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Compassion and Merit in Early Buddhism with the Focus on the *Ānguttara Nikāya* and the *Ekottarika* *Āgama*

Tse-fu Kuan*

1. Compassion and merit in relation to the purpose of the numerical collections

It is generally held that compassion distinguishes Mahāyāna Buddhism from the “Hīnayāna”, a pejorative term for early Buddhism and the mainstream schools derived from it. For example, Damien Keown (1996: 59) says: “in the Mahāyāna compassion (*karuṇā*) is accorded a central place.” A famous scholar of religious studies, Huston Smith (1958: 130) also remarks: “In Theravada [which refers back to ‘Hinayana’ on p. 128] the key virtue was *bodhi*, wisdom ... Mahayana moved a different word to the center: *karuna*, compassion.” In this research I argue that early Buddhism already laid heavy stress on compassion, which was by no means peripheral. Early Buddhist literature attributes infinite compassion to the Buddha, and even attaches supramundane value to the practice of compassion.

The earliest stratum of Buddhist literature includes the four main *Nikāyas* in the Pali Canon and the corresponding four *Āgamas* in Chinese translation, which may be traced back to the First Council (*saṅgīti*) shortly after the Buddha’s death (Hirakawa, 1990: 69) in the 5th century BCE.¹ The four divisions are apparently

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¹ Regarding the Buddha’s date, Narain (1992 and 1994) puts the Buddha’s death at 483 BCE, Norman (1991: 312) at 415–410 BCE, and Gombrich (2000) at 422–399 BCE.

based on the length of the suttas/sūtras contained therein. The long suttas have been allocated to the *Dīgha Nikāya/Dīrgha Āgama*, the middle-length suttas to the *Majjhima Nikāya/ Madhyama Āgama*, and the short suttas to the *Samyutta Nikāya/ Samyukta Āgama* and the *Aṅguttara Nikāya/ Ekottarika Āgama*. The short suttas have been arranged together according to their topics in the *Samyutta Nikāya/Samyukta Āgama*, while the *Aṅguttara Nikāya* (abbreviated to AN) and the *Ekottarika Āgama* in Chinese translation (abbreviated to EĀ) adopt a numerical arrangement as elucidated below.²

In AN and EĀ, the suttas are grouped into eleven nipātas (“books”), from the *Eka-nipāta* (Book of Ones) to the *Ekādasaka-nipāta* (Book of Elevens) — though in EĀ the nipātas are not labelled as such. This grouping into nipātas is based on the number of doctrinal items dealt with in the component suttas. The structures of both numerical collections, namely AN and EĀ, are thus organized on the “aṅguttara principle”, as some scholars dub it.³

The materials found in the scriptures of the early schools — which are preserved in Pali, Chinese, and some fragmentary texts in Sanskrit and Tibetan — that agree with each other can be regarded as going back to the time before the schisms.⁴ A large amount of textual material is shared in common by the four main *Nikāyas* of the Theravāda and the corresponding four *Āgamas* of various schools. Even within a single school, e.g. the Theravāda, one *Nikāya* contains (portions of) suttas parallel to those in the other *Nikāyas* presumably because the reciters (*bhāṇakas*) or redactors⁵ of the various *Nikāyas* could not always agree about the allocation of suttas. Likewise, different schools had their own

² Cf. Norman (1983: 30); von Hinüber (1997: 25); Cox (1995: 9–10).

³ E.g. Sujato (2005: 87); Sujato and Brahmali (2014: 67).

⁴ Wynne (2005: 65) says: “The corresponding pieces of textual material found in the canons of the different sects ... probably go back to pre-sectarian times. It is unlikely that these correspondences could have been produced by the joint endeavour of different Buddhist sects, for such an undertaking would have required organisation on a scale which was simply inconceivable in the ancient world.”

⁵ In early times the Buddhist texts were transmitted orally by the *bhāṇakas* “reciters”, who may also have been the redactors of the texts. See von Hinüber (1997: 25).

reciters/ redactors, who preferred to differ over the placing of some suttas. For example, the *Vammika Sutta* was placed in the *Majjhima Nikāya* (MN 23) by the Theravādins, but the same sutta was placed in the *Samyukta Āgama* (SĀ 1079) by the (Mūla-) Sarvāstivādins, and in the *Ekottarika Āgama* (EĀ 39.9) by the Mahāsāṃghikas. Referring to the above phenomena, Norman (1983: 31) explains: “there was in early times a large collection of *suttas* which were remembered by heart, and the task of allocating them to the various *nikāyas/āgamas* had not been finished, or the allocation completely agreed, by the time the schools began to separate.” Accordingly, such textual materials with parallels may belong to the pre-sectarian, earliest stratum of Buddhist literature.

On the other hand, however, it does not follow that suttas without parallels must be late. Some Pali suttas have no parallels in the Chinese *Āgamas*. This does not signify that only the Theravāda Canon has these suttas. The *Dirgha Āgama*, *Madhyama Āgama*, *Samyukta Āgama* and *Ekottarika Āgama* in Chinese translation are respectively ascribed to the Dharmaguptakas, Sarvāstivādins, (Mūla-)Sarvāstivādins and Mahāsāṃghikas.⁶ None of these schools’ four *Āgamas* survives complete. Therefore, the foregoing schools might have included such “lone” Pali suttas in certain *Āgamas* that have been lost, and thus such suttas could have already existed before the schisms. The same can be said of “lone” suttas in the Chinese *Āgamas*. As Anālayo (2018: 131) notes, “the complexity of the transmission of the early discourses is such that it does not allow invariably equating lack of parallels with lateness.”

Most suttas from AN and EĀ dealt with in this paper have no parallels in ancient Buddhist texts. In the light of the above discussion, these suttas are not necessarily later than the other suttas in the *Nikāyas* and *Āgamas*, although they appear to be relatively unconventional. Their distinctive features are probably related to the nature of the numerical collections.

The numerical collections could be idiosyncratic in some ways compared to the other three collections. As regards the

⁶ For DĀ, see Mayeda (1985: 97), Salomon (1999: 173–174) and Karashima (2014). For MĀ, see Enomoto (1984), Thich Minh Chau (1991: 18–27) and Anālayo (2017: 67–71). For SĀ, see Enomoto (1984), Yinshun (1994: 97), Mizuno (1996: 373–375), Hiraoka (2003) and Dhammadinnā (2012: 68). For EĀ, see Akanuma (1981: 38–39), Bronkhorst (1985: 312–314), Yinshun (1994: 755–756), Pāsādika (2010: 88–90) and Kuan (2013).

content of AN, the best-known sets of doctrinal categories are largely unrepresented in this corpus. A likely explanation for this phenomenon is that AN was intended to accommodate sets that were not already accommodated in the *Samyutta Nikāya* (SN).⁷ For example, suttas relating to the four noble truths were not included in AN because there was already a place for them in SN, namely the *Sacca-samyutta*. The Book of Fours in AN was meant to include any tetrad for which no *samyutta* was provided in SN. The frequently cited sets are absent from AN because AN was meant for *rarely* cited sets, such as the three kinds of persons compared to the sick discussed in Section 4 below. AN was for any sets left over after the well-known sets had been grouped in SN.⁸ The same holds true for EĀ in Chinese translation. This “leftover” feature of AN and EĀ may explain why most suttas discussed below seem atypical.

