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Compassion and emptiness: The Four Immeasurable Minds and the Three Types of Great Compassion in Candrakīrti's *Madhyamakāvatārabhāṣya*

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Abstract

Compassion has long been central to Buddhist thought and practice, shaping both personal development and the broader vision of human flourishing. This article compares two key frameworks: The Four Immeasurable Minds (*brahmavihāra*) of early Buddhism and the Three Types of Great Compassion (*mahākaruṇā*) articulated by Candrakīrti in his *Madhyamakāvatārabhāṣya*. The Four Immeasurables of loving-kindness (*maitrī*), compassion (*karuṇā*), sympathetic joy (*muditā*), and equanimity (*upekṣā*) are presented as meditative practices that cultivate boundless attitudes of care and prepare the mind for wisdom. Candrakīrti's threefold model deepens this foundation by showing how compassion evolves from empathy for beings to recognition of the ignorance underlying suffering, to a non-objectified compassion inseparable from the realization of emptiness (*śūnyatā*).

By placing these frameworks side by side, the study highlights both their continuity and their distinctive emphases: the Four Immeasurables ground compassion in ethical and psychological training, whereas Candrakīrti reframes it as an ontological principle at the heart of the bodhisattva path. The comparison shows that Buddhist compassion is not merely an emotional response but a transformative discipline that integrates ethical practice with philosophical insight.

Beyond textual analysis, this study suggests that Buddhist approaches to compassion offer conceptual resources for contemporary reflection on empathy, human relationships, and the cultivation of a more humane society. Rather than providing prescriptive

solutions, these teachings inspire ways of linking inner transformation with outward ethical responsibility. In this way, ancient Buddhist traditions continue to inform modern conversations about spirituality, ethics, and the conditions for human wellbeing.

Keywords: Buddhist compassion; *brahmavihāra* (Four Immeasurable Minds); *mahākaruṇā* (Three Types of Great Compassion); Candrakīrti; *Madhyamakāvatārabhāṣya*; *śūnyatā* (emptiness); Buddhist ethics; spirituality

Introduction

Compassion is not only a religious virtue but also a universal human value that underpins ethical life across cultures. In Buddhism, compassion (*karuṇā*) is regarded as essential to both personal liberation and the welfare of society (Harvey, 2000). From its earliest formulations in the Four Immeasurable Minds (*brahmavihāra*) (Murakami, 1960) to its refined expression in Mahāyāna philosophy as the Three Types of Great Compassion (*mahākaruṇā*) (Candrakīrti, n.d.), compassion has been presented as a practice that transforms both the individual and the world in which they live.

The Four Immeasurables of loving-kindness (*maitrī*), compassion (*karuṇā*), sympathetic joy (*mudītā*), and equanimity (*upekṣā*) are among the earliest systematic practices for expanding the heart beyond narrow self-interest. They are designed to dissolve hostility, jealousy, and bias, creating an ethical and emotional foundation for a more harmonious way of living (Taishō Tripiṭaka, T25, 350c24–28; Vasubandhu, n.d.). In this sense, they represent not only a meditative discipline but also a vision of human relationships grounded in care and mutual respect (Murakami, 1960).

In the Mahāyāna tradition, Candrakīrti (c. 600–650 CE) reinterprets compassion through the lens of Madhyamaka philosophy. His *Madhyamakāvatārabhāṣya* presents a threefold model of great compassion that deepens the practice by linking it to the insight of emptiness (*śūnyatā*). For Candrakīrti, compassion is not merely an emotional response but a way of perceiving reality: from empathy for beings to recognition of the ignorance that perpetuates suffering and to a universal compassion beyond self–other distinctions (Candrakīrti, n.d.; Ogawa, 1986).

This study places these two frameworks side by side, asking how they illuminate both continuity and innovation in Buddhist thought. By comparing the ethical training of the Four Immeasurables with the philosophical vision of Candrakīrti’s model, we gain a clearer understanding of how compassion functions in Buddhist spirituality, not only as a personal practice but also as a principle with implications for social and cultural life.

