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No Real Protection without Authentic
Love and Compassion

John Makransky

Boston College
Department of Theology
Chestnut Hill, MA.
Email: makransk@bc.edu

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No Real Protection without Authentic Love and Compassion

John Makransky

Abstract The focus of modern technocratic societies on material means for well being tends to ignore the significance of motivation: What sort of motive force drives the social policies and development strategies of our societies, and how does that affect the outcome of our endeavors to establish social stability and well-being? This paper will draw upon teachings from the *Ornament of the Mahayana Scriptures* (*Mahāyāna-sūtra-alaṃkāra*, ascribed to Maitreya circa the fourth century CE), teachings that focus on the motive power of boundless love and what happens where it is lacking. I will try to apply insights from that text to contemporary problems of social fragmentation and violence.

Given the forces of divisiveness and violence that have been unleashed in many parts of the world in recent years, I have been asked to explain what resources within Buddhism I draw upon as a Buddhist scholar and Dharma teacher that might help empower people in their quest for genuine peace.¹ In the past year, partly as my own response to the violence of September 11, terrorism, and war, but also to daily news of violence in homes and neighborhoods in my own country, I have found my attention turn to the four boundless attitudes that are central to my tradition, and a renewed interest in taking them up for protection and refuge. I find myself increasingly focusing on their practice in my life and teaching their cultivation both within the university and in meditation retreats and workshops.

The four boundless attitudes appear prominently in *Śākyamuni* Buddha's recorded teachings. Buddhist texts refer to them as boundlesses (*apramāṇas*), and as divine abodes (*brahma-vihāras*). The four boundless attitudes are powerful states of mind that are literally unconditional and all-inclusive in scope: boundless, unconditional love (*maitrī*); compassion (*karuṇā*); sympathetic joy (*muditā*); and equanimity (*upekṣā*). *Love* here is the wish for beings to be deeply well and joyful and to possess the inner causes of such joy (inmost virtue). *Compassion* is the wish for beings to be free of suffering and free from its inmost causes (free from patterns of self-grasping and karmic reaction). *Sympathetic joy* is joy in the joy of beings and in the means to their joy. Equanimity is the impartiality that permits the prior attitudes to focus on every being equally, without discrimination.

Buddhist traditions following *Śākyamuni* provide specific meditation methods for the cultivation of these all-inclusive attitudes. For Buddhist traditions in which the teaching of Buddha nature (*tathāgata-garbha*) is central, such attitudes are posited as innate capacities of mind that manifest spontaneously as the self-grasping patterns that obscure them are cleansed away by spiritual practices.

In early Buddhist and Theravada traditions, the boundless attitudes have been cultivated specifically to overpower obstacles to the path (such as hatred and jealousy) and to achieve states of highly refined meditative concentration (*dhyānas*). In my own traditions of practice (Tibetan, Mahayana), the four boundlesses are cultivated to empower the emergence of *bodhicitta*, the bodhisattva resolve to attain fullest enlightenment (Buddhahood) for the sake of all beings. *Bodhicitta*, the motive force of the bodhisattva path, is the motive power of the four boundless attitudes conjoined with wisdom when they are harnessed to attain or express Buddhahood. In *Vajrayāna* Buddhist practice, the four boundlesses take sacramental form as the four doorways of the tantric mandala, the passageways to enter into the Buddhas realm, to commune and merge with the Buddhas qualities and to participate in their liberating activity for beings.

However, such soteriological and symbolic schemes may seem abstract. I would like to describe two elements of Buddhist tradition that may help show the concrete relevance of the boundless attitudes to the current problem of violence in our world. Firstly, a number of Buddhist sayings and stories characterize boundless love and compassion quite literally as a crucial form of protection. Secondly, the “boundless attitude” section of a foundational *Mahāyāna* treatise argues that forces of violence are inevitably unleashed whenever the boundless attitudes are lacking (*Ornament of the Mahayana Scriptures, Mahāyāna-sūtrālaṅkāra*, ascribed in Tibet to Maitreya and Asanga, circa the late fourth century CE).