Some characteristics of AN and EĀ can be highlighted if we consider the principle underlying the compilation of the four *Nikāyas/Āgamas*. As stated above, the length of the suttas is relevant to how the texts were compiled into four collections. In addition, the four *Nikāyas/Āgamas* are assigned with different functions. The *Sapoduo pini piposha* 薩婆多毘尼毘婆沙 (T 1440, **Sarvāstivāda-vinaya-vibhāṣā*), a commentary on the Sarvāstivāda *Vinaya*, states:

The *Ekottarika Āgama* was compiled for teaching the Dharma at the right time to devas and humans in this world; it is studied by preachers. The *Madhyama Āgama* is meant for teaching the profound doctrines to beings of sharp faculties; it is studied by the learned. The *Samyukta Āgama* teaches various methods of meditation; it is studied by meditators. The *Dīrgha Āgama* refutes other religions.⁹

Coincidentally, modern Western scholars also have similar opinions on the four *Nikāyas*. Thorough research by Manné (1990: 29, 78–79) indicates that the original purpose of the *Dīrgha Nikāya* was to attract converts; this collection is rich in debates and is

⁷ See Rhys Davids (1910: vii–viii) and Pande (1995: 232–233).

⁸ Kuan and Bucknell (2019: 156).

⁹ T XXIII 503c–504a: 為諸天世人隨時說法，集為增一，是勸化人所習。為利根眾生說諸深義，名中阿舍，是學問者所習。說種種禪法，是雜阿舍，是坐禪人所習。破諸外道，是長阿舍。

directed mostly towards non-Buddhists. The original purpose of the *Majjhima Nikāya* was the presentation of the Buddha, both as a real person and as an archetype, and the integration of new monastics into the community and the practice. As to the *Samyutta Nikāya*, Bodhi (2005: 12) infers from its contents that it was intended to serve the needs of the doctrinal specialists and of those devoted to the meditative development of insight. Regarding the *Aṅguttara Nikāya*, Bodhi (2012: 21) observes: “a shift in emphasis takes place from comprehension to personal edification”, which echoes the ancient view of EĀ quoted above from the *Sapoduo pini piposha*. In his earlier work, Bodhi (2005: 13) elaborates on this aspect of “personal edification” prominent in the *Aṅguttara Nikāya* as follows:

The Aṅguttara includes a notable proportion of suttas addressed to lay followers dealing with the ethical and spiritual concerns of life within the world, including family relationships ... and the proper ways to acquire, save, and utilize wealth. Other suttas deal with the practical training of monks. The numerical arrangement of this collection makes it particularly convenient for formal instruction, and thus it could easily be drawn upon by elder monks when teaching their pupils and by preachers when giving sermons to the laity.

Again, the coincidence is impressive: this feature of AN outlined by Bodhi is almost identical to that of EĀ outlined in the *Sapoduo pini piposha* cited above. The numerical collection AN/EĀ, as perceived by ancient Indian/Chinese and modern American monks alike, is unique in its function and purpose. It seems designed to be particularly convenient for teaching diverse types of individuals, ranging from monastics to laymen, from mankind to devas. It serves as a textbook very useful to preachers.

In view of the different purposes attached to the four *Nikāyas/Āgamas*, it is conceivable that the numerical collections, AN and EĀ, are the most adaptable and considerate of individual needs, and hence closely connected with the concepts of compassion (*karuṇā/anukampā*). As Bodhi points out above, AN “includes a notable proportion of suttas addressed to lay followers dealing with the ethical and spiritual concerns of life within the world”, which involves the issues of merit (*puñña*) that is fundamental to Buddhist ethics (Harvey, *An Introduction to Buddhist Ethics*, 2000: 18–22 and passim). This is also the case with EĀ. Compassion is often interwoven with merit as demonstrated below.

2. Compassion: finite or infinite

Different religions emphasize compassion as an attribute of their respective holy beings. The Buddha is also portrayed in Buddhist texts as one endowed with compassion. Is his compassion finite or infinite from the viewpoint of early Buddhism? Or to put it in a different way, was the Buddha compassionate towards all sentient beings according to the early Buddhist texts? In relation to this question, Anālayo (2015: 7) provides an answer based on one sutta passage as follows:

Even after awakening, the Buddha’s form of compassion does not seem to be depicted as being motivated by the wish to save all living beings. A discourse in the *Āṅguttara-nikāya* and its *Samyukta-āgama* parallel explicitly highlight that the Buddha was not concerned with whether the whole world or only part of it will be able to reach liberation. (Ibid. note 15 gives the references: AN 10.95 at AN V 195,8 and its parallel SĀ 965 at T II 248a10)

This passage does not necessarily suggest that the Buddha’s compassion was finite, but probably implies the Buddha’s equanimity. The idea that the Buddha did not intend to help all beings may be supported by another sutta in the *Āṅguttara Nikāya*, AN 1.13.1:¹⁰

Bhikkhus, there is one person who arises in the world for the welfare of *many people*, for the happiness of *many people*, **out of compassion for the world**, for the good, welfare, and happiness of devas and human beings. Who is that one person? The Tathāgata, the Arahant, the Perfectly Enlightened One. (trans. Bodhi 2012: 107–108)

AN I 22: *Ekapuggalo, bhikkhave, loke uppajjamāno uppajjati bahujanahitāya bahujanasukhāya lokānukampāya atthāya hitāya sukhāya devamanussānam. Katamo ekapuggalo? Tathāgato araham sammāsambuddho.*¹¹

This passage uses the word “many” (*bahu*) instead of “all” and thus seemingly implies that the Buddha (aka the Tathāgata, the

¹⁰ Sutta 1 of Vagga 13 in the Book of Ones.

¹¹ This passage has a Chinese parallel in EĀ 8.2 at T II 561a: 若有一人出現於世，多饒益人，安隱眾生，愍世群萌，欲使天、人獲其福祐。云何為一人？所謂多薩阿竭、阿羅呵、三耶三佛。The sutta in question is only found in these two numerical collections, not in the other *Nikāyas* or *Āgamas*.

