



Research Paper

Compassion in the lens of Buddhism and Christianity

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Abstract:

This paper explores the concept of compassion in Buddhism and Christianity. While compassion is a virtue present in various religions, it is argued that it sets humanity apart from the inherently selfish animal kingdoms. Buddhism and Christianity both place great emphasis on the value of all life and teach that it is the duty of humanity to show love and compassion to all beings. However, the two religions differ in their interpretations of this tenet, as demonstrated in their literature, traditions, and practices. Through examples from both religions' literatures, this paper aims to compare and contrast their views on compassion and argue that their ultimate manifestation of compassion differs significantly. The paper also provides an overview of Buddhism's core teachings, including the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path, and its emphasis on personal spiritual development and the pursuit of enlightenment.

Keywords:

compassion, virtue, religions, humanity, animal kingdoms, Buddhism, Christianity, literature, traditions, practices, comparison, contrast, Four Noble Truths, Eightfold Path, personal spiritual development, enlightenment

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Compassion, understood as the ability to understand and share the feelings of others, is a virtue that has been practiced and promoted in various religions throughout history. Outside of any religious framework, compassion is arguably what sets humanity apart from the animal kingdoms, which can be argued to be inherently selfish. (Phelps Norm) Religious traditions, too, show the superiority of humanity, yet not all religions demonstrate the fundamentality of compassion to their central messages as much as Buddhism and Christianity, two of the most widespread faiths in the world. In both Buddhism and Christianity, the two religions share a deep respect for the value of all life and teach that it is the duty of humanity to show love and compassion to all beings. Though similar in their centrality of compassion, the two religions ultimately differ in their interpretations of the tenet, which is demonstrated in their literature, traditions, and practices. This paper will serve as an overview of certain elements of compassion throughout both the Buddhist and Christian faiths, utilizing examples from the literatures of both, in order to compare and contrast the views of the two religious traditions and argue that, despite their initial views, the ultimate manifestation of compassion differs significantly between them.

The religion and philosophy of Buddhism was founded in the fifth century BCE by Siddhartha Gautama, also known as the Buddha, in ancient India. The core teachings of Buddhism are the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path. The Four Noble Truths state that life is characterized by suffering, the cause of suffering is desire and attachment, suffering can be overcome, and the way to attain happiness is by following the Eightfold Path. The Eightfold Path consists of right understanding, intention, speech, action, livelihood, effort, mindfulness, and concentration. Evolving from the native religions of ancient India, Buddhism emphasizes personal spiritual development through meditation and mindfulness, and encourages individuals to strive for enlightenment, or Nirvana, which is the ultimate state of peace and liberation from suffering.

In Buddhism, compassion is known as Karuna. Compassion, in this context, is the wish for all beings to be free from suffering. It is an active practice that involves understanding the suffering of others and taking action to relieve it. The practice of Karuna is integral to the path of enlightenment in Buddhism. Compassion is considered a key component of the path to enlightenment, as it is believed to lead to the development of wisdom, moral discipline, and spiritual progress. Through the cultivation of compassion, individuals are encouraged to develop empathy, kindness, and a deep sense of connectedness with all living beings. Throughout the faith and philosophy, compassion is not simply seen as a passive feeling or emotion, but an active practice. It involves taking action to alleviate the suffering of others and to promote their well-being. Compassionate action can take many forms, such as offering kindness, generosity, supporting those in need, or advocating for social justice and

environmental sustainability. Ultimately, the practice of compassion is seen as a means of breaking down the barriers that separate individuals from each other and fostering a sense of unity and interconnectedness with all of existence.

The Angulimala Sutta is a story from Buddhist scriptures that teaches about the transformative power of compassion. It tells the story of a notorious killer named Angulimala, who had murdered many and wore a necklace made from the fingers of his victims. When the Buddha encountered Angulimala, he did not fear him but instead approached him with compassion and wisdom. The Buddha recognized that Angulimala was suffering and that his violent behavior was a result of this suffering. Through his compassionate teachings, the Buddha was able to help Angulimala understand the nature of his suffering and how to overcome it. As a result, Angulimala was transformed and became a monk. He renounced violence and dedicated his life to the practice of Buddhist teachings. The story emphasizes the importance of responding to violence and wrongdoing with compassion rather than with fear, anger, or violence. More importantly, this process of self-overcoming through compassion and wisdom is an important aspect of Buddhist teachings.