Love and Compassion as Protection: Buddhist Sayings and Stories

These famous words are attributed to *Śākyamuni* Buddha: “Hatred is never quelled by hatred in this world. It is quelled by love. This is an eternal truth.” (*Dhammapada* 1.5). That statement, like many ascribed to the Buddha, declares a necessary connection between conditioned mental states, such as hatred, and their results. To hate is both to elicit the hatred of others and to further habituate oneself to hating. To exercise patience in the spirit

of love is to quell the conditioned dynamic of hatred in oneself and others. “*Without love, there can be no dependable protection from hatred and its results*”. This is stated not as sentiment but as objective truth, to be tested rigorously in the experience of individuals and communities.

However, merely intellectual adherence to that truth is not enough. We may not perceive our individual and communal hatreds to be hatred. Instead, we may be conditioned, both individually and socially, to hate without conscious awareness of hating, to rationalize our subconscious hatreds in the name of “retributive justice” or “righteous indignation,” making it impossible to recognize how the Buddha’s words apply to us. Then, upon hearing his words, we may wish only that others would listen better to the Buddha. The rigorous cultivation of boundless attitudes, such as love and compassion, taken up as daily practice, permits something new to happen. Such practice helps us come newly conscious of ways we have been subconsciously frozen into socially conditioned patterns of hostility and fear. It shows us how the warming rays of loving kindness for self and others, as the Buddha taught, can gradually thaw those frozen patterns, conforming one’s heart and mind, little by little, toward the literal meaning of the Buddha’s words. In this way, we can test his words and see for ourselves, in little or big ways, whether the increasing power of love carries with it a field of protection in the lives we actually live.

Tibetans often tell how the revered Indian Buddhist sage Asanga spent twelve years meditating upon and praying to Maitreya, the future Buddha, who was believed to abide in a heavenly realm awaiting his descent to earth. Asanga, utterly discouraged after twelve difficult years of practice without any direct vision or sign of Maitreya, abandoned his retreat and walked toward town. On the road, he spotted a wounded dog, triggering intense compassion in Asanga for the suffering creature. Upon seeking to save the dog’s life, he suddenly perceived a radiant vision of Maitreya, who explained to Asanga that it was the power of Asanga’s effective love and compassion for that creature which purified his perception, finally allowing him directly to perceive the future Buddha. The name Maitreya is Sanskrit for “loving one,” a name often connected to the suffix “-nātha,” *Maitreya-nātha*, which means “the loving protector,” one who personifies the principle that love is the great protection for the world.

One of my Tibetan teachers liked to tell the story of the fourteenth century master Gyalsey Togmey, whose love and compassion, it is said, was so powerful that it protected him from malicious spirits, and radiated such a forceful blessing upon his environment that mountain lions were attracted to his retreat cave, where they lay tamely nearby as his protectors (giving

quite a shock to pilgrims who came to visit him).

Shantideva, renowned eighth century Indian Buddhist saint, composed the *Manual for Entry into Bodhisattva Practice* (*Bodhicaryāvatāra*), influential in the formation of Tibetan Buddhism. Chapter 8, verse 120 of that text declares, “One who wants to protect oneself and others quickly should practice exchanging self for other, the great mystery.” Unconditional love and compassion, mediated here by the discipline of exchanging “self” for “other,” are again characterized literally as great protection, in matters both mundane and supra-mundane. This is proclaimed in the context of specific practice instructions (for “tong-len,” a rigorous discipline of exchanging self-concern for other-concern) so as to test the truth of such statements within the context of an embodied discipline.

Without Love and Compassion, No Protection: The Ornament for Mahāyāna Scriptures

In our perilous and cynical time, such sayings and stories may seem charming but also a bit too naïve to take literally. In what sense is unconditional love and compassion to be seen as a real protection for individuals and communities in our dangerously violent world? The *Ornament of the Mahayana Scriptures* (*Mahāyāna-sūtrālamkāra*, abbreviated MSA), traditionally ascribed to Maitreya and Asanga, contains a section on the four boundless attitudes in which the relation between the boundless attitudes and protection is rephrased in a way that may seem more realistic.