Arahant, the Perfectly Enlightened One) arises in the world for the sake of saving many people rather than all beings. In fact, in the *Aṅguttara Nikāya* there are stock formulas very similar to what is cited above, but they are applied to other kinds of persons rather than the Buddha, for example:

- (1) AN 1.18.2:¹² Bhikkhus, there is one person who arises in the world for the welfare of many people, for the happiness of many people, for the good, welfare, and happiness **of many people**, of devas and human beings. Who is that one person? It is one who holds right view and has a correct perspective. (trans. Bodhi 2012: 119)

AN I 33: *Ekapuggalo, bhikkhave, loke uppajjamāno uppajjati bahujanahitāya bahujanasukhāya bahuno janassa atthāya hitāya sukhāya devamanussānaṃ. Katamo ekapuggalo? Sammāditthiko hoti aviparītadassano.*

- (2) AN 1.11.1–10:¹³ Bhikkhus, those bhikkhus who explain non-Dhamma as non-Dhamma are **acting** for the welfare of many people, for the happiness of many people, for the good, welfare, and happiness **of many people**, of devas and human beings. ... (trans. Bodhi 2012: 106)

AN I 19–20: *Ye te, bhikkhave, bhikkhū adhammaṃ adhammo ti dīpenti te, bhikkhave, bhikkhū bahujanahitāya paṭipannā bahujanasukhāya bahuno janassa atthāya hitāya sukhāya devamanussānaṃ. ...*

- (3) AN 1.12.11–20:¹⁴ Bhikkhus, those bhikkhus who explain what is no offense as no offense are **acting** for the welfare of many people, for the happiness of many people, for the good, welfare, and happiness **of many people**, of devas and humans. ... (trans. Bodhi 2012: 107)

AN I 21: *Ye te, bhikkhave, bhikkhū anāpattiṃ anāpattī ti dīpenti te, bhikkhave, bhikkhū bahujanahitāya paṭipannā bahujanasukhāya bahuno janassa atthāya hitāya sukhāya devamanussānaṃ. ...*

The above 21 suttas describe 21 types of people using two stock phrases almost identical to that in AN 1.13.1. Let us compare these three phrases:

¹² Sutta 2 of Vagga 18 in the Book of Ones.

¹³ Suttas 1–10 of Vagga 11 in the Book of Ones.

¹⁴ Suttas 11–20 of Vagga 12 in the Book of Ones.

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1. *bahujanahitāya bahujanasukhāya lokānukampāya atthāya hitāya sukhāya devamanussānaṃ* (AN 1.13.1)
2. *bahujanahitāya bahujanasukhāya bahuno janassa atthāya hitāya sukhāya devamanussānaṃ* (AN 1.18.2)
3. *bahujanahitāya paṭipannā bahujanasukhāya bahuno janassa atthāya hitāya sukhāya devamanussānaṃ* (AN 1.11.1–10 and AN 1.12.11–20)

It should be noted that the last two phrases in the 21 suttas have *bahuno janassa* (of many people) in place of *lokānukampāya* (out of compassion for the world) as found in AN 1.13.1. The expression “out of compassion for the world”, unique to AN 1.13.1, is used exclusively to describe the Buddha. Similarly, this expression found elsewhere in the *Anguttara Nikāya* also applies to the Buddha only:¹⁵

- (1) AN 4.160:¹⁶ Bhikkhus, while the Fortunate One or the Fortunate One’s discipline remains in the world, this is for the welfare of many people, for the happiness of many people, **out of compassion for the world** ... (trans. Bodhi 2012: 526)
AN II 147: *Sugato vā bhikkhave loke tiṭṭhamāno sugatavinayo vā tad assa bahujanahitāya bahujanasukhāya lokānukampāya* ...
- (2) AN 8.70: Let the Fortunate One live on for an eon, for the welfare of many people, for the happiness of many people, **out of compassion for the world** ... (trans. Bodhi 2012: 1213)
AN IV 309: *tiṭṭhatu bhante Sugato kappam bahujanahitāya bahujanasukhāya lokānukampāya* ...

Accordingly, the redactors of AN evidently reserved the expression “out of compassion for the world” for the Buddha. This is probably intended to accentuate the Buddha’s compassion for the entire world, for all living beings.

The other three *Nikāyas* are not consistent in their usages of *lokānukampāya* (out of compassion for the world). It is sometimes used with reference to the Buddha, for example:

¹⁵ This information is yielded by searching the *Sutta-piṭaka* in CST for *lokānukampāya*.

¹⁶ Sutta 160 in the Book of Fours.

DN II 103: *tiṭṭhatu bhante bhagavā kappam, tiṭṭhatu sugato kappam bahujanahitāya bahujanasukhāya lokānukampāya atthāya hitāya sukhāya devamanussānan ti.*

MN I 21: *Yaṃ kho taṃ brāhmaṇa sammā vadamāno vadeyya: asammohadhāmmo satto loke uppanno bahujanahitāya bahujanasukhāya lokānukampāya atthāya hitāya sukhāya devamanussānan ti, mam eva taṃ sammā vadamāno vadeyya.*

SN II 274: *Sace hi bhagavā ciraṃ dīgham addhānaṃ tiṭṭheyya tad assa bahujanahitāya bahujanasukhāya lokānukampāya atthāya hitāya sukhāya devamanussānan ti.*

But *lokānukampāya* is also used with reference to other people rather than the Buddha, for example:

DN II 332: *Yathā yathā kho rājañña samaṇa-brāhmaṇā silavanto kalyāṇadhammā ciraṃ dīgham addhānaṃ tiṭṭhanti, tathā tathā bahum puññaṃ pasavanti, bahujanahitāya ca paṭipajjanti bahujanasukhāya lokānukampāya ...* (referring to moral and well-conducted ascetics and brahmins¹⁷)

MN I 211: *Passa Dīgha yāva c' ete tayo kulaputtā bahujanahitāya paṭipannā bahujanasukhāya lokānukampāya ...* (referring to three clansmen)

SN II 203: *Sādhu sādhu Kassapa bahujanahitāya kira tvam Kassapa paṭipanno bahujanasukhāya lokānukampāya ...* (referring to Kassapa)

In conclusion, of the four *Nikāyas*, only AN applies the expression *lokānukampāya* (out of compassion for the world) exclusively to the Buddha. Our common sense tells us that the Buddha was unable to save the whole world. However, this does not mean that he had no intention to help all living beings or that his compassion was finite. Many Buddhists, including AN's redactors, would conceive thus: the Buddha arises, lives on and acts "out of compassion for the world" (*lokānukampāya*). In the other three *Nikāyas*, this applies also to other kinds of good people.

3. Merit from compassion

In a similar vein, the Buddha encouraged others to develop compassion for the whole world. The four *brahma-vihāras* or "boundless states [of mind]" (*appamaññā*), often taught by the

¹⁷ Translation of *samaṇa-brāhmaṇā silavanto kalyāṇadhammā* by Walshe (1995: 357).

Buddha as recorded in the *Nikāyas*, consist of pervading the entire world with a mind imbued with boundless loving-kindness (*mettā*), compassion (*karuṇā*), empathetic joy (*muditā*) and equanimity (*upekkhā*). This is not purely meditative, only practised by meditation adepts. It is also an attitude or mindset to be cultivated in daily life, from childhood to death.¹⁸ In AN 10.208, the Buddha affirms that if a person develops the four boundless states of mind from his childhood, he will not do a bad deed (*kamma*, “karma”), and such mind at death will lead to a good rebirth (AN V 300–301). Good rebirth denotes merit (*puñña*) considering the analogy between this sutta and the sutta discussed below.

