

# Did the Buddha Have Desires?<sup>1</sup>

Eli Franco

There is no denying that there is a contradiction between the monkish or ascetic ideal of ‘sacred indifference’ and perfect quietism on the one hand and acting in love and pity on the other hand: but happily religious teachers have never been mere logicians, but have always made free use of the privilege of inconsistency.<sup>2</sup>

Jan Willem de Jong had a reputation of being a difficult man. Yet neither in our regular correspondence over the last fifteen years—his last letter to me is dated only four days before his sudden death—nor on the few privileged occasions of meeting him in person—unfortunately far too few although I taught in Australia for eight years—did I notice any trace of this reputation. On the contrary, the de Jong I knew was always friendly, jovial, kind (although not lacking in sarcasm towards some of our colleagues) and hospitable (subjecting himself and his amiable wife to a vegetarian diet whenever I visited them). I sent him all my publications and his responses were always appreciative and helpful, stimulating and encouraging. I feel, therefore, deeply sorry that I am unable at present to contribute a more substantial study to honour his memory.

Winternitz was probably the first Western scholar to point out the contradiction or incompatibility between the two Buddhist ideals of equanimity or lack of desires (*upekṣā*, *vītarāgatva* and similar expressions) and compassion (*karuṇā* and similar expressions). He was certainly right to draw attention to this contradiction, but the second part of his statement strikes me as somewhat problematic. What does he mean by “free use” and “privilege”? Does he imply that (Buddhist) religious teachers were conscious of this and other inconsistencies and chose to ignore them? Did he presume that they believed that they had the privilege of doing so, but others did not? Further, even if one assumes that Winternitz did not intend his statement to be taken literally, one wonders whether only “mere logicians” are worried about contradictions and inconsistencies, and whether being inconsistent is a “happy” state of affairs.

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<sup>1</sup> As always, I am indebted to my wife, Karin Preisendanz, for reading this paper and making very valuable comments.

<sup>2</sup> M. Winternitz, “Problems of Buddhism.” In: *Kleine Schriften*. Ed. H. Brinkhaus. Vol. II, 612-627, at p. 627, quoted in M. Maithrimurthi, *Wohll wollen, Mitleid, Freude und Gleichmut*. Stuttgart 1999: 149, n. 29.

Whatever Winternitz's intention may have been, I think it could be argued that at least some Buddhist religious teachers took inconsistencies in general, and the inconsistency referred to by Winternitz in particular, seriously and attempted to solve them. One could also argue that internal contradictions or inconsistencies were one of the most important driving forces in the historical development of Buddhist religious teachings. The creative tension between the incompatible ideals of equanimity and compassion, especially in the context of the four immeasurables (*apramāṇa*), has been illuminated recently in an outstanding study by Maithrimurthi (cf. n. 2) and another by Schmithausen.<sup>3</sup> In the following pages I want to complement (and compliment) these studies by presenting some additional material that bears on the subject.

From the textual sources studied by Maithrimurthi and Schmithausen it becomes clear that most religious teachers who were concerned with the contradiction between equanimity and compassion attempted to reconcile the two conflicting ideals. One such remarkable attempt appears in the *Mahāvibhāṣā* (428c16ff, my rendering is based on the German translation by Maithrimurthi [cf. n.2] p. 149, n. 29): “When the Buddha is in a state of Great-Equanimity (*mahopekṣā*), one could burn all living beings like dry wood; even if he would stand next to this (burning), he would not perceive it (i.e., would not react to it). When he actualizes the Great-Compassion (*mahākaruṇā*), then his body, which is so strong that no one can move it, trembles like a banana leaf shaken by the wind owing to the suffering of a single living being.”