What happens if boundless attitudes are lacking? Then, says the MSA, we become defenseless before their opposing tendencies. It declares, “Where the boundless attitudes of love, compassion, joy, and equanimity are lacking, persons become subject to their opposing tendencies: malice, violence, jealousy and prejudice,” and, “Those who come under the power of malice, violence, jealousy and prejudice undergo many miseries” (MSA 17.24 *bhāṣya* followed by MSA 17.24). It also says, “Such deluded tendencies destroy oneself, destroy others, and destroy morality. Through them, one is damaged, impoverished and made defenseless” (MSA 17.25).² Elsewhere, it declares, “Boundless love destroys deluded tendencies. . . . It unravels the mind-made knots of deluded emotions, so their objects [of projection] are cut.” (from MSA 17.19 with *bhāṣya*).³

In other words, if love, compassion, sympathetic joy, and equanimity are lacking, the fundamental power of care for others well being, the essential will for good, is just not there. According to the MSA teaching, there is simply

no escape from this fundamental truth. Strategies of assistance or protection for others and self that lack the fundamental power and motive force of love, of authentic care, automatically tend to express individual and communal dispositions toward jealousy, prejudice, fear, and violence, in the face of which all are rendered defenseless. Even when we claim to be helping others through our various agencies and governments, our “helping” strategies are ineffective or harmful if they are not the expression of a genuine, strong will for the good of others, the will of loving kindness that wishes others to be deeply well.

When I first read the MSA section quoted above, it brought to mind part of my experience as a young man in the U. S. Peace Corps in the Philippines. I worked in a rural tuberculosis treatment program. Patients had to take the necessary medicine each day for a full year. If they stopped, their tuberculosis might return in even more vehement forms. However, the region has monsoon rains many months each year, during which floods made it difficult for village patients to travel miles to the clinics. If the effort was to be successful, it would require tremendous dedication, health workers carrying medicine to villages during the rainy season at great personal inconvenience or risk. Local government agencies and international agencies put much resource and medicine into the TB program, and many (underpaid) health workers were remarkably dedicated, but overall, the will to get the medicine to village patients during flood season was just not strong enough to overcome the obstacles. The sheer power of care, love, and compassion for those suffering from TB was just not strong enough to make the program successful. Lacking that, human tendencies toward jealousy, competition (some agencies competing with others for limited resources), communal prejudice, and apathy rendered communities helpless to deal effectively with the problem. As the MSA declares, when sufficient love and care are lacking, we become helpless before their opposing tendencies, in this case individual and social tendencies toward narrow self-concern, competition for funds and reputation, or even prejudice against the rural poor.

Indeed, this experience partly motivated my early exploration of Buddhism just after my service in the Peace Corps: it appeared to me that real solutions to individual and social suffering required much more than material resources, strategies, and technologies. What was needed in order for social development work to actually make a difference in people’s lives was a tremendous care for people, an indomitable will for the good, immense love, and compassion that does not become discouraged at numerous social and material obstacles to progress and does not dissipate into apathy or self-concerned competition among “helping” individuals and agencies. Without

a tremendous motive force of genuine care for persons, as the MSA declares, the common good simply will not hold together, no matter how clever the strategy for development, no matter how advanced the technologies.

There may be further social implications to the MSA's teaching that where genuine care for others is lacking, the opposite tendencies take over. If the social system in any society makes it too difficult for people at lower economic levels to fulfill their needs of life (for food, clothing, shelter, and education), such a system implicitly communicates the message to those at lower echelons that no one really cares whether they live or die. Even if some individuals at higher echelons of society experience themselves as civilized and loving persons, their social system, by making it so difficult for the lower echelons to live, may communicate the opposite message. Eventually, it may occur to some in the lower echelons to mirror the social systems seeming lack of care in calls for violent change, as if to say, "just as no one cares whether we live or die, we don't care if others live or die."