According to AN 7.58 (IV 88–91),¹⁹ the Buddha expounds “merit” (*puñña*) as follows:

This is a designation for happiness, that is, merit. I recall that for a long time I experienced the desirable, lovely, agreeable result of merit that had been made over a long time. For seven years I developed a mind of loving-kindness. As a consequence, for seven eons of world-dissolution and evolution I did not come back to this world. When the world was dissolving I fared on to the [realm of] streaming radiance. When the world was evolving, I was reborn in an empty mansion of Brahmā ...²⁰ (trans. Bodhi 2012: 1062)

In view of this passage, as Cousins (1996: 155) says, *puñña* (merit) simply means fortunate or happy. He goes on to interpret *puñña* thus: “As a noun it is applied either to an act which brings good fortune or to the happy result in the future of such an act.” In this passage, the Buddha says in retrospect that, by cultivating loving-kindness he has made merit, which brings about (or which is) the happy result consisting in the various good rebirths. In other words, loving-kindness (*mettā*), which can be synonymous with

¹⁸ This idea is inspired by Anālayo (2015: 9–10 and note 19).

¹⁹ This sutta is parallel to EĀ 10.7 (T II 565b–c).

²⁰ AN IV 88–89: *Sukhass’ etaṃ, bhikkhave, adhivacanam, yadidaṃ puññāni. Abhijānāmi kho panāhaṃ bhikkhave dīgharattaṃ katānaṃ puññānaṃ dīgharattaṃ iṭṭhaṃ kantaṃ manāpaṃ vipākaṃ paccanubhūtaṃ. Satta vassāni mettacittaṃ bhāvesiṃ. Satta vassāni mettacittaṃ bhāvetvā satta samvaṭṭavivaṭṭakappe na yimaṃ lokaṃ punāgamasiṃ. Samvaṭṭamāne sudāhaṃ bhikkhave loka ābhassarupago homi, vivaṭṭamāne loka suññaṃ brahmavimānaṃ upapajjāmi ...*

compassion (*anukampā*, *karuṇā*) as elucidated below, is conducive to merit (*puñña*).

The concept that compassion, or loving-kindness, is conducive to merit is articulated in a verse of AN 8.1 as follows:

If, one arouses loving-kindness (*mettāyati*) towards just one being,
with a mind free from hatred, one thereby becomes good (*kusalī*).
Compassionate (*anukampī*) in mind towards all beings,
the noble one generates abundant merit (*puñña*).²¹

Anukampī (nominative singular masculine form of *anukampin*, compassionate) is the adjective of the noun *anukampā* (compassion). Despite the nuances between *anukampā* and *karuṇā*,²² these two words can be regarded as synonyms.²³ This is corroborated by the fact that in the above verse, *mettāyati* (arouses loving-kindness) and *anukampī* correspond respectively to the first two “boundless states”, namely loving-kindness (*mettā*) and compassion (*karuṇā*). Just as *mettāyati* is etymologically equivalent to *mettā*, so too *anukampī* is semantically equivalent to *karuṇā*.

As Collins (2010: 44) elucidates, there are two axes of moral evaluation in Buddhism:

- (1) *puñña*, meritorious, and *pāpa*, demeritorious (as nouns they mean “merit” and “demerit”);
- (2) *kusala*, wholesome or skilful, and *akusala*, unwholesome or unskilful (they are also nouns).

Collins says: “Both merit and demerit are phenomena of karma and rebirth, and so acquiring merit, however useful in the short term in attaining good rebirth, is in the long run inimical to attaining nirvana.” By contrast, as he explains, an enlightened person’s action, without any trace of attachment, is entirely skilful (*kusala*) but does not accumulate merit (*puñña*), and thus has no

²¹ AN IV 151: *Ekam pi ce pāṇam aduṭṭhacitto, mettāyati kusalī tena hoti. Sabbe ca pāṇe manasānukampī, pahūtam ariyo pakaroti puññaṃ.*

²² Bodhi (2012: 1790 note 1616) says: “*Anukampā* usually suggests compassion as a motive for action on behalf of others, whereas *karuṇā* generally designates a meditative state.”

²³ Anālayo (2015: 9 note 19) says: “*anukampā* and *karuṇā* do not seem to be substantially different qualities, but complementary and interrelated aspects of compassion.”

karmic result. This view is supported by several passages in the *Sutta-nipāta*.²⁴

The first half of the foregoing verse mentions the word *kusalī*, which is apparently the nominative singular masculine form of *kusalin*, a presumed variant of *kusala*, “skilful/ wholesome”.²⁵ This verse also appears in the *Itivuttaka* (sutta 27 of *Eka-nipāta* “Book of Ones”), another numerical but much smaller collection in the *Khuddaka Nikāya*, which has *kusalo* (It 21) instead of *kusalī*. Therefore, *kusalī* undoubtedly means the same as *kusalo*, the nominative singular masculine form of *kusala*. The second half of the verse talks about “merit” (*puñña*). Therefore, this verse seems to mean that loving-kindness brings about *kusala*, which is karma-free, whereas compassion accumulates merit (*puñña*), which has karmic effects. To interpret in this way would be pedantic. It is more advisable to understand the two halves of the verse as two different ways of putting the same idea—altruism is beneficial to oneself as well as to others. In other words, *mettāyati* and *anukampī* are meant to be synonymous, and this is also true of *kusalin/kusala* and *puñña*.²⁶ The fact that *kusalin/kusala* and *puñña* are not incompatible but are strongly correlated is attested in sutta 26 of DN: “By reason of the undertaking of good (*kusala*) states, bhikkhus, in this way this merit (*puñña*) increases.”²⁷ In view of the contrast between “one becomes good” (*kusalī/kusalo hoti*) and “the noble one generates abundant merit” (*pahūtam ariyo pakaroti puññaṃ*), the purport of this verse is that kindness or compassion towards an individual is indeed beneficial, and much more so towards all sentient beings (Cf. Anālayo 2015: 11). This suggests that

²⁴ Sn 520, 547, 636, 790. Referring to these verses, Nyanatiloka (1970: 146) says: “The Arahats, however, having transcended all life-affirming and rebirth-producing actions, are said to be ‘beyond merit and demerit’.” Cf. also Harvey (2000: 43).

²⁵ For the Sanskrit counterparts of the Pali *kusala* and *kusalin*, namely *kuśala* and *kuśalin*, see Monier-Williams (1899: 297).

²⁶ *Kusala* and *puñña* may not be so distinctly different in relation to karma. Gethin (1998: 199) says: “In general, though with some qualification, rebirth in the lower realms is considered to be the result of relatively unwholesome (*akuśala/akusala*), or bad (*pāpa*) karma, while rebirth in the higher realms the result of relatively wholesome (*kuśala/kusala*), or good (*puṇya/puñña*) karma.”

²⁷ DN III 58: *kusalānaṃ bhikkhave dhammānaṃ samādāna-hetu evaṃ idaṃ puññaṃ pavaḍḍhatī ti*. My translation is based on Cousins (1996: 155).

compassion towards all beings is particularly encouraged. In other words, infinite compassion greatly surpasses finite compassion. This notion is exemplified in the suttas discussed below.

4. Compassion put into practical action

In AN 3.22 (I 120–122)²⁸ the Buddha expounds three kinds of persons, which are compared to the following three kinds of sick people (abridged):

- (1) A sick person will not recover from his illness whether or not he gets medication.
- (2) A sick person will recover whether or not he gets medication.
- (3) A sick person will recover only if he gets medication, not if he fails to get it.