The Story of Kisa Gotami from the Gotami Sutta also emphasizes similar teachings. Kisa Gotami was a young mother who was grief-stricken by the death of her infant. She went to the Buddha, asking him to bring her son back to life. The Buddha told her that he could not bring her son back to life, but that if she brought him a mustard seed from a household where no one had ever experienced loss, he would help her. Kisa Gotami went from house to house, but was unable to find a household where no one had experienced loss. In the process, she came to realize that suffering is a universal human experience, and her grief began to lift. In Buddhism, the understanding of the nature of suffering and its causes is seen as essential to achieving liberation from suffering. This understanding is often accompanied by the development of compassion and wisdom, which are considered necessary qualities for attaining enlightenment.

Both the faiths of Buddhism and Christianity share the intrinsic belief that compassion is essential in extending beyond personal needs and desires, and that the understanding of and empathizing with others is crucial to both alleviate their suffering and ensure their salvation, respectively. Turning to the Christian system of beliefs, the origins of the religion and its central texts ensure that the approach to compassion, forgiveness, and overall systems of religious traditions differ significantly from those of Buddhism.

Christianity as a religion was founded in the first century CE and is centered around Jesus Christ, who Christians believe to be the son of God. According to their beliefs, Jesus came to Earth to save humanity from their sinful ways and offer eternal life in the form of Heaven through his sacrifice and Crucifixion. Followers of Christianity worship one God in three persons, known as the Holy Trinity, and follow the Bible as the main text for Christian teachings, which contains both the Old and New Testaments. Christianity branched off from the religious traditions of Judaism, whose beliefs center around a just single God through the enforcement of the rules found within the Old Testament. Unlike followers of Judaism, who believed their deity to have codified rules for a specific people to follow, Christianity, through the sacrifice and Crucifixion of Jesus Christ, thought themselves to have been freed from these ordinances. (Wessel Susan) As a result, turning to a larger community of both Jews and non-Jews, and unlike their more legally-oriented predecessors, Christian beliefs center largely on doctrines of forgiveness, compassion, and love, many of which appear similar to those of Buddhism, at least on the surface.

In Christianity, compassion is rooted in the teachings of Jesus Christ in the New Testament, particularly as written in the Gospels. According to the teachings most central to the Christian faith, followers are called upon to "love your neighbor as yourself" and treat others in the same way they would like to be treated. (Matthew 22:35-40, Mark 12:28-34, Luke 10:27) This quote has evolved into being known as the "Golden Rule," on account of its centrality to both Christianity itself and societies attempting to emulate core Christian values. Compassion is also emphasized in the Gospel of Luke through the Parable of the Good Samaritan; it tells the story of a man who was traveling from Jerusalem to Jericho and was attacked by robbers. He was left half-dead on the road, and several people passed by without helping him, including a priest and a Levite. Finally, a Samaritan, hailing from a group traditionally divided from Jews, came along and showed him compassion, taking care of him and paying for his medical care. (Luke 10:25-37) The parable concludes with Jesus reciting a commandment to go out and do the same as the Samaritan had done, directly tying the acts of the compassionate to all the believers. It shows that Christian compassion involves action, not simply intent or emotions. The Samaritan took concrete steps to provide aid, including bandaging his wounds, taking him to an inn, and paying for his care. Compassion also knows no boundaries. The Samaritan was not from the same religious or ethnic group as the injured man, yet he still showed him kindness and mercy. It shows that compassion is costly. The Samaritan went out of his way to help the injured man, and it cost him time, money, and effort. Christianity teaches that true compassion involves action, selflessness, and a willingness to put others first. By following this principle, Christians can strive to make a positive impact on the world around them.

Through the descriptions and analysis of compassion alone, the differences between Christian and Buddhist beliefs can seem almost negligible. Yet it is once the focus turns from compassion itself to that of forgiveness that the two seem to divide themselves further. The difference between the two terms is also slight.