Recall the MSA's specific message: Where all-inclusive attitudes of love and compassion are lacking, people become subject to their opposing tendencies: jealousy, malice, and violence. This problem can happen even when many persons in higher echelons lack any specific intention to injure or harm others. It can occur where social groups in power lack sufficient attention to the needs of other social groups, which is just to say, where genuine care for all members of the society is lacking. Just as love, willing the good of others, tends to invoke others' capacity for love, social callousness about the well-being of others tends to invoke others' capacity for callousness in an escalating cycle. The implication of this concept is not necessarily just to replace one social system with another, because the replacement may just replicate the callousness of the prior system in a different form, as occurred in societies that replaced capitalism with a form of communism, only to find it, in various ways, more socially repressive and callous about the lives of its citizens than the former system. Rather, the point here is for influential groups and individuals in any such social system to seek to see and feel much more of the social reality than was previously seen and felt, continually asking ourselves, Is our social system making it just too hard for some groups to live? If so, then how is that happening, and what can be done seriously to adjust the social system to respond much better to that reality?

Those questions, if sincere, are the expression of an all-inclusive love, a genuine care for all involved, not just for some. To affirm this key point may sound naïve in an age of technocracy and narrow communal identities, but to ignore it is to lose the power to hold together the common good; it is to be rendered defenseless before the individual and social forces of evil

that operate in all our hearts and tend to tear apart the fabric of all our societies.

In the Cakkavatti-Sīhanāda sutta of the Pali Canon (Dīgha Nikāya III 58-77), the Buddha tells a legend of an ancient line of kings who ruled in accord with the Dharma, with compassion and fairness. The wisdom and counsel of the kings was passed down from father to son, until one son who became king did all that had been advised *except* providing generously for those in need. As a result, poverty increased, and with it an increase in thievery. A thief who was caught told the king that he had stolen because he was poor. The king, remembering the advice he had ignored to provide for the poor, gave the thief goods to support himself and his family. As word of this act spread, more people became thieves, thinking that if they were caught, they would be similarly rewarded. But the king, realizing his mistake, executed the next thief to make an example of him. When the growing number of thieves heard of this, some thought, “We too can arm ourselves with sharp swords and threaten others’ lives; then we can steal even more.” And the kingdom descended into social upheaval.

As several modern scholars have pointed out, one message in this story as summarized by the Buddha is that any social system that does not effectively respond to poverty within the society creates fundamental causes for social disruption.⁴

However, please also notice another theme in the story relevant to our current discussion. Forces of disruption were unleashed because the leadership lacked a clear focus of care for the poor, a lack of effective love for them. When thievery increased, the rulers attention turned to that problem, but never to genuine care for the poor. He thought he was recalling the advice of the kings to give to the needy by giving goods to the impoverished thief he had caught, but the advice of the kings actually implied a genuine and effective care for all who are needy, through generosity. The advice was not to give just as it seems pragmatically useful to deal with a problem person, for the lens of such self-interest is simply too narrow to know and respond to the fuller social reality. Disruptive forces were unleashed by the leaderships simple lack of care for the poor as a whole, a lack of effective all-inclusive love that wishes and acts for others well being, a fundamental apathy that took expression in the social system.

In my own city of Boston there was a recent news story. A man, jealous of his former girlfriend, took revenge upon her by murdering her children. A friend of mine teaches in a school for youths from poor inner-city neighborhoods of Boston. Several of his students, deeply upset at the news, told him that they personally knew the children who were murdered. Then, one

by one, students told their own stories of friends and relatives who had been murdered in their neighborhoods, often by rival ethnic gangs of youths who attacked at the slightest provocation or with no provocation at all. The students told him, “This *is* the world. This is how it is.” When individuals and groups do not experience being loved, cared for, when communities lose hope that anyone cares, fear and violence are often seized upon as seeming protectors in the form of gangs, mobs, and communal hatreds. Where each fears the others, the only seeming protection is to be on the strongest, most violent side. Indeed, when the tendencies opposed to love and compassion become so seemingly omnipresent, their projections of fear and hatred appear simply to *be* the world — so those students declared.