Medication is prescribed particularly for the third kind of sick person. But because of this sick person, the other sick people should also be served. Likewise, there are three kinds of persons (abridged):

- (1) A person will not enter upon the world-transcending path²⁹ whether or not he hears the Dharma.
- (2) A person will enter upon the world-transcending path whether or not he hears the Dharma.
- (3) A person will enter upon the world-transcending path only if he hears the Dharma, not if he fails to hear it.

²⁸ According to SuttaCentral (<https://suttacentral.net/an3-puggalavagga>) and Akanuma (1929: 238), this sutta has only one parallel, i.e. the *Puggalapaññatti* 3.2 (Pp 27–29), also organized on the “aṅguttara principle”. The *Puggalapaññatti* is probably the earliest *Abhidhamma* text, which was composed before the compilation of the four *Nikāyas* had been completed. See Kuan (2015: 34–35, 44).

²⁹ Bodhi (2012: 217–218) translates *okkamati niyāmaṃ kusalesu dhammesu sammattam* as “enter upon the fixed course [consisting in] rightness in wholesome qualities”. Bodhi (2012: 1638 note 358) explains: “This is a technical expression denoting entry upon the world-transcending path. ... See too SN 25.1–10, III 225–28, which says that by entering the ‘fixed course of rightness’ (*sammattaniyāma*) one enters the noble plane ...” The Pali *sammatta-niyāma* is equivalent to the Sanskrit *samyaktva-niyama*. As Dhammajoti (2015: 518) explains, the entry into *samyaktva-niyama* denotes that “from this point onward, the practitioner is destined for — i.e., will definitely attain — *nirvāṇa* (= *samyaktva*).

The teaching of the Dharma (*dhamma-desanā*) is prescribed particularly for the third kind of person. But because of this person, the Dharma should also be taught to the others (*aññesam pi dhammo desetabbo*).

This sutta compares the Dharma to medication. Both can save people, but not all people. Just as only certain sick people can recover from illness by using medication, so too only certain people, i.e. the third kind of persons in our sutta, can benefit from listening to the Dharma. Even though only the third kind of persons really *need* the teaching of the Dharma, which is useless to the other two kinds of persons, the Dharma *should* also be taught to the other two kinds of persons, for we do not know which people belong to the third kind and have to assume everyone to fall into this category. In other words, the Dharma *should* be preached to *all* kinds of people, just as medical treatment should be made available to all kinds of sick people. Someone comments on this sutta: “Healing the body, healing the mind. Everyone should be treated, even if they don’t recover.” (<https://suttacentral.net/an3-puggalavagga>) This sutta indicates that the Buddha advocates “boundless” compassion towards all human beings.

Anālayo (2015: 21–22) points out: “Compassion in the early Buddhist discourses finds its most prominent expression in teaching activity ... Compassionate activity has its complement and source in the meditative cultivation of compassion.” Compassion is mainly, but not solely, embodied by teaching the Dharma, as AN 2.13.10 states.³⁰

There are these two kinds of compassion. What two?
Compassion [shown with] worldly things (*āmisānukampā*) and
compassion [shown with] the Dharma (*dhammānukampā*).
These are the two kinds of compassion. Of these two kinds of
compassion, compassion [shown with] the Dharma is foremost.
(AN I 92)

It is clear that compassion is not just a type of meditation or contemplation, but it can and should be put into practical action, either by preaching the Dharma or by providing worldly necessities. However, as Gombrich (1998: 26–27) comments, the Theravāda tradition is so conservative that wherever the words loving-

³⁰ This sutta has no parallels in ancient texts according to SuttaCentral (<https://suttacentral.net/an2-danavagga>) and Akanuma (1929: 284).

kindness (*mettā*) and compassion (*karuṇā*) are mentioned in the texts, the reference is to thought, not to acts of kindness — other than preaching. He points out that the Theravādin *Abhidhamma*, e.g. the *Dhammasaṅgani*, defines loving-kindness (*mettā*) negatively as absence of hatred (*adosa*) and considers it to be a component of every morally wholesome (*kusala*) thought (Dhs §1056), and therefore not necessarily directed at any object; “loving-kindness” is thus rendered somewhat bloodless. This is certainly not the Buddha’s original intention.

How compassion can be put into practical action is illustrated by the Buddha in sutta 4 of Chapter 12 in the *Ekottarika Āgama* (hereafter EĀ 12.4) as follows:³¹

The Blessed One told the bhikkhus: “If anyone visits a sick person, he visits me. If anyone attends to a sick person, he attends to me. The reason is that now I personally want to attend or visit a sick person. Bhikkhus, I do not see one person among the devas, worldlings, ascetics and brahmins whose supreme giving surpasses this giving. One who practises this giving, performs such giving, will obtain great result and great merit (功德, **puñña*).”³²

Although this passage makes no mention of any word equivalent to *karuṇā* or *anukampā* (compassion) such as 悲, it expresses a strong humanitarian sentiment which cannot be other than compassion. Harvey (2013: 280) makes the same point by saying: “The Buddha taught that ‘whoever wishes to take care of me should take care of the sick’ (*Vin.I.301–2*) ... A good example of this *compassionate* ideal at work was in Tang China ...”³³ In EĀ

³¹ This sutta has no parallels in ancient texts according to SuttaCentral (<https://suttacentral.net/ea12>) and Akanuma (1929: 124). The *Sifen lü* 四分律 (T 1428, the Dharmaguptaka *Vinaya*) contains a similar passage, which equates serving a sick bhikkhu with serving the Buddha: 世尊言：「善哉！比丘，汝乃能瞻視病比丘，正應供養病比丘，作瞻病比丘人。供養病比丘，是為供養我。」 (T XXII 862a) I thank Ven. Jiyin for this reference.

³² T II 569c: 世尊告諸比丘：「其有瞻視病者，則為瞻視我已；有看病者，則為看我己。所以然者，我今躬欲看視疾病。諸比丘，我不見一人於諸天、世間、沙門、婆羅門施中最上，無過是施。其行是施，爾乃為施，獲大果報，得大功德。」

³³ Harvey continues: “Tang China (618–907), where Buddhist monasteries, and lay religious societies set up by monks, ran hospitals, dispensaries, orphanages, homes for the elderly ... they fed beggars, did famine relief work ...”

12.4 the Buddha's teaching on giving, i.e. altruistic behaviour, connotes that boundless compassion should be directed to any people who suffer.

It is remarkable that this sutta equates compassion (or kindness) for the Buddha with compassion for others. Serving the Buddha and Arahants is usually deemed to be more meritorious and auspicious than serving the others. AN 3.57 states: "Those, however, who attend on the holy ones ... go to the world of the devas or are born here in a good family."³⁴ (trans. Bodhi 2012: 256) According to the commentary, the "holy ones" (*sante*) refer to the supreme persons (*uttama-purise*): Buddhas, Paccekabuddhas and Arahants.³⁵ Therefore, EĀ 12.4 suggests that by attending on any kinds of people, as long as they are in need, one generates such great merit (*puñña*) as is acquired by attending on the Buddha.

