12: 28-31.

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You shall not kill, You shall not steal, You shall not covet," and any other commandment, are summed up in this sentence, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfilling of the law²).

Here it is clearly mentioned how the religion of the Law, Judaism, had changed to the religion of Love, Christianity. Namely, Moses' "Ten Commandments" in the Old Testament were summed up to a single precept 'Love' in the New Testament.

As mentioned in the above, the term 'Love' is classified into three levels in Greek: *eros* as the level of sexual love, *philia* as the level of ethical or social love, and *agape* as the Love of God. *Eros* originally meant Aspiration for Good, but now it is understood as the mutual fulfillment of sexual love. *Philia* is brotherly-love or friendly-love, but sometimes it is used as the Love of God to men. *Agape* is the Absolute Love which has been manifested by God by giving his only son, Jesus Christ, to men as is mentioned as follows:

God shows his love for us in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us³. Then what is 'Love'?

Love is patient and kind; love is not jealous or boastful; it is not arrogant or rude. Love does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrong, but rejoices in the right. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things⁴).

Again then what is the difference between *eros* and *agape*?

He⁵) believes that the uncalculating and unmotivated love of *agape* which God pours out upon the sinner stands in final contrast to the *eros* which always seeks the fulfillment of the self⁶).

It seems that Anders Nygren believes the synthesis of *agape* and *eros* in the course of Christian history had weaken the full meaning of *agape*.

2) Romans 12: 8-10.

3) Romans 5: 8.

4) I Corinthians 13: 4-7.

5) Anders Nygren in his "*Eros and Agape*"

6) Daniel D. Williams: Love, in *A Handbook of Christian Theology*, p. 218.

Bishop Anders Nygren, whose great work on love has been referred to, regards the Augustinian doctrine and its subsequent mystical expression as invalid synthesis of agape and eros, which weaken the full meaning of agape⁷⁾.

On the contrary, Daniel D. Williams himself mentions on this matter in the same book as follows:

Most interpreters of Christian love, both Catholic and Protestant, while recognizing the danger of reducing agape to human desire, seek to preserve a positive place for eros within the goodness of man's created nature, and thus provide for its fulfillment within the purpose of God, though that purpose becomes clear only in the light of agape⁸⁾.

On this point Daniel D. Williams again refers to Nygren as follows;

Nygren argues that the Protestant Reformers, especially Luther, saw the weakness in the traditional synthesis and broke it in favor of a radical doctrine of agape as grace given to man⁹⁾.

Then what was Augustine's viewpoint on this matter?

In St. Augustine the Latin *caritas*, which the Vulgate prefers as translation for agape and which survives in the English "charity", receives its definitive statement as a synthesis of man's search for the good and God's search for sinful man¹⁰⁾.

Here some viewpoints of Christian theologians as to the differences between such a concept of Christian 'Love' and the concept of Buddhist 'Compassion' will be introduced in the following.

In spite of the fact that Douglas Jay clearly mentions;

It has been suggested that such love (*maitri*) is the purest form of charity since it extends beyond men to all creatures, even to vegetations¹¹⁾, still he emphasizes the difference between the concept of love in the two religions as follows:

7) *ibid.*

8) *ibid.*, p. 219.

9) *ibid.*, pp. 218-9.

10) *ibid.*, p. 218.

11) *The Meaning of Life in Five Great Religions*, edited by John A. Arving and R. C. Chalmers, p. 146.

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A real difference becomes apparent however between the Christian and Buddhist conception of "neighbor.".....

Both Christian agape and Buddhist maitri consist in loving one's neighbor as oneself. But whereas the former is a relationship between two equally real individualities, both created in the image of God, the latter occurs between two equally "suffering, impermanent and unsubstantial aggregates," in the classic phrase¹²⁾.