The attitudes of prejudice, hatred, and violence are radically cut off from the realities of persons, lost in projections of fear and malice, which, in the absence of all-inclusive love and compassion, present the appearance of *being* objectively what persons are, what the world is. Current perpetrators of violence here and abroad often perceive themselves as the historical victims who finally get “justice” through violence, while their current victims fantasize about being able someday to become the perpetrators, to inflict their own revenge in the name of “justice.” Fundamentally contrary to that dynamic are the all-inclusive attitudes of love, compassion, sympathetic joy, and equanimity, which are attuned to the *actual* realities of persons beyond such projections. These attitudes sense and respond to persons accurately, as they are, in the qualities shared by all, layers of human suffering and fear often hiding a tremendous inner capacity for generosity, love, and fundamental goodness.

It is extremely hard to break out of the communal maps that project the appearance of a world of intrinsic “friends,” “enemies,” and “strangers,” the maps that organize communal violence here and abroad, precisely because such maps are a social construction viewed as real by social consensus. This is an important meaning of the Buddhist term *karma* for our time. *Karma* in classical Buddhist theory refers to the habitual patterns of thought, intention, and reaction through which individuals experience and react to their world. Largely missing in classical Buddhist treatments of this topic is the way that patterns of thought and reaction (*karma*) comprise not just individually conditioned but also socially conditioned and reinforced phenomena.

That is why most of us find it so hard to believe we could ever really become free from our deluded emotions of fear and aversion, to realize all-inclusive love as a real human possibility. When everyone around me believes that only certain people deserve to be loved while certain other

people deserve just to be hated and feared, I become accustomed to seeing and reacting to them in that way and as I treat them that way; I receive the feedback that reinforces the impression, react accordingly, and thereby condition others around me to the same deluded view. Such social patterning of interpretation and reaction (karma) is largely subconscious, hard even to notice, and hence hard to change.

If I leave the room where I am now working, walk outside, and encounter people on the street, some are categorized the moment I see them, pre-reflectively, as “friend” (someone who deserves to be loved), some as “enemy” (a person who should not be loved), and the vast majority, not personally known to me, as “stranger” (a person of no value, who matters no more than a block of wood). See if this is not the case. That is karmic patterning, individually and socially conditioned, which pre-consciously affects our reactions to everyone we meet, profoundly obscuring the fuller, more mysterious reality of each person.

A remarkable movie came out a few years ago entitled, *Beautiful Mind*, about a mathematical genius named John Nash who taught at Princeton University, until he descended into the mental illness of schizophrenia, experiencing delusions of hearing, seeing, and reacting to people who were not really there. After many years recovering from his mental illness, John Nash was visited by a Nobel prize investigator who wanted to know if he was sane enough to be invited publicly to receive the Nobel prize in mathematics for his early work. The investigator asked Nash whether he still experienced delusions, hearing and seeing people not really there. Nash replied, “I do continue to experience such delusions. But I have learned not to pay attention to them.” That is a profound point. When we continually cognize and react to others within the delusion that most persons are of no importance (“strangers”), some deserve our love (“friends”) and others do not (“enemies”), we are experiencing our world through the delusion of intrinsic “friend,” “enemy,” “stranger” without yet having learned John Nash’s lesson: how to recognize it *as* delusion, how *not* to pay attention to those reductive, inaccurate projections of persons.

However, as MSA 17.19 and its commentary declare, “Boundless love destroys deluded tendencies. . . . It unravels the mind-made knots of deluded emotions, so their objects [of projection] are cut.” The component of impartiality in unconditional love and compassion contains a wisdom that does not believe in the projected appearances of such deluded tendencies. The lens of boundless love and compassion is the wisdom of equanimity that sees through projections of individual and communal violence, that simply does not believe the reduction of persons to objects of hatred and fear.

When the evening television news reported that a young man killed his ex-girlfriends children out of jealousy, I did not hear the anchorperson announce: “Last night a young man, *mistaking his own jealous projections of his ex-girlfriend for the actual person*, seeking revenge, killed her children.” Why was this simple truth never spoken? It is the sort of truth-telling that we desperately need to hear. In the scandal following upon such violence, as mass media continues to comment upon it, as neighborhood parents share their horror of it while waiting to pick up children at school, our social discourse could point to the truth, rather than further obfuscate it through communally rationalized projections of hatred and violence upon the murderer.