5. Compassion and seeing all as equals

In EĀ 18.8 the Buddha tells Mahāprajāpatī Gautamī: "Seeing disciples as equals is reverence for the Tathāgata."³⁶ In response to the Buddha's instruction, she said: "Henceforth I will revere the Blessed One, as the Tathāgata decrees now, by seeing all sentient beings with a mind free from [the discriminatory concepts of] upper and lower [classes]."³⁷ Despite the fact that Buddhism classifies people into ranks based on their spiritual levels, this sutta emphasizes the importance of seeing all sentient beings as equals

³⁴ AN I 162: *Ye ca sante upāsanti ... devalokañ ca te yanti kule vā idha jāyare.*

³⁵ Cited from Bodhi (2012: 1646 note 417). See Mp II 259: *Na hi sante upāsare ti buddha-paccekabuddha-khiṇāsare uttamapurise na upasamkamanti.*

³⁶ This sutta has no parallels in ancient texts according to SuttaCentral (<https://suttacentral.net/ea18>) and Akanuma (1929: 128).

³⁷ T II 592c: 世尊復以偈報瞿曇彌曰：「...平等視聲聞，此則禮如來。」是時，大愛道白世尊曰：「自今以後，當禮世尊，如今如來勅，視一切眾生，意無增減。」 I follow the Song, Yuan and Ming editions, which all read 如今如來勅視 "as the Tathāgata decrees now, [by] seeing" as given in footnote 28 at T II 592, while the Taishō edition reads 如來今勅禮 "the Tathāgata now decrees revering" (T II 592c22). Thích Huyên-Vi *et al.* (1996: 150) translate Mahāprajāpatī's reply thus: "Hence-forth the Exalted One should be revered [for his,] the Tathāgata's, insisting on regarding all living beings with a mind free from [the discriminatory concepts of] upper and lower (*adhikanyūna*) [classes]."

to such a degree that this attitude is said to be a way of venerating the Buddha. It could be that the foregoing passage is a precursor of the Mahāyāna concept of compassion, which is considered to be so “great” as to “see all sentient beings as equals” as found in the **Deva-rāja-pravara-prajñāpāramitā Sūtra* 勝天王般若波羅蜜經 (T 231): “the Fortunate One (*sugata*, i.e. Buddha) ... has great compassion, seeing all sentient beings as equals.” (T VIII 724a: 善逝...大悲平等視眾生)

Why should all sentient beings be regarded as equals? The answer can be found in EĀ 10.5, which elucidates the rationale behind this attitude.³⁸ This sutta vividly describes how a lay Buddhist practises such “great” compassion with an intention to equally help all sentient beings without discrimination:

The householder Anāthapiṇḍika went to where the Blessed One was ... the Blessed One said: “Householder, does your family constantly give to the poor?”

The householder replied: “Yes, Blessed One, [we] constantly give to the poor. [We] give widely at the four city gates, and give away necessities at home too. Blessed One, sometimes I have this thought: ‘I also want to give to wild animals³⁹— birds, pigs, dogs and the like.’ I do not have the thought: ‘This should be given; that should not be given.’ Nor do I have the thought: ‘This should be given more; that should be given less.’ I always have this thought: ‘All sentient beings are maintained by food. They live when food is available, and die when food is unavailable.’”⁴⁰

Note that “all sentient beings are maintained by food” in this passage is actually the first “one thing” (*eko dhammo*) in the lists of doctrinal items arranged on the “aṅguttara principle” as found in the *Saṅgīti Sutta* of the *Dīgha Nikāya* and its Chinese

³⁸ This sutta has no parallels in ancient texts according to SuttaCentral (<https://suttacentral.net/ea10>) and Akanuma (1929: 123).

³⁹ I follow the Song, Yuan and Ming editions, which all read 野獸 “wild animals” as given in footnote 3 at T II 565, while the Taishō edition reads 野 “wild” (T II 565a16).

⁴⁰ T II 565a: 阿那邠持長者便往至世尊所...世尊告曰：「云何，長者，貴家恒布施貧乏耶？」長者對曰：「如是，世尊，恒布施貧乏。於四城門而廣布施，復在家中給與所須。世尊，我或時作是念：『并欲布施野獸、飛鳥、猪、狗之屬。』我亦無是念：『此應與，此不應與。』亦復無是念：『此應與多，此應與少。』我恒有是念：『一切眾生皆由食而存其命，有食便存，無食便喪。』」

parallel in the *Dīrgha Āgama*.⁴¹ According to our sutta EĀ 10.5, Anāthapiṇḍika has sympathy for all kinds of living beings and tries to help everyone in need. His compassion is built on the rationale that all sentient beings wish to live and they cannot live without food. He is willing to grant such wishes of all creatures. It is in this sense that all sentient beings should be treated equally.

After Anāthapiṇḍika's reply as quoted above, the Buddha praises him: "With a Bodhisattva's mind, you concentrate your mind to give widely and benevolently ... You will obtain great fruit, attain great fame, have great results, be heard everywhere, and attain the dharma taste of sweet dew (*amṛta/amata*, immortality)."⁴² Therefore, Anāthapiṇḍika's compassion is credited with generating abundant merit and hence good karmic effects in this world. It is noteworthy that his compassion is also invested with the supramundane significance of attaining "immortality" (sweet dew), i.e. Nirvana or enlightenment. This idea is implicit in the *Aṭṭhakanāgara Sutta* of MN (I 349–353) and its parallel, AN 11.17 (V 342–347). According to this sutta, just like the four *jhānas* and the first three formless meditative attainments, the four boundless states of mind (as meditation), including loving-kindness and compassion, can form the basis for developing insight into impermanence, as a result of which, the practitioner may attain the destruction of the taints (*āsavaṇaṃ khayam*), i.e. Nirvana, but if not, he will be reborn in the Pure Abodes and attain final Nirvana there (Dhammajoti 2010: 173).

What is peculiar to EĀ 10.5 is its mention of the Bodhisattva in conjunction with boundless compassion as practical action. There seems to be a hint of Mahāyāna influence on the Chinese *Ekottarika Āgama*. As usually understood, early Buddhism did not regard boundless compassion as an indispensable prerequisite for achieving the ultimate goal, but it (as meditation) is only an optional way besides *jhānas*, etc. as stated in the *Aṭṭhakanāgara Sutta* above. According to Atiśa, a Mahāyāna master, beings can be divided into three types (mostly cited from Williams 2009: 194–195):

- (1) ordinary worldly beings;

⁴¹ DN III 211: *sabbe sattā āhāra-tṭhitikā*. DĀ 9 at TI 49c: 一切眾生皆仰食存。

⁴² T II 565a: 汝乃以菩薩心，專精一意而廣惠施。...汝當獲大果，得大名稱，有大果報，聲徹十方，得甘露法味。

- (2) those who are on the path to the Nirvana of an Arahant; they act in order to bring about their own pacification;
- (3) Bodhisattvas, whose aspiration includes removing the sufferings of all sentient beings.