Paul Tillich again, recognizing high and pure concept of Buddhist Compassion, suggests as follows :

But something is lacking: the will to transform the other one, either directly or indirectly, by transforming the sociological and psychological structures by which he is conditioned.....It differs in that it lacks the double characteristic of agape—the acceptance of the unacceptable, or the movement from the highest to the lowest, and, at the same time, the will to transform individual as well as social structures¹³⁾.

Further he mentions in the same book as to the difference between the two conceptions as follows :

One can say, in considerably condensed form, that participation leads to agape, identity to compassion¹⁴⁾.

Quoting Jacques-Albert Cuttat¹⁵⁾, Douglas Jay analyzes such a difference between them in the following way :

A related difference noted by Cuttat is that *agape* is an end in itself because its object (the human person) is the image and likeness of a God who is love itself. *Maitri* on the other hand is a means subordinate to an end other than love, namely *nirvāṇa*¹⁶⁾.

Such an idea on Christian love seems to be derived from the following passage in the New Testament :

Beloved, let us love one another ; for love is of God, and he who loves is born of God and knows God. He who does not love does not know God ; for God

12) *ibid.*, pp. 146-7.

13) *Christianity and the Encounter of the World Religions*, pp. 71-2.

14) *ibid.*, p. 70.

15) *The Encounter of Religions*, p. 59 ff.

16) *op. cit. The Meaning of Life*, pp. 147-8.

is love¹⁷⁾.

The similar interpretation concerning Buddhist compassion is also found in Winston L. King who had a detailed survey on the comparison between Christian love and Buddhist compassion¹⁸⁾. Some passages from his book will be quoted in the following.

Its highest form and limitless extension involve a state of experience in which one passes even beyond empathy (the feeling of oneself as though momentarily he were another) into the complete identification of oneself with other selves, so that the distinction between "my" joy and "your" joy actually ceases to be¹⁹⁾. If Christian love might be described as spontaneously and intensely personal in spirit, practical and direct in its expression, historically and socially minded in viewpoint, Buddhist loving-kindness must be described as systematic and calculated, indirect and impersonal, and atomistically individualistic²⁰⁾.

But in any case Buddhist loving-kindness did not provide the necessary inspiration to change the social order, and thereby demonstrated a fundamental incapacity to deal with historical and political realities²¹⁾.

Now I would like to turn my attention to the interpretation of the Buddhist 'Compassion' from the Buddhist side. Dr. Hajime Nakamura mentions:

The fundamental principle of Buddhist ethics is that all men should develop an attitude of compassion. True wisdom consists not in metaphysical sophistication, but in practical knowledge which is expressed in the attitude of compassion as the fundamental principle in our social life. Compassion or love of one's neighbors is very highly esteemed in Buddhism. Compassion is *metta* in Pali and *maitri* in Sanskrit, both derived from *mitra*, or friend. Thus both words literally mean "true friendliness." If we allow the virtue of compassion or love to grow in us, it will not occur to us to harm anyone else, any more than we would willingly harm ourselves. In this way we extinguish our love of self by widening the boundaries of what we regard as ours, we break down the barriers which separate us from others²²⁾.

17) I John 4: 7-8.

18) *Buddhism and Christianity—some bridges of understanding*, pp. 64-102.

19) *ibid.*, pp. 77-8.

20) *ibid.*, p. 91.

21) *ibid.*, p. 101.

One of the oldest Buddhist scriptures says :

As a mother even at the risk of her own life watches over her own child, so let everyone cultivate a boundless love toward all beings²³⁾.

Such an interpretation on the concept of Buddhist love seems to be one of the oldest manifestations.

Buddhism was founded by Gautama Buddha through his deep self-introspection and meditation. He could reach the state of Enlightenment by being delivered himself from all sufferings of this world. In this sense, it can be said that attaining that state had been achieved only for himself. Therefore he was once asked by a *Brahman* as follows :

It seems to me that the way of a way-seeker is to seek only one's happiness, because it aims at obtaining one's tranquillity and deliverance from worldly bonds. Are not the teachings for one's happiness inferior to those for many people²⁴⁻¹⁾ ?