At a broader level, the comparison also speaks to contemporary concerns. In a world marked by conflict, inequality, and ecological crisis, Buddhist traditions remind us that compassion can be cultivated as a discipline, expanded without limit, and grounded in wisdom. While these frameworks were not designed as modern social programs, they offer enduring insights into how human beings can nurture inner transformation that supports more humane forms of living together (Harley, 2000; Makransky, 2007).

Section I: Historical and Doctrinal Background

Compassion Before and Beyond Buddhism

The concept of compassion (*karuṇā*) predates the emergence of Buddhism and appears in early Indian religious contexts as a form of ascetic discipline. Practitioners who renounced worldly

life were often subject to ridicule and hostility from conservative Brahmanical circles. Instead of responding with anger or resentment, these practitioners cultivated patience and benevolence toward their detractors. This discipline of meeting hostility with kindness was regarded as a difficult but noble ascetic practice, establishing compassion as one of the virtues of renunciant life (Nakamura, 1956). Compassion thus functioned as both a moral and spiritual exercise, shaping the ethos of early ascetic communities.

Compassion in Early Buddhism

With the rise of Buddhism, compassion took on a more central doctrinal role. The Buddha repeatedly emphasized that true religious practice requires extending benevolence to all beings, modeled after a mother's selfless love for her only child. The *Karuṇā-mettā Sutta* in the *Sutta-nipāta* states: "Just as a mother would protect her only child with her life, so should one cultivate a limitless heart toward all living beings." This universalization of the mother-child paradigm established compassion as the foundation of Buddhist ethics. In early Buddhism, compassion was closely paired with loving-kindness (*maitrī*), together constituting the heart of the Four Immeasurables (*brahmavihāra*). These contemplative practices were designed to purify the mind of hostility, cultivate equanimity, and prepare for deeper states of concentration.

Scholars such as Ogawa (1986) note that in the earliest strata of Buddhist texts, *maitrī* often received more explicit emphasis than *karuṇā*, though the two gradually came to be treated as complementary. Compassion in this context was not yet explicitly tied to philosophical doctrines such as emptiness but functioned as an indispensable ethical and meditative practice.

From Compassion to Great Compassion in Mahāyāna

Mahāyāna Buddhism elevated compassion from a preparatory practice to the defining characteristic of the bodhisattva path. The bodhisattva is not content with personal liberation but vows to remain in the cycle of rebirth until all beings are freed from suffering. This expansive orientation is captured by the term "great compassion" (*mahākaruṇā*), which denotes not only boundless empathy but also the resolve to act skillfully for the liberation of others.

Nāgārjuna, often regarded as the founder of the Madhyamaka school, described great compassion as the "mother of wisdom" (*prajñāpāramitā*). In his writings, compassion and wisdom are presented as mutually generative: Compassion motivates the pursuit of wisdom, and wisdom deepens the scope of compassion by revealing the empty, interdependent nature of all phenomena (Nāgārjuna, *Mahāprajñāpāramitopadeśa*).

Building on Nāgārjuna, Candrakīrti (c. 600–650 CE) systematized the integration of compassion and emptiness in his *Madhyamakāvatārabhāṣya*. For him, great compassion is not merely one virtue among others but the very foundation of the bodhisattva path. The opening verses of his commentary explicitly praise great compassion as the first cause of Buddhahood, even before wisdom and *bodhicitta*. By framing compassion in this way, Candrakīrti establishes it as both the motivating force and the ontological grounding of the bodhisattva's journey.

Section II: Candrakīrti's Three Types of Great Compassion

Candrakīrti, a major figure of the Madhyamaka school, begins his *Madhyamakāvatārabhāṣya* by praising great compassion (*mahākaruṇā*) as the very first cause of Buddhahood, even prior to wisdom (*prajñā*) or the awakening mind (*bodhicitta*) (Candrakīrti, n.d.). For him, compassion is not merely an ethical virtue but the foundation of enlightenment itself.

To clarify how compassion unfolds on the bodhisattva path, Candrakīrti distinguishes three forms of great compassion, which may be understood as progressive deepening: Moving from ordinary empathy to a wisdom-infused, universal compassion.