Such attempts to reconcile the two conflicting ideals—in this case by means of assigning equanimity and compassion to different times—do not come as a surprise. Indeed, both ideals have a very strong footing in Buddhism and one could hardly imagine that one of them would simply be discarded. Yet some Buddhist teachers saw such a strong contradiction between equanimity and compassion that they reached the conclusion that embracing both ideals is untenable. The *Kathāvatthu* (18.3)<sup>4</sup> reports of a controversy between the Theravādins and the Uttarāpathakas<sup>5</sup> on this matter. The latter associated compassion with desire (*rāga*) and reached the conclusion that the Buddha was not compassionate or, to use the expression of Shwe Zan Aung and Mrs. Rhys Davids, that “the Exalted Buddha felt no pity.”<sup>6</sup> The Theravādin objects:

<sup>3</sup> L. Schmithausen, “Gleichmut und Mitgefühl.” In: *Der Buddhismus als Anfrage an christliche Theologie und Philosophie*. Ed. A. Bsteh. Mödling 2000: 119-136.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. also A. Bareau, *Les Sectes Bouddhiques du Petit Véhicule*. Saigon 1955: 251, thesis 28.

<sup>5</sup> The identification of the Theravādin's opponent as Uttarāpathakas is based on Buddhaghosa's commentary; cf. *Kathāvatthu-Prakaraṇa-Aṭṭhakathā*. Ed. I.P. Minayeff. In: *Journal of the Pāli Text Society*. Vol. III. 1888-89: 172. Buddhaghosa attributes no less than forty-five heretic theses of the most diverse character to them. According to Bareau, *op. cit.*, p. 247, the term refers to various sects that reside in the northern region, i.e., the Indus basin and the mountain regions.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Shwe Zan Aung and Mrs. Rhys Davids, *Points of Controversy or Subjects of Discourse*. London 1915 (repr. 1969), pp. 325-326.

“[1] *Th.*—But this implies that neither did he [the Buddha] feel love or sympathetic joy or equanimity.<sup>7</sup> You [the Uttarāpathaka] deny. [2] But could he have these and yet lack pity?

[3] Your proposition implies also that he was ruthless. Yet you agree that the Exalted One was pitiful, kindly to the world, compassionate towards the world, and went about to do it good. [4] Nay, did not the Exalted One win the attainment of universal pity?

[5] *U.*—But if there was no passion (*rāga*) in the Exalted One, surely there was in him no compassion (*karuṇā*)?”<sup>8</sup>

It is remarkable that the Theravādin does not have the last word in the above debate, which would normally mean that he has lost. This rare but by no means unique case may indicate that the debate has arisen in this form before it was integrated into the Theravāda scholastics. Whatever the case may be, the Uttarāpathaka has a strong argument in his favour. For what is compassion if not the wish—and what is a wish if not *desire*—that some (ideally all) living beings should not suffer?

The Uttarāpathakas were not the only ones to draw a somewhat eccentric conclusion from the apparent contradiction between equanimity and compassion. An unidentified opponent in the Spitzer Manuscript<sup>9</sup> (fragment 113<sup>10</sup>) has drawn a different inference on the basis of the same contradiction. He seems to have argued as follows. Compassion (the term used throughout the discussion is *anukrośa*) is desire (or more literally, attachment [*saṅga*] and affection [*sneha*]) and it is meritorious (*dharma*, *dharmika*<sup>11</sup>), therefore attachment (or at least some kind of attachment,

<sup>7</sup> These refer, of course, to the *apramāṇas*.

<sup>8</sup> The above translation by Shwe Zan Aung and Mrs. Rhys Davids is more of a summary than a translation, but nevertheless it is quite accurate. The text reads (*Kathāvatthu*. Ed. A. C. Taylor. London 1894-1897, repr. 1979: 561-562):