Whereas compassion can be described as the ability to feel and empathize with the suffering of others, taking action to alleviate that suffering, forgiveness, on the other hand, is the act of letting go of anger or resentment towards someone who has wronged you, which can lead to feelings of peace and healing. While compassion involves an emotional response to the suffering of others, forgiveness is a conscious decision to release negative feelings towards someone who has caused harm.

In Christianity, forgiveness is considered a crucial aspect of compassion, rather than a separate process altogether, emphasizing the importance of forgiving those who have wronged others and showing them love despite their misdeeds. Christians are called upon to forgive others, especially those who have wronged them, as God has forgiven them through the sacrifice of the Crucifixion. The Lord's Prayer, the most widespread prayer in the Christian faith and the only one to have been mentioned in the Gospels themselves, includes the phrase, "forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us," (Matthew 6:12-14) thus highlighting the central nature of forgiveness throughout the religious tradition. The term "trespass" refers to a wrongdoing or a sin committed against another person. In this context, asking for forgiveness for one's trespasses entails admitting to one's own errors and misdeeds, and seeking absolution from God. This is a gesture of humility and remorse, acknowledging the fact that humans are not infallible and require divine benevolence and compassion. The latter portion of the line, "as we forgive those who trespass against us," highlights the significance of extending forgiveness to others. Similar to how individuals implore God for forgiveness for their own transgressions, they are also encouraged to forgive those who have wronged them. This component of the Christian faith is challenging but essential, as forgiveness can be arduous to grant when one feels hurt or wronged by another person. Nevertheless, by forgiving others, individuals are able to mirror the love and mercy that God embodies.

Throughout Christianity, forgiveness is seen as a means of breaking the imposition and cycle of institutional and personal hatred, violence, and oppression through the promotion of peace and reconciliation. Initially persecuted as a minority religious sect throughout the first three centuries of its existence, Christianity had long fought through its extreme pacifism to secure its independence, security, and systems of beliefs, before ultimately being legalized in the early fourth century. Such examples of pacifism and forgiveness can be seen both in biblical scripture itself and the apocrypha, featuring in the biblical Parable of the Prodigal Son, which tells the story of a wealthy man with two sons. The younger son asked his father for his share of the inheritance, and then he left home and squandered all of his money on a glamorous lifestyle. Eventually, the younger son found himself destitute and hungry, and he decided to return home to his father, hoping to become a servant in his household. When the father saw his son coming from a distance, he ran to him and embraced him, welcoming him back with open arms. The older son, who had stayed with his father and worked hard for him all those years, was angry and resentful of his brother's return. But the father urged him to forgive his brother and celebrate, noting that he had been lost and was now found. (Luke 15:11–32)

Outside of the biblical canon, depictions of Early Christian martyrs, saints, and holy men and women tell countless stories of unwavering faith and forgiveness in the face of violent imperial and personal discrimination, persecution, and execution, with the core concepts detailing the triumphant nature of overwhelming faith and forgiveness over the harsh crackdowns and impositions of authority. In the same way, the Christian God waits for the non-Christian and unfaithful sinners to realize their inherent sinfulness and repent, asking for forgiveness and fully in their faith as He welcomes them back among his flock of lost sheep.

In its development centuries and worlds apart, compassion and forgiveness are also closely related concepts in Buddhism, allowing its followers and adherents to see beyond the immediate harm caused by the actions of a wrongdoer and to recognize the underlying causes of their behavior, which could potentially be rooted in their own pain and suffering, rather than any deliberate ill-will. In Buddhism, the focus of forgiveness, specifically, lies in the understanding and letting go of a believer's own attachments to their anger and resentment, although forgiveness remains an inherent aspect of compassion and understanding. While the process to enshrine peace, joy, and salvation – however that may be defined – for oneself and others is attained through the processes of compassionate acts, the religious traditions of Buddhism and Christianity differ in their approach to forgiveness itself.