- i Compassion toward beings (*sattvāmbana-karuṇā*): This is the starting point, directed at beings suffering in *saṃsāra*. It resembles everyday compassion when seeing another in distress, but for the bodhisattva, it extends universally to all beings. It emphasizes relational empathy while being strengthened by the bodhisattva's vow (Ogawa, 1986).
- ii Compassion toward phenomena (*dharmāmbana-karuṇā*): At this stage, compassion is informed by insight into the nature of reality. Beings suffer not only because of immediate pain but also because they misunderstand impermanent things as permanent. Recognizing this, the bodhisattva's compassion addresses the ignorance that underlies suffering (Mahāprajñāpāramitā Śāstra, T25, 417b21–24). This form integrates affect with philosophical insight, marking a shift toward ontological depth.
- iii Non-objectified compassion (*anāmbana-karuṇā*): The highest form of compassion is not directed toward beings or phenomena as discrete objects. It arises naturally from realizing emptiness (*śūnyatā*), becoming universal, impartial, and non-dual (Candrakīrti, n.d.). Candrakīrti identifies this as the compassion of Buddhas: Spontaneous, boundless, and inseparable from wisdom itself.

Together, these three forms illustrate a clear progression and integration from empathy for beings to insight into causes of suffering and to wisdom-based, non-objectified compassion. This mirrors the bodhisattva's path, showing that compassion and wisdom are inseparable (Ogawa, 1986). True great compassion arises only when grounded in the realization of emptiness.

Why Compare the Two Frameworks?

At this point, we have two frameworks for understanding compassion: The Four Immeasurable Minds and Candrakīrti's Three Types of Great Compassion. At first glance, they seem different. The former emphasizing meditative practice, the latter philosophical insight. The first point is historical continuity - the Four Immeasurables are part of the early Buddhist heritage that Mahāyāna reinterprets (Murakami, 1960). The second point is shift of emphasis – from emotional practice to ontological principle, showing how compassion evolves in meaning (Candrakīrti, n.d.). The third one is complementary perspectives – one framework offers a foundation in ethical training, the other provides philosophical maturation (Ogawa, 1986). Finally, contemporary relevance – together, they remind us that compassion is not only a feeling but also a way of perceiving reality (Keown, 2005; Makransky, 2007). This comparison offers a fuller picture as both a discipline of the heart and a vision of reality.

Section III: The Four Immeasurable Minds (*Brahmavihāra*)

The *Four Immeasurable Minds* (*brahmavihāra*) are among the earliest Buddhist frameworks of compassion. They are called “immeasurable” because they are meant to be extended universally—beyond friend or enemy, across all directions. The four qualities are (1) loving-kindness (*maitrī*) – the wish that all beings be happy, (2) compassion (*karuṇā*) – the wish that all beings be free from suffering, (3) sympathetic joy (*muditā*) – rejoicing in others' happiness and success, (4) equanimity (*upekṣā*) – impartial care for all, free from bias.

Early Buddhist Context

The Four Immeasurables are taught in early Buddhist scriptures, such as the *Dharmasaṅgīti Sūtra* (T17, 641c18–642a16) and the *Madhyama Āgama* (T1, 439b1–7). Practitioners are instructed to begin with themselves and gradually expand these attitudes outward: first to loved ones, then to strangers, then to adversaries, and ultimately to all beings.

Each immeasurable functions as an **antidote** to a specific unwholesome state: loving-kindness counters anger and hatred; compassion counters cruelty; sympathetic joy counters jealousy and envy; equanimity counters bias and partiality. Vasubandhu's *Abhidharmakośa-bhāṣya* categorizes them systematically as wholesome meditations that support both concentration and ethical purification (Vasubandhu, n.d.). In this way, the brahmavihāras provide an ethical and psychological foundation for harmonious living (Murakami, 1960).

Mahāyāna Reinterpretation

In Mahāyāna Buddhism, the Four Immeasurables were not abandoned but reinterpreted as integral to the bodhisattva path. They became closely linked to *bodhicitta*, the altruistic aspiration to attain enlightenment for the sake of all beings. Under this reinterpretation, each immeasurable takes on a broader, cosmic dimension as below:

- a) Loving-kindness becomes the wish that all beings attain ultimate happiness in enlightenment.
- b) Compassion becomes the vow to liberate all beings from *saṃsāra*.
- c) Sympathetic joy becomes the delight in others' progress toward awakening, not merely their worldly good fortune.
- d) Equanimity becomes an impartial, boundless care for all beings, transcending cultural, social, and personal boundaries.