1. N’atthi Buddhassa Bhagavato karuṇā ti? Āmantā. N’atthi Buddhassa Bhagavato mettā ti? Na h’evaṃ vattabbe-pe—  
N’atthi Buddhassa Bhagavato karuṇā ti? Āmantā. N’atthi Buddhassa Bhagavato muditā-pe-upekkhā ti? Na h’evaṃ vattabbe-pe—  
2. Atthi Buddhassa Bhagavato mettā ti? Āmantā. Atthi Buddhassa Bhagavato karuṇā ti? Na h’evaṃ vattabbe-pe—  
Atthi Buddhassa Bhagavato muditā-pe-upekkhā ti? Āmantā. Atthi Buddhassa Bhagavato karuṇā ti? Na h’evaṃ vattabbe-pe—  
3. N’atthi Buddhassa Bhāgavato karuṇā ti? Āmantā. Bhagavā akāruṇiko ti? Na h’evaṃ vattabbe-pe—  
Nanu Bhagavā kāruṇiko lokahito lokānukampako lokatthacaro ti? Āmantā. Hañci Bhagavā kāruṇiko lokahito lokānukampako lokatthacaro, na vata re vattabbe “N’atthi Buddhassa Bhagavato karuṇā ti”.  
4. N’atthi Buddhassa Bhagavato karuṇā ti? Āmantā. Nanu mahākaruṇāsamāpattim samāpajjīti? Āmantā. Hañci Bhagavā mahākaruṇāsamāpattim samāpajji, no vata re vattabbe “n’atthi Buddhassa Bhagavato karuṇā ti.”  
5. Atthi Buddhassa Bhagavato karuṇā ti? Āmantā. Bhagavā sarāgo ti? Na h’evaṃ vattabbe-pe—  
Tena hi n’atthi Buddhassa Bhagavato karuṇā ti.

<sup>9</sup> SHT-810, Depositum der Berlin-Brandenburgischen Akademie der Wissenschaften in der Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin – Preussischer Kulturbesitz, Orientabteilung. The print of the fragment below was realized from a slide of excellent quality that was kindly prepared by the photography division of the State Library, Berlin.

<sup>10</sup> Fragment 444 may belong to the same leaf, but I could not coordinate the two fragments.

<sup>11</sup> It seems that *dharma* and *dharmika* (cf. r2) are used interchangeably in this discussion. *dharma* or *dharmika*

notably, attachment that is intimately connected with compassion) is meritorious.

The proponent distinguishes: Not all compassion is meritorious, nor does all compassion involve affection/attachment. As an example for the former he adduces the case—alas, also nowadays not uncommon—of someone eating meat and feeling sorry for the slaughtered animal. As examples for the latter he mentions compassion towards someone who has fallen on the road, the weak, the poor, the injured, etc.

As is often the case with the Turfan fragments, only a small portion of the text remains; nevertheless enough of the discussion has survived to enable discernment of the respective positions of the proponent and opponent.

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can be interpreted in this connection as meritorious or appertaining to right conduct. Note also that the scribe consistently spells *dharmika* rather than *dhārmika*.

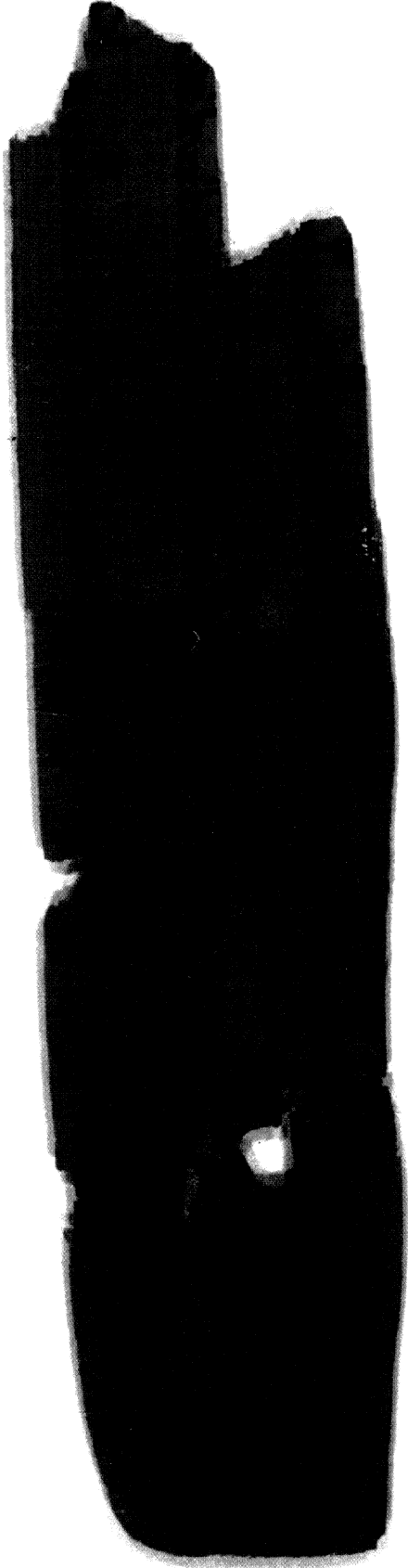
113a (4.3x20.6)