Who will come right out and tell both the potential murderer and those who scream for the death penalty in “righteous” hatred of him, *before* they kill, that our images of persons in every moment of malice, jealousy, and violence are illusory constructs of thought, distortions of persons, *not* the actuality of those persons? It is the perspective of boundless love and compassion that holds that vision, that knowledge. The boundless attitudes cut through their opposing tendencies by dispelling distorted projections of self and other, and by the sheer power of such unconditional attitudes to uplift oneself and others to our true potential for unconditional goodness.

All this would sound unrealistic if the boundless attitudes were just rarities of birth, unattainable, uncultivable. But there are clear and specific ways to cultivate them, now provided by Buddhist traditions to whomever wishes to take them up (not just for Buddhists).⁵ It is not enough merely to repeat sayings like “love your neighbor as yourself,” “the lives of all are invaluable,” and so forth when we see and deeply feel the world in the distorted, conditioned ways we do. Such pronouncements have little effect, because they provide neither the motivation nor any precise method to see through the conditioned projections and reactions that each moment make others appear vividly as if they were valueless or discardable, that hide their mystery, their intrinsic worth beyond reduction to our projections of them. What the world desperately needs is widespread exposure to specific means of realizing the boundless attitudes as a real human possibility, together with the recognition that where they are lacking, no scheme, strategy, or technology of itself will have the power to hold together the human family.

My argument is not that individual cultivation of boundless attitudes, by itself, will alleviate the problem of violence in our world. Also required is continued analysis of connections between poverty, unjust social systems, and the social and material conditions that feed communal fear, hatred, and violence, followed up by social action. I do argue, however, that all

such strategies for social intervention, in themselves, will never be sufficient. The power of the boundless attitudes, the sheer power of good will for all involved, is essential. These attitudes provide the motive force required for social and material actions for peace to bear lasting fruit, without which, they do not.

Where all-inclusive love and compassion are lacking, their opposing tendencies tend to become the dominant motive force of social activity, whether or not the activity purports to help or to harm. According to the texts I have quoted, there is no escape from this truth. But there are means to conform to it. Clear, precise ways to cultivate all-inclusive love and compassion are the Buddha's gift to the world, not just his gift to Buddhist ethnic groups and religious communities. Those who have long trained in the boundless attitudes within Buddhist social institutions can and should introduce the means to their cultivation more and more widely into societies beyond Buddhist institutions. We can, and should, work to make the cultivation of all-inclusive love and compassion an essential part of education in contemporary societies, for children, youths, and adults, as the necessary complement to our technocratic trainings. Little by little, this cultivation could beneficially inform the future development of our social theories, our social institutions, and our individual responses to the challenges we face.

Notes

¹The content of this essay was presented as the keynote address for the Second Annual Symposium on Buddhist Studies in Boudhanath, Nepal, October 25, 2004: “Toward Genuine Peace,” sponsored by Kathmandu University’s Centre for Buddhist Studies.

²Translated from the Tibetan of MSA and bhāṣya within sDe-dge phi, fols. 214a6 to 214b2.

³MSA and bhāṣya within sDe-dge phi, fols. 213b3 to 213b4.

⁴Peter Harvey, *An Introduction to Buddhist Ethics*, (New York: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2000), p. 197. David Loy, *The Great Awakening: A Buddhist Social Theory* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2003), p. 46, 56, 71.

⁵Several authentic writings in English now teach clear ways to cultivate the four boundless attitudes, based on their authors long traditional training and practice experience. Especially accessible to contemporary readers (whether they are Buddhist or not) are the following: *Loving-Kindness: The Revolutionary Art of Happiness* by Sharon Salzberg (Boston, Shambhala, 1997); Chapter 7 of *Wake Up to Your Life: Discovering the Buddhist Path of Attention*, by Ken McLeod (New York, Harper San Francisco, 2001); *Awakening the Buddhist Heart* by Lama Surya Das (New York: Broadway Books, 2000); and *Boundless Heart: The Cultivation of the Four Immeasurables* by Alan Wallace (Ithaca, Snow Lion, 1999).