Thus, the Four Immeasurables transform from personal meditative exercises into universal commitments of the bodhisattva (Ogawa, 1986). They represent not only a discipline of the mind and heart but also the emotional architecture of Mahāyāna's expansive vision of compassion.

Section IV: Comparative Analysis

Both frameworks encourage practitioners to extend their compassion without limit. The *Four Immeasurables* dissolve boundaries between friend, stranger, and enemy, expanding goodwill universally (Murakami, 1960). Similarly, Candrakīrti's model culminates in non-objectified compassion (*anā lambana-karuṇā*), which arises from the realization of emptiness (*śūnyatā*) and treats all beings equally (Candrakīrti, n.d.).

In this sense, the two frameworks share a vision of compassion that moves beyond partiality. Limited empathy which is directed only toward family, community, or those we like, is only a beginning. True Buddhist compassion seeks to embrace all living beings.

Despite their shared orientation, the two frameworks differ in emphasis and depth in term of ethical and ontological. The first framework, the *Four Immeasurables* are primarily ethical and psychological practices, cultivating wholesome states of mind that counteract destructive emotions (Vasubandhu, n.d.). Their focus lies in training attitudes—replacing hatred with loving-kindness, cruelty with compassion, jealousy with sympathetic joy, and bias with equanimity. By contrast, Candrakīrti's Three Types of Great Compassion are embedded in the Madhyamaka philosophy of emptiness. His second and third forms '*compassion toward phenomena and non-objectified compassion*' cannot be understood apart from insight into impermanence and *śūnyatā* (Ogawa, 1986). Here compassion is not only a feeling but a way of perceiving reality correctly.

This difference reveals how Mahāyāna reframes compassion from an affective practice into an ontological principle as shown in Table 1 below.

Table 1 Shows Comparison of Candrakīrti's Three Types of Great Compassion and the Four Immeasurable Minds

Framework	Definition/ focus	Correspondence with four immeasurables	Distinctive features
<i>Compassion toward beings (sattvāmbana-karuṇā)</i>	Directed at suffering beings; empathetic response to their pain.	Aligns with <i>karuṇā</i> (compassion) and <i>maitrī</i> (loving-kindness).	Relational empathy of beginning bodhisattvas; explicitly tied to the bodhisattva vow (Ogawa, 1986).
<i>Compassion toward phenomena (dharmāmbana-karuṇā)</i>	Compassion informed by insight into impermanence and emptiness.	Resonates partly with <i>upekṣā</i> (equanimity).	Goes beyond the brahmavihāras: grounded in ontological insight, not just emotional training (Mahāprajñāpāramitā Śāstra, T25, 417b21–24).
<i>Non-objectified compassion (anāmbana-karuṇā)</i>	Boundless, impartial compassion inseparable from emptiness (<i>śūnyatā</i>).	Closest to <i>upekṣā</i> but surpasses it in universality and wisdom.	Considered the compassion of Buddhas: non-dual, transcendent, and inseparable from wisdom (Candrakīrti, n.d.).
<i>Four Immeasurable Minds (brahmavihāra)</i>	Loving-kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy, and equanimity.	Serve as meditative foundations for wisdom.	Ethical and affective practices in early Buddhism; less explicitly tied to emptiness (Vasubandhu, n.d.; Murakami, 1960).

Note: Italicized terms are Sanskrit. Sources: Murakami (1960); Vasubandhu (n.d.); Candrakīrti (n.d.); Ogawa (1986); Mahāprajñāpāramitā Śāstra (T25, 417b21–24).

As we can see, Table 1 illustrates three important insights. The first perspective is that compassion toward beings closely parallels the brahmavihāras of loving-kindness and compassion. The second insight is that compassion toward phenomena and non-objectified compassion represent distinct Mahāyāna innovations, deepening the scope of compassion through ontology. The third one is that the Four Immeasurables provide the ethical-psychological foundation, while Candrakīrti's model represents the philosophical maturation of compassion.

