



Compassionate Mind, Compassionate World Women Faith Leaders Retreat

*Closing Remarks by the Most Venerable Master Sheng Yen
(pictured above center)*

Honored Venerables, women leaders and guests,

Dena asked me to speak about Compassion and its practice today. In the Chinese culture, the female form symbolizes compassion. In addition, mothers in the Chinese society are always portrayed as compassionate. Hence, in Buddhism, the Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara or the Guanyin Bodhisattva symbolizes compassion; therefore in the eyes of the public, Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara takes on the form of a female.

During Shakyamuni Buddha's lifetime in India where Buddhism was founded, men and women in Indian Buddhist societies were treated as equal then. However, for most societies and religions, the equal treatment of men and women is not necessarily true, even in Chinese Buddhist societies too. Why do men and

women enjoy equal status in Taiwan, especially in Taiwanese Buddhist societies? Firstly, it is because women make up most of the Buddhist devotee population, also, women monastic have many great contributions to Buddhism in Taiwan. Secondly, there are individuals waging in the campaign for the equality of women in the Buddhist society here too. Venerable Chao Hwei, who is here in the Retreat with us, is a great example of one of these individuals.

Compassion can have a narrow or wide scope and a shallow or deep level. Compassion of the narrowest scope represents ordinary love, the love for our immediate family, love for our extended family, love for our relatives, love for our friends and love for our immediate community. When we love these people or community unconditionally, without expecting to receive anything from them, then this is compassion. If we expect to receive something in exchange for our love, for example, the love between man and woman, if they love each other because they want the other to love them back, then this is not compassion. This is an investment. You invest because you hope to get a return. This is merely a social exchange of love and not of compassion. From here, compassion, in the narrowest scope, is compassion of unconditional giving to those around us.

Compassion of the wider scope or higher level is the love one has for all people in this world. This compassion has an object for one to direct one's love or one's compassion. This unconditional love for all beings, usually expressed by great religious or faith leaders or great political leaders who are able to extend this compassion for all beings regardless of their nationality, ethnicity, race, religion and faith. However, there are some religious leaders who only love those within their own faith and not those outside their faith, then, that is not compassion of the second level.

The compassion of the third level has no object to which one's compassion is directed. There is no purpose or goal that needs to be carried out, there is no idea of contribution that needs to be made, there is no specific person that needs to be loved and helped. One goes wherever and whenever there is a need. One does one's best, within one's ability, to help the person in need. When the need is fulfilled, then in one's mind, there is no trace. It is likened to a boat travelling through a body of water, there is no trace left after the wake of the boat; after a bird flies across the sky, there is no trail left behind by the bird. Therefore, the person practicing this compassion has no notions of the giver or receiver of a compassionate deed or the notion of the deed in his or her mind. There is no trace left in this person's mind about this compassionate deed. Yet, this compassion is eternal and infinite, going where there is need to fulfil this need. Ordinary people cannot realize this compassion. It can only be manifested by the Buddha, the

enlightened one, and great bodhisattvas. The great Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara or Guanyin Bodhisattva is also referred to as the Bodhisattva of Great Compassion.

We, the ordinary people, should all be able to practice the first compassion of contributing to those around our communities and us without expecting anything in return. But one should strive to practice the second compassion; our focus is to love all beings of the entire world, regardless of their faith, ethnicity, culture and gender. On the contrary, if we do not use the second compassion as our goal or center, then this world will always be in war, conflict, struggle and opposition. We will constantly be plagued with discrimination. For example, discriminate against women because we think they are inferior, discriminate against men because we think they are not good, people of different ethnic groups discriminate against one another. Then there could never be peace. It is important to begin at the first level of loving those around oneself. If one only wants to practice the second compassion, that of the love for only all the people of this world, but not the love for one's parents, this is absurd.

To draw an example, I often observed both the husband and wife arguing over the injustices within their relationship. They are constantly calculating to see if the other spouse's love matches one's love for them. But the reality is that it is difficult to achieve complete justice between the two parties in a marital relationship. For instance, only women can become pregnant and give birth. They would go through the pain of pregnancy and labour. This is a reality. If the wife feels that it is not fair because she needs to get pregnant, she needs to go through childbirth, and feels that she is the only one contributing and that the husband cannot compare. The husband insists on weighing who contributed more, he could claim that although the wife gives birth to their offspring, but he still has to take care of their offspring and that is still a contribution. If the couple constantly engages in this comparison and evaluation to achieve complete justice between husband and wife, then there is no compassion. If there were compassion in the relationship, their attitudes would be unconditional love for each other without expecting anything, instead of arguing and evaluating contributions constantly. If the husband and wife view their love this way, then this will be a harmonious relationship. In fact, within this marital relationship, even if one spouse has this compassionate attitude, this would be a harmonious relationship. The same idea applies to the community, if there is someone who is compassionate within the community, and then there will be harmony. The same idea can also apply to a larger society too. That is why I have always encouraged everyone to practice compassion.

I would like you to reflect on this question, please ask yourself: “Am I a compassionate person? Or am I a selfish person?”

For example, Dharma Drum Mountain hosted the Women Faith Leaders Compassion Retreat as an unconditional contribution. Dharma Drum Mountain does not expect anything in return. We were willing and happy to be able to offer this facility so you can gather here and share your experience in this retreat. If you return to your home town and use the experiences of this retreat to benefit yourself, benefit your community and benefit the world, then we would be happy, because our mission would have been accomplished. This is our approach in all the work we engage in at Dharma Drum Mountain. If in all our efforts, we think about what is it in for Dharma Drum Mountain if I am doing this, what am I going to get back? You will not see the Dharma Drum Mountain you see today. One thing for sure, by doing our work unconditionally, the more we contribute, the more people embrace our mission and are willing and happy to return and contribute.

Therefore, I am hopeful about the world because there is compassion. When there is compassion in an organization, there is great hope in the organization. When there is compassion in a community, and then there is great hope in the community. When there is compassion in the world, and then there is great hope for the entire world. When this happens, the world will be heaven itself. In fact, everyone here taking part in this retreat is contributing, and the most important contributor in this retreat is the convenor of this retreat, Ms. Dena Merriam.

Thank you.

By The Most Venerable Master Sheng Yen
Founder, Dharma Drum Mountain
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