This question seems to be very reasonable, since Buddha's teachings aim at the attainment of one's Enlightenment. The Buddha answers to this question as follows :

I went forth into the homeless life in search of the solution of my sufferings, and found the truths through which I could obtain the solution. Therefore I teach people to come to the solution of their sufferings also through the truths ; and if many people could also reach the solution of their sufferings through the truths they should never be called the truths for only one's happiness²⁴⁻²⁾.

What about the interpretations on this concept of 'Compassion' in Mahayana stream ? One of the Mahayana scriptures mentions as follows :

The Mind of Buddhas is none other than the Great Compassionate Mind²⁵⁾.

There is the concept of the Four Sublime States of Mind which are expected to be possessed by all those who aspire for the Enlightenment in Buddhism. They are *maitrī*, compassion, *karuṇā*, loving-kindness, *muditā*, happiness of the others, and *upekṣā*, equanimity. The first two are usually

22) *The Path of the Buddha*, edited by Kenneth W. Morgan, p. 386.

23) *Sutta-nipāta* 1-8.

24-1) & 24-2) *Anguttara-nikāya* 3, 60.

25) *The Meditation Sūtra*, Taishō Shinshū Daizō-kyō, vol. 12, p. 343-c.

used in a compound which is translated as 'Compassion' in English as already mentioned. To this concept of Compassion, there have been a great many interpretations as well as explanations within Buddhism in the course of history. The above quotation is one of them. In order to make clear the Mahayana interpretations to this concept, two typical interpretations will be quoted in the following.

Great Compassion and Great Loving-kindness are already explained in detail in the Section of the Four Sublime States of Mind. Here, however, they are again explained briefly. Great Compassion means to give pleasure and happiness to all beings, while Great Loving-kindness indicates to get rid of all sufferings and agonies from all beings.....

Question: Great Compassion and Great Loving-kindness are such in the above. Then what are Small Compassion and Small Loving-kindness? "Great" here should have been used in comparison with "Small."

Answer: Compassion and Loving-kindness included in the Four Sublime States of Mind are Small ones.....Compassion and Loving-kindness of Buddhas are Great Ones and those of all other beings are Small ones.

Question: Then why is it usually said that Bodhisattvas are practising Great Compassion and Great Loving-kindness?

Answer: If compared them with those of Buddhas, Bodhisattvas' compassion and loving-kindness are small, but if compared them with those of Two Vehicles²⁶⁾, they are surely Great Ones. Thus they are called Great in the latter sense for the time being. Great Compassion and Great Loving-kindness of Buddhas are the real Great Ones²⁷⁾.

In compassion, a difference exists between that of the Path of Sages²⁸⁾ and that of the Pure Land²⁹⁾. The compassion talked about in the Path of Sages is to take pity on, to sympathize with, and to nurture others. But it is extremely rare that we can truly save others as we will.

The compassion talked about in the Pure Land Buddhism is to say *Nembutsu*³⁰⁾,

26) Śrāvaka and Pratyekabuddha=Theravāda or Hīnayāna Buddhism.

27) *Daichido-ron*, vol. 27. Taishō Shinshū Daizō-kyō, vol. 25, p. 256-b.

28) Buddhist schools other than Pure Land schools.

29) Pure Land Buddhism which advocates the universal salvation by Amida Buddha.

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to become a Buddha quickly, and with the great compassionate heart of an Enlightened One to save beings just as we will. We can have in this life as much pitying heart as we will, but thorough salvation, as we may well know, is not possible. This will say that any compassion like this cannot persist. So the *Nembutsu* is the only great compassion that passes to the end³¹).