However, modern scholarship helps clarify this relationship. According to Harvey (2000), he underscores compassion's centrality in both early and Mahāyāna traditions, noting its role in dissolving self-centeredness. In similar context, Makransky (2007) interprets Mahāyāna compassion practices as transformative methods that unveil innate goodness and dismantle illusions of separateness. These perspectives highlight that Buddhist compassion integrates emotional warmth and philosophical clarity, uniting ethical practice with wisdom.

Section V: Contemporary Relevance

In much contemporary discourse, compassion is understood mainly as empathy. While empathy is valuable, it can be fragile and selective. We often feel it more strongly for those close to us and less so for strangers. The Buddhist frameworks show that compassion can be cultivated deliberately and extended impartially. The *Four Immeasurables* dissolve hostility, envy, and bias through systematic training (Vasubandhu, n.d.; Murakami, 1960). Candrakīrti's model takes this further, showing how compassion matures into non-objectified care that transcends self–other boundaries (Candrakīrti, n.d.).

A distinctive contribution of Candrakīrti's teaching is the link between compassion and wisdom. Suffering does not arise only from external conditions but from ignorance–misperceiving impermanent things as lasting and clinging to them as inherently real. Thus, compassion requires not only emotional resonance but also insight into the causes of suffering (Mahāprajñāpāramitā Śāstra, T25, 417b21–24). For modern contexts, this suggests that addressing social inequality, ecological crises, or cultural conflict demands both goodwill and an understanding of the deeper structures that perpetuate harm (Makransky, 2007). It is important not to overstate the social relevance of these teachings. Buddhist doctrines are not ready-made blueprints for modern society. Their relevance lies in inspiration rather than prescription. They provide conceptual resources for reflection, reminding us that compassion can be intentionally cultivated, expanded without limit, and grounded in wisdom (Schlieter, 2021). In this way, they help link inner transformation with outward responsibility.

Finally, these frameworks invite dialogue across traditions and disciplines. Just as Candrakīrti reinterpreted earlier practices in the light of Madhyamaka philosophy, modern readers can reinterpret Buddhist compassion in relation to psychology, philosophy, neuroscience, and interfaith ethics (Harvey, 2000; Makransky, 2007). This creates a fertile space for comparative inquiry into how spiritual training can support humane and pluralistic societies.

Section VI: Discussion

In Candrakīrti's Madhyamaka thought, *mahākaruṇā* (great compassion) is no longer understood merely as an emotional or ethical virtue, but as the ontological principle of enlightenment itself – the way in which *śūnyatā* (emptiness) manifests as salvific activity. For Candrakīrti, compassion is not simply a “sacred feeling” but the functional expression of emptiness, the dynamic power of wisdom in operation. Therefore, he begins his *Madhyamakāvatāra-bhāṣya* with a hymn to Great Compassion as the “first cause of Buddhahood” (*prathama-hetu buddhahood*), even prior to *prajñā* (wisdom) and *bodhicitta* (the mind of awakening).

From my perspective, Candrakīrti's distinctive insight lies in his affirmation of *mahākaruṇā* not only as the *hetu* (cause) leading to enlightenment, but also as the *svabhāva* – the intrinsic nature of Buddhahood itself. Thus, his opening praise of Great Compassion in the *Madhyamakāvatāra* is not rhetorical ornamentation, but a philosophical declaration that compassion is the ontological energy that enables wisdom to function within dependent origination. The three levels of Great Compassion he identifies – *directed toward beings, toward phenomena, and non-referential* – symbolize not merely the expansion of loving concern, but the transformative stages of the Bodhisattva's cognition, evolving from object-based perception to non-conceptual awareness. At the culmination of this process, compassion and wisdom become unified in a non-dual reality where emptiness itself appears as the act of liberation.

The most remarkable feature of Candrakīrti's system is the inseparable unity of *prajñā* and *karuṇā* (*prajñā–karuṇā advaya*). Here, wisdom is not a cold cognition of non-self, but the very vision that makes compassion boundless; conversely, compassion is not mere altruistic

emotion, but the way in which the wisdom of emptiness expresses itself within the interdependent world. In other words, compassion is the function of emptiness, and emptiness is the nature of compassion.