- 1) ity atra brūmaḥ | upapā[d]itam asmābhiḥ santi loka muktā iti ◇ yadi ca saṅgo dharma(h) syā[t\* n]. + + + + +
- 2) sthitaḥ naiva dharmiko O nādharmmikaḥ syāt\* tasmād ahetur eṣa dharmmaḥ saṅga iti | na khalv api sarvvaḥ anu(kk)r(ośa)///
- 3) haḥ vaṭharatvaṃ hy asya māṃsārtham prārthayāno<sup>1</sup> bhaktenānukrośaṃ kurute eṣa ca drohaḥ tasmān na sarvvo 'nu[k](kr)o[śo]///

<sup>1</sup> o corrected to ā; read *prārthayamāno*?

113b



- 1) iti | atrocyate yā tāva<|> te pratijñā dharmma evānukkrośa iti sā hīnā | yad apy uktam nāntareṇa sneham (an)[u](k)[kr](ośa)(?)///
- 2) pi sneham anukkrośaḥ O tad yathā pathi patitasya sambaddhisyotthāpanam ḍ durbbalasyānāthasya hanyamā(nasya?)///
- 3) vanīpakānām pradānānukkrośa ity evamādiḥ tadyathaiśam asaṃbaddhānām antareṇa s[n]e[ha](m) + + + + +///

## Translation

## Recto

- 1) On this we say: [The following has already] been established by us: There are liberated [persons] in the world. And if attachment were *dharma*, ...<sup>12</sup>
- 2) [then<sup>13</sup> attachment] would be neither meritorious nor non-meritorious. Therefore, this [thesis (*pakṣa*?) of yours, namely] “attachment is *dharma*” is devoid of reason. Indeed, nor [is it the case that] all compassion [is meritorious]. ...
- 3) For [this is] stupidity/wickedness on his part. While he begs for meat, he exercises compassion with the [animal served as] food. And this is an offence. Therefore, not all compassion [is meritorious]. ...

## verso

- 1) On this we say: To begin with, your thesis that compassion is nothing but *dharma* is deficient. [Further] what has also been said, namely, that there is no compassion without affection [that is also not true.] ...
- 2) There is also compassion [without]<sup>14</sup> affection. To explain, helping (lit. raising to one’s feet) an (un)related<sup>15</sup> person who has fallen on the road [is due to compassion, but not to affection]. [Similarly one has compassion, but not affection] towards the weak, the poor, those being injured. ...
- 3) Towards beggars there is compassion which consists in giving, and so on. Therefore, just as [there is compassion] without affection for these unrelated [persons], [similarly the Buddha has compassion without affection for all living beings(?)].

If my understanding of the fragment is correct, the author attempts to disassociate compassion and attachment by pointing out that compassion is possible, indeed natural and spontaneous, towards persons for whom one does not feel affection such as beggars or anyone who is suffering from misfortune.<sup>16</sup> This in itself sounds convincing, but one suspects that the author is playing a trick on

<sup>12</sup> Several possibilities can be considered for the apodosis; e.g., if attachment were *dharma*, there would be no liberated persons (but we established that there are, and therefore attachment is not *dharma*). Or perhaps: if attachment were *dharma*, the liberated persons would not teach that abandoning desires is meritorious.

<sup>13</sup> Perhaps: If some attachments are established as *dharma* and some not, then attachment, as such, is neither *dharma* nor *adharma*.

<sup>14</sup> Read *antareṇāpi*.

<sup>15</sup> I would like to conjecture *-asambaddhasya*, cf. *asambaddhānām* in the next line.

<sup>16</sup> As Maithrimurthi has convincingly demonstrated, compassion is often directed towards one’s inferiors, whereas “benevolence” (*maitrī*) is directed towards one’s superiors.

us. He seems to shift from one desire to another. The desire or the wish that someone should suffer no harm is not the same as the desire for someone (i.e., the love or affection for someone); it is the former, but not the latter that seems to be inherent to compassion. In the final analysis it seems impossible to avoid the conclusion that any radical distinction between compassion and passion would be a mere distinction in words rather than a distinction in feelings.