In the Buddhist scriptures, the practice of forgiveness is known as Kshanti. Kshanti is the demonstrated practice of patience, endurance, and forbearance in the face of difficult situations and challenging people, be they of Buddhism belief or not. Such adherence to Kshanti requires cultivating the capacity to pardon others despite their wrongdoings, including those who have committed offenses against themselves or society as a whole. The teachings of the Buddhist scriptures emphasize the importance of understanding that all living beings are interconnected, and that the actions of others are often the result of their own suffering, regardless of their intentions or wills. A prime example of preferred actions are demonstrated in the Akkosa Sutta, a 2500 year old discourse in the Pali Canon, also known as the *Insult Sutta* or the *Discourse on Insults*, dealing with the proper practices pertaining to verbal hatred. Within the text, the Buddha is insulted and abused by a man who is suffering from mental illness. Instead of reacting with anger or violence, the Buddha responds with compassion and understanding, recognizing the man's suffering as the cause of his pain and outbursts, offering him teachings on

the path to liberation and enlightenment, stating that “If you become angry with me and I do not get insulted, then the anger falls back on you. You are then the only one who becomes unhappy, not me. All you have done is hurt yourself. If you want to stop hurting yourself, you must get rid of your anger and become loving instead.”(Sutta Translation) Despite how this parable may seem, the practice of forgiveness in Buddhism does not center around condoning or excusing harmful behavior. Rather, the relationship between Buddhism and forgiveness promotes understanding the causes of suffering and cultivating compassion and wisdom in response. Forgiveness involves recognizing that all living beings, human or otherwise, are capable of change and growth, and that everyone deserves the opportunity to be free from suffering through the following of Buddhist teachings. This suggests the practice of love and compassion is not only beneficial for others, but more importantly to oneself.

Through a basic analysis of Christian and Buddhist attitudes to both compassion and forgiveness, it is easy to recognize similarities between the two religious traditions, with both forming the foundational cores around their practices. While Christianity and Buddhism share some commonalities when it comes to compassion and forgiveness, however, they approach these concepts differently. In Christianity, compassion is often tied to a belief in a loving, merciful God who extends compassion and forgiveness to all people. In Buddhism, while there may be a recognition of the interconnectedness of all things and a sense of universal compassion, there is not necessarily a belief in a higher power or deity. Additionally, the practices and techniques for cultivating compassion may differ between the two traditions. In Christianity, compassion and forgiveness are considered essential aspects of faith, with Christians expected to follow the examples Jesus had set of showing love and compassion towards others despite external pressures and impositions. Forgiveness is often seen as an act of obedience to God and a way of demonstrating love and mercy towards others, often to a radical degree. Repentance is often linked with forgiveness, as Christians are encouraged to acknowledge their mistakes and commit to changing their behavior. In contrast, Buddhism places a great emphasis on compassion and considers it central to its teachings. Compassion is often associated with Karuna, the desire to reduce suffering and one of the Four Noble Truths, and is cultivated through meditation and mindfulness practices. Forgiveness is also valued in Buddhism, but it is regarded more as a way to let go of negative emotions and to achieve inner peace than as a moral obligation. Forgiveness is often connected to loving-kindness and is considered a way of cultivating positive emotions while letting go of negative ones, both towards oneself and others, despite the intentions of both. In summary, while both Christianity and Buddhism value compassion and forgiveness, the former places greater emphasis on the importance of forgiveness as an act of obedience and subservience to God through leading by example, while the latter emphasizes the cultivation of compassion as a means to alleviate suffering of both oneself and others, and forgiveness as a way to achieve personal inner peace on the path to enlightenment.

Beyond Enlightenment: Buddhism, Religion, Modernity by Richard Cohen. Routledge 1999. ISBN 0-415-54444-0. p. 33. Bauddha is "a secondary derivative of buddha, in which the vowel's lengthening indicates connection or relation. Things that are bauddha pertain to the buddha, just as things Saiva related to Siva and things Vaisnava belong to Visnu. ... baudda can be both adjectival and nominal; it can be used for doctrines spoken by the buddha, objects enjoyed by him, texts attributed to him, as well as individuals, communities, and societies that offer him reverence or accept ideologies certified through his name. Strictly speaking, Sakya is preferable to bauddha since the latter is not attested at Ajanta. In fact, as a collective noun, bauddha is an outsider's term. The bauddha did not call themselves this in India, though they did sometimes use the word adjectivally (e.g., as a possessive, the buddha's)."

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