The three forms of Great Compassion presented by Candrakīrti – *sattvāmbana-karuṇā* (compassion directed toward sentient beings), *dharmāmbana-karuṇā* (compassion directed toward phenomena), and *anāmbana-karuṇā* (non-referential compassion) represent not simply three degrees of feeling, but three evolutionary phases of the Bodhisattva's awareness. Beginning with ordinary compassion, the practitioner comes to perceive the causes of suffering (ignorance and self-grasping), and finally attains the non-conceptual compassion beyond duality, where distinctions between subject and object, self and other, good and evil dissolve. At this stage, wisdom and compassion arise simultaneously, and salvific action becomes the natural manifestation of awakened insight.

When compared with the *Four Immeasurable Minds (brahmavihāra)* of Early Buddhism, Candrakīrti does not reject them but repositions them. If the *brahmavihāras* represent the pedagogical training of the heart, then the threefold Great Compassion represents the mature fruition of wisdom. *Maitrī*, *karuṇā*, *muditā*, and *upekṣā* expand the emotional range to infinity, while Candrakīrti's *anāmbana-karuṇā* deepens compassion into formlessness. The "great" (*mahā*) in *mahākaruṇā* thus signifies the union of the boundless scope of the Four Immeasurables with the non-conceptual depth of the Middle Way.

Philosophically, Candrakīrti introduces a paradigm shift: compassion is no longer a means to wisdom but the manifestation of consummate wisdom itself. Compassion is not outside of emptiness, nor does it arise after emptiness; compassion is emptiness in action (*śūnyatā kriyārūpa*). Hence, throughout the Bodhisattva path, *mahākaruṇā* is both the motivating force (*upāya*) and the very nature of enlightenment (*bodhi-svabhāva*).

From the Madhyamaka standpoint, this is Candrakīrti's greatest contribution. He not only reconciles ethics and wisdom but transforms their apparent opposition into a dynamic interplay of interdependence. When non-self is realized, action becomes spontaneous; and in compassionate action, emptiness reveals itself. Great Compassion, therefore, is no longer an emotion, but the self-expression of *tathatā* (suchness) within the phenomenal world – wisdom that knows how to love.

In essence, for Candrakīrti, Great Compassion is the active expression of the wisdom of emptiness – "emptiness in motion." It is the perfect union of *prajñā* and *upāya*, of cognition and conduct, of enlightenment and the world. Thus, Candrakīrti's *mahākaruṇā* is not only the foundation of the Buddhist path but also the ultimate model of enlightened humanity, wherein knowing and loving become one.

Section VIII: Conclusion

This study has compared the *Four Immeasurable Minds (brahmavihāra)* and Candrakīrti's *Three Types of Great Compassion (mahākaruṇā)*. The former provide ethical and psychological training in universal attitudes, cultivating loving-kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy, and equanimity (Murakami, 1960; Vasubandhu, n.d.). The latter deepen this foundation into an ontological principle inseparable from emptiness, reframing compassion as the very heart of enlightenment (Candrakīrti, n.d.; Ogawa, 1986). Together, they show compassion as both a discipline of the heart and a vision of reality (Harvey, 2000).

For Buddhism, compassion is not merely an emotion, nor only a doctrine, but a transformative integration of care and wisdom. This integration is what makes compassion truly "great" (*mahākaruṇā*). Though rooted in ancient traditions, these frameworks remain meaningful today. They do not prescribe fixed social solutions but invite reflection on how compassion can

be cultivated, expanded, and deepened. In this way, they contribute to ongoing human efforts to link inner transformation with outward ethical responsibility (Schlieter, 2021).

In the spirit of *spiritual science in human evolution*, this study suggests that Buddhist compassion offers more than doctrinal insight. It provides a vision of how inner growth may support humane and pluralistic societies (Makransky, 2007). By uniting ethical practice with philosophical wisdom, Buddhist traditions of compassion continue to illuminate pathways toward balanced, compassionate, and spiritually grounded ways of being human.

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