The logical necessity to admit that a compassionate Buddha could not be without the desire that living beings should not suffer may seem obvious, but it took the Buddhists many centuries to admit it, and even then only reluctantly. Such acceptance was probably facilitated by the emergence of Mahāyāna in which equanimity as an ideal has lost much of its value vis-à-vis compassion.<sup>17</sup> The other alternative, namely, to hold that the Buddha had neither desires nor compassion, as favoured by the Uttarāpathakas, albeit much closer to the oldest descriptions in the Pāli canon,<sup>18</sup> became even less acceptable. To my knowledge, the first Buddhist master who clearly accepted that compassion involves desire and that consequently the Buddha had desires was (the “mere logician”?) Dharmakīrti. In the *Svārthānumāna*-chapter of the *Pramāṇavārttika*, he illustrates a certain type of non-conclusive inference by means of the well-known Mīmāṃsā allegation: The Buddha had passions, etc., because he spoke (*rāgitādivad vacanāt*).<sup>19</sup> Dharmakīrti argues that one cannot infer passion from speech because speech is caused by the desire to speak (*vaktukāmatā*), not by passion. If one claims that precisely this is meant by desire, no harm ensues for the Buddhist position because the Buddhists themselves admit that the Buddha had a desire to speak (*saiva*<sup>20</sup> *rāga iti cet, iṣṭatvān na kiṃcid bādhitam syāt.*).

Dharmakīrti further elaborates that if one objects that a passionless Buddha would not have spoken because he would not have had a motivation to speak, this is not correct because the Buddha speaks not for himself, but for the sake of other living beings. And if one claims that he is incapable to do so because he is free from desires, this is not true because one also speaks out of compassion, not only out of desire. The opponent further objects that precisely this compassion is passion and

<sup>17</sup> Schmithausen points out the difficulties in integrating *upekṣā* into the spirituality of the Mahāyāna. Thus, certain texts interpret *upekṣā* as the wish that living beings be free from defilements; cf. L. Schmithausen, “Mitleid und Leerheit.” In: *Der Buddhismus als Anfrage an christliche Theologie und Philosophie*. Ed. A. Bsteh. Mödling 2000: 437-455, at p. 441.

<sup>18</sup> As is well-known, in the Pāli canon the Buddha is depicted as searching for salvation primarily for his own sake. The benefit of other living beings seems to have been of little or no significance to him on his way to enlightenment.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. R. Gnoli. *The Pramāṇavārttikam of Dharmakīrti. The first chapter with the autocommentary*. Roma 1960, p. 9, v. 12. This passage is discussed in J. Dunne, “Thoughtless Buddha, Passionate Buddha.” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* LXIV/3: 525-556. The same statement is discussed again in the *Pramāṇasiddhi* chapter, v. 142; cf. T. Vetter, *Der Buddha und seine Lehre in Dharmakīrtis Pramāṇavārttika*. Wien 1990, p. 50.

<sup>20</sup> *sā* refers to *vaktukāmatā*.

Dharmakīrti agrees that this is the case.<sup>21</sup>

Dharmakīrti's courageous admission became the established opinion in the Buddhist epistemological tradition, but had probably little impact on the Buddhist tradition in general. As far as I know, his ideas were not taken up in any of the schools of Conservative Buddhism. In Mahāyāna Buddhism, on the other hand, the tension between compassion and passion was largely defused because the new Mahāyāna ontology considered the Buddha, in the sense of a certain individual person who preached the *dharma* in Northern India some centuries ago, to be an illusory apparition. Still, the notion of the Buddha's compassion remained problematic, albeit from a different angle; the problem has now become how compassion could be cultivated towards entities which, in the final analysis, do not exist. But that is another story, a story that I won't repeat here as it has already been skilfully told by Schmithausen on another occasion.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, p. 9.10-12: *prayojanābhāvād avyavahāra iti cet, na, parārthatvāt. na yukto vītarāgatvād iti cet, na, karuṇayāpi vṛtteḥ. saiva rāga iti cet. iṣṭam.*

<sup>22</sup> On this problem cf. Schmithausen, *ibid.* (as in n. 17).