The paradigms of early Buddhism belong to the second type. It is unusual for EĀ 10.5, supposedly an early Buddhist sutta, to mention “Bodhisattva’s mind” and attribute it to Anāthapiṇḍika. This lay disciple of the Buddha is thus depicted as a Bodhisattva, among the third type of beings, who according to Atiśa aspire to remove the sufferings of all sentient beings. In sum, the portrayal of Anāthapiṇḍika as a Bodhisattva might be a late addition inspired by the Mahāyāna. Apart from this point, however, EĀ 10.5 is not especially distinct from other ordinary early Buddhist suttas.

Alternatively, the description of Anāthapiṇḍika as a Bodhisattva probably exemplifies the inception of the Mahāyāna within an early Buddhist school, presumably the Mahāsāṃghika. Scholars have noticed the difficulties in defining “Mahāyāna Buddhism”.⁴³ Rather than a sect or school, Mahāyāna Buddhism started to arise as a new movement⁴⁴ within (not independent of) early Buddhist schools (*nikāyas*)⁴⁵ around the second or first century BCE.⁴⁶ In regard to this movement, Harvey (2013: 108) says: “There developed a new orientation to traditional Buddhist teachings and an upsurge of novel interpretations.”⁴⁷ The new orientation involves “a wholehearted adoption of the *Bodhisattva* path”⁴⁸. The foregoing EĀ 10.5 passage, although mentioning the term “Bodhisattva”, falls short of a fully-fledged Bodhisattva path as elaborated by the Mahāyāna. The Bodhisattva ideal was not invented from scratch by the Mahāyāna, but it already emerged in early Buddhism. As Anālayo (2010: 131) notes, taking the early suttas as the starting point would explain quite naturally why “the bodhisattva ideal became a pan-Buddhist phenomenon that drew

⁴³ E.g. Silk 2005; Ruegg 2004.

⁴⁴ Williams (2009: 3); Keown (1996: 58); Harvey (2013: 108).

⁴⁵ Williams (2009: 6). See also de La Vallée Poussin’s (1930: 25, 32–33) remarks cited and translated by Silk (2005: 389–390).

⁴⁶ Gombrich (1990: 29); Williams *et al.* (2012: 71).

⁴⁷ Similar views are expressed by Saitō (2011: 30–31) and Keown (1996: 64).

⁴⁸ See Harvey (2013: 108); or “a new emphasis” on “the ideal of the bodhisattva” in the words of Keown (1996: 58).

followers from most, if not all, of the Buddhist schools, including the Theravāda tradition.” Accordingly, it is likely that Mahāyāna Buddhism was developed from such seemingly innovative notions as found in EĀ 10.5 that had germinated in early Buddhist schools.

6. Compassion and enlightenment in connection with merit

In EĀ 21.2 the Buddha elaborates on merit (*puñña*), which integrates compassion embodied in practical action with compassion as a systematic meditative practice. This sutta has no parallels in ancient texts.⁴⁹ It enumerates three kinds of meritorious action (三福之業). They resemble the “three bases of meritorious action” (*tīni puñña-kiriya-vatthūni*), namely the basis of meritorious action consisting in giving (*dāna-mayaṃ puñña-kiriya-vatthu*), the basis of meritorious action consisting in morality (*sīla-mayaṃ puñña-kiriya-vatthu*) and the basis of meritorious action consisting in cultivation (*bhāvanā-mayaṃ puñña-kiriya-vatthu*), as listed in AN 8.36 (IV 241), It 3.ii.1 (p. 51) and the *Saṅgīti Sutta* (DN III 218), all of which are organized on the “aṅguttara principle”. But none of them explains these three items; the names of the last two items differ from those in EĀ 21.2 (see below).⁵⁰ This sutta expounds the first kind of meritorious action as follows:

What is meritorious action consisting in giving? When a person willingly gives to ascetics, brahmins, those in extreme poverty, those who live alone, and those who are uprooted; when food is needed, he provides food; when drink is needed, he gives drink; [he offers] clothes, food, bedding, medicine for the sick, fragrant substances, flowers and accommodation unstintingly at his convenience — this is what is called the meritorious action consisting in giving.⁵¹

⁴⁹ According to SuttaCentral (<https://suttacentral.net/ea21>) and Akanuma (1929: 130). Akanuma however suggests a comparison between the verses in this sutta and the verses in AN 4.32, but the two sets of verses are quite different.

⁵⁰ The Pali *Saṅgīti Sutta* has a Chinese version in DĀ, which lists three kinds of action almost identical to those listed in EĀ 21.2 except for the omission of 福 “merit” (TI 50a): 施業、平等業、思惟業。

⁵¹ T II 602b: 彼云何名施為福業？若有一人開心布施沙門、婆羅門、極貧窮者、孤獨者、無所趣向者；須食與食，須漿給漿，衣被、飯食、床臥之具、病瘦醫藥、香花、宿止，隨身所便，無所愛惜，此名曰施福之業。

This is an explication of compassion embodied in practical action. It is followed by the exposition of the second kind of meritorious action, namely meritorious action consisting in universality.

I translate 平等 in this sutta as “universality”. This disyllabic (having two characters) word usually means “equality”. Thích Huyền-Vi *et al.* (2002: 186–187) translate 平等 here as “equilibrium”. Judging from the context, it signifies something more profound, perhaps like what is stated in the *Digital Dictionary of Buddhism*: “it especially refers to the Buddha in his universal, impartial, and equal attitude towards all beings.” (<http://www.buddhism-dict.net/cgi-bin/xpr-ddb.pl?q=平等>) Here 平等 was probably translated from an Indic word equivalent to *samāna* or *samyak* in Sanskrit, which can mean “universal, all, complete”.⁵²

The exposition of meritorious action consisting in universality begins with the five precepts: A person abstains from killing, stealing, sexual intercourse, false speech and alcohol (T II 602b). It goes on to describe the four boundless states of mind as follows:

Moreover, he pervades one quarter with a mind of loving-kindness, likewise the second quarter, the third and the fourth. He pervades eight quarters, above and below, boundlessly, without limits and immeasurably. He encompasses all [beings] with this mind of loving-kindness and brings them security. Moreover, he pervades one quarter with a mind of compassion, empathetic joy and equanimity, likewise the second quarter, the

⁵² According to Hirakawa (1997: 424), 平等 was translated from many Sanskrit words, including *samāna* and *samyak*, while 平等教化 was translated from *samyak-prayoga*. Monier-Williams (1899: 1160) defines *samāna* as “common, general, universal, all”. Monier-Williams (1899: 1181) explains *samyak* as “in compound for *samyañc*”, which is defined as “entire, whole, complete, all”. The following case also supports that 平等 was used to render an Indic word meaning “universal, complete”. A passage in EĀ 46.8 (T II 778c) reads: 比丘平等厭患, 平等解脫, 平等觀察, 平等分別其義. Its Pali counterpart in AN 10.27 (V 51) reads: *bhikkhu sammā nibbindamāno ... sammā vimuccamāno sammā pariyantadassāvī sammatthābhisamecca*. Bodhi (2012: 1373) translates this passage thus: “a bhikkhu is completely disenchanted ... completely liberated from it, completely sees its delimitations, and completely breaks through its meaning.” Accordingly, 平等 is translated from an Indic word equivalent to *sammā*, or Sanskrit *samyak*, and means “completely” in this sutta.

third and the fourth. He pervades eight quarters, above and below, boundlessly, without limits and immeasurably ... This is what is called the meritorious action consisting in universality.⁵³

This passage reads like a description of a meditative practice as usually understood. However, attention should be drawn to the occurrence of “He encompasses all [beings] with this mind of loving-kindness and brings them security” in this context. By implication, the same is said of compassion and so forth. Therefore, this practice of loving-kindness and compassion is intended to benefit all beings. This second type of meritorious action is closely linked to the first type, meritorious action consisting in giving, shifting from sympathy for specific objects to “universality”, from concrete to abstract, and from outward to inward.