In Buddhism, ordinary love as well as sexual love is understood as the origin or the cause of all human sufferings, and therefore, such type of love is expressed as 'love of desire.' However, this type of love is understood to be neither evil nor good in the sense of ethics, because it is simply an instinctive power of human beings. In this sense, it can be said that the concept of Buddhist compassion excludes the level of sexual, naturalistic, or instinctive love which may correspond to the *eros* level of love in Christianity. And if the Buddhist compassion is to be classified into the following three: Great Compassion of Buddhas, compassion of Bodhisattvas, and that of Two Vehicles and all others; only the third level of compassion as well as compassion in the Path of the Sages in the above quotation may correspond to *philia* level of love, while compassion of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas may roughly correspond to *agape* level of love. Nevertheless, there seems to be clear distinction between Christian Love and Buddhist Compassion which cannot be identified. Namely, differences on the concepts of the Ultimate Reality or the Absolute Being and the ways of thinking in both religions are influencing greatly upon these two similar concepts. That is to say, 'Love' is the thing which is given to men, sinners and created, by God, love itself and the Creator himself, while compassion is coming forth from compassionate minds of the Enlightened Ones, who had also been in the midst of sufferings and agonies together with other fellow-beings, to get rid of all sufferings of other beings. In other words, there is the dualistic way of thinking, the Creator and the Created, in Christianity, while there is the monistic way of thinking, the Enlightened was none other

30) To recite the name of Amida Buddha in the form of *Na-mu-a-mi-da-butsu*.

31) *Tannishō*, spoken by Shinran, the founder of Jōdo-shin Denomination of the Pure Land Buddhism, chapter IV.

than the suffering being, in Buddhism. That is to say, the difference between them exists in the point that the religion of love expects sinful and incomplete men to imitate God's Love, *agape*, in order to lead them to the Kingdom of God, while the religion of compassion expects the thorough and perfect compassion in the Enlightened who had also been in sufferings and delusions.

Winston L. King mentions as follows :

Also the Christian is exhorted to love others as he loves himself. Yet there is the Christian reference to God, a sense of being first loved by Another³²⁾.

Buddhism, in the course of history, finally reached the conclusion that no one can expect, except for the Enlightened Ones, the thorough and perfect compassionate heart in the incomplete beings, and therefore, as clearly can be found in the above Shinran's thought³³⁾, one can expect to seek to be identified with the perfect compassion through *Nembutsu*.

Here in this paper, I simply tried to suggest that differences on the concepts of Love and Compassion cannot be realized without having an investigation upon the differences of the concept of the Absolute Being in the two religions : God, the Creator and Love itself, and the Buddhas who had been the same human beings before they had attained the state of Enlightenment and who had nothing to do with the creation of this universe.

Just as in Christian history, the concept of Compassion or Loving-kindness also has been transformed greatly in the course of Buddhist history as shown in the above. The most important thing to be noted in Buddhist concept of compassion is that the love in *eros* level has always been regarded as the cause of sufferings and delusions. And again the perfect compassion has been admitted in every being, who is believed to possess the Buddha-nature or the potentiality of becoming a Buddha, upon the completion of Enlightenment which is surely contrasted to the concept of God in Christian religion in which no one can expect to be identical with God, Love itself.

32) op. cit. *Buddhism and Christianity*, p. 75.

33) cf. above footnote 31.

34) *Samyutta-nikaya* 3, 8, *Mallika*

Nevertheless, as has been pointed out by Christian theologians, it is also true that Buddhist Compassion does not talk too much about the relation with the society in which men live, in spite of the fact that Buddhism does not neglect the social life, since it always has emphasized the interrelationship among all existences and phenomena in this world.

Again however, the Buddhist Compassion will be able to have the relation with the society in the whole when the following way of thinking is to be applied to all others, although such a compassionate mind seems to be only a part of the concept of the Buddhist Compassion :

Man's thought can go anywhere.
Wherever he may go, however,
He may find nothing dearer than himself.
The same is with all others.
Therefore, one who loves himself,
Should not hurt others³⁴).

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