The third type, namely meritorious action consisting in reflection, turns even further inward and abstract. It is explained as follows:

Here a bhikkhu develops the enlightenment factor of mindfulness, dependent on dispassion, dependent on non-deliberation, dependent on cessation, and dependent on escape. He develops the enlightenment factor of discrimination of phenomena, develops the enlightenment factor of mindfulness (*sic*, redundant), develops the enlightenment factor of tranquility, develops the enlightenment factor of concentration, and develops the enlightenment factor of equanimity, dependent on dispassion, dependent on non-deliberation, dependent on cessation, and dependent on escape. This is what is called the meritorious action consisting in reflection.⁵⁴

The Buddhist texts usually enumerate seven enlightenment factors, but our sutta EĀ 21.2 lists only five, omitting the enlightenment factors of energy and joy. As Gethin (2001: 170–172) demonstrates, the formula of the seven enlightenment factors has

⁵³ T II 602b–c: 復以慈心遍滿一方，二方、三方、四方亦爾，八方、上下遍滿其中，無量無限，不可限，不可稱計。以此慈心普覆一切，令得安隱。復以悲、喜、護心，普滿一方，二方、三方、四方亦爾，八方、上下悉滿其中，無量無限，不可稱計...是謂名為平等為福之業。

⁵⁴ T II 602c: 於是比丘修行念覺意，依無欲、依無觀、依滅盡、依出要。修擇法覺意，修念覺意，修猗覺意，修定覺意，修護覺意，依無欲、依無觀、依滅盡、依出要。是謂名為思惟為福之業。

strong relevance to the four *jhānas*, the crucial meditative attainments. As found throughout early Buddhist texts, enlightenment or Nirvana is attained on the basis of the fourth *jhāna*. Therefore, the third type of meritorious action, which represents the enlightenment factors, conduces to Nirvana.

To conclude, in this sutta the scheme of the three types of meritorious action suggests that compassion underlies merit (first and second types), while merit is essential to Nirvana (third type). Harvey (2000: 45–46) also holds that merit (*puñña*), which he renders as “karmic fruitfulness”, is necessary for movement towards Nirvana but not itself sufficient, for some texts say that Nirvana is attainable by merit. In summary, merit involves compassion and leads to enlightenment.

7. Conclusion

Of the four *Nikāyas* in Pali and the four *Āgamas* in Chinese, the numerical collections, i.e. the *Āṅguttara Nikāya* and the *Ekottarika Āgama*, are the most adaptable and considerate of individual needs according to ancient Indian/Chinese and modern American monks. Therefore, these two collections contain a considerable proportion of suttas/sūtras that are closely connected with the notion of compassion (*karuṇā/anukampā*). These two collections include many suttas addressed to Buddhists dealing with the ethical and spiritual concerns of life within the world (as noted by Bhikkhu Bodhi), and thus involves the issues of merit (*puñña*). In this study I have illustrated the significant but often underestimated position of compassion with merit in early Buddhist doctrine.

While there is textual evidence that the Buddha had no concern whether the entire world or part of it would be emancipated, this does not suggest that his compassion was finite, but probably implies the Buddha’s equanimity. In fact, many suttas in the *Āṅguttara Nikāya* and the *Ekottarika Āgama* depict the Buddha as being compassionate for the whole world, and record that he taught compassion for the whole world. The redactors of the *Āṅguttara Nikāya* reserved the expression “out of compassion for the world” (*lokānukampāya*) for the Buddha in order to accentuate the Buddha’s compassion for the entire world. Similarly, the Buddha encouraged others to develop compassion for the whole

world. He taught the following according to suttas in the *Āṅguttara Nikāya* and the *Ekottarika Āgama*. Finite compassion is good (*kusala*), i.e. meritorious, but infinite compassion greatly surpasses finite compassion. Being compassionate (*anukampī*) for all beings, one generates abundant merit (*puñña*). Compassion is not just a type of meditation or contemplation, but it can and should be put into practical action, either by preaching the Dharma or by providing worldly necessities. Compassionate action consists in seeing all sentient beings as equals on the rationale that all sentient beings wish to live and they cannot live without food. The Buddha's sermon on the three kinds of meritorious action suggests that compassion underlies merit, while merit is essential to enlightenment or Nirvana.

Williams (2009: 195) observes: "Compassion is the basis and motivating force of the Bodhisattva. From it, therefore, springs the entire edifice of the Mahāyāna." That being said, the doctrine of compassion is not exclusive to Mahāyāna Buddhism, nor was it formulated by the Mahāyāna from scratch. As this study has shown, the soteriological function of compassion associated with merit is expounded in the early suttas/sūtras, particularly those in the *Āṅguttara Nikāya* and the *Ekottarika Āgama*. On the other hand, many discourses in these two collections reify great compassion by extending Buddhist concern from monastics to the laity, caring for all beings' worldly welfare based on an ethical system of merit. Walser (2018: 163–187) has examined the ur-sūtra of the *Perfection of Wisdom (Prajñāpāramitā)*, a type of early Mahāyāna literature, and regards it as "an adaptation of earlier Buddhist sutras", which refer to what are now Pali texts and *Āgama* translations. The early Buddhist discourses on compassion and merit explored in this paper may be precursors to the more developed Mahāyāna conceptions.

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Abbreviations

References to Pali texts are to the Pali Text Society editions.

AN =*Āṅguttara Nikāya*

CBETA= *CBETA Chinese Electronic Tripitaka Collection*, Version 2014. Taipei: Chinese Buddhist Electronic Text Association.

CST =*Chaṭṭha Saṅgāyana Tipiṭaka*, Version 4.0 (digital version). Igaṭpuri: Vipassana Research Institute.

DĀ =*Dīrgha Āgama* (*Chang ahan jing* 長阿含經)

Dhs =*Dhammasaṅgaṇi*

DN =*Dīgha Nikāya*

EĀ =*Ekottarika Āgama* (*Zengyi ahan jing* 增壹阿含經)

It =*Itivuttaka*

MĀ =*Madhyama Āgama* (*Zhong ahan jing* 中阿含經)

MN =*Majjhima Nikāya*

Pp =*Puggalapaññatti*

Sv =*Samyukta Āgama* (*Za ahan jing* 雜阿含經)

SN =*Samyutta Nikāya*

Sn =*Sutta-nipāta* (by verse)

T =*Taishō Shinshū Daizōkyō* 大正新脩大藏經 (Taishō Edition of the Chinese Tripitaka). Tokyo: Taishō Issaikyō Kankōkai, 1924–1934. (from CBETA)

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