

**COMPASSION OR KARUNA—  
AS UNDERSTOOD IN THE  
BAHÁ'Í RELIGION**

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*Dr. A.K. Merchant*

*“Blessed are they who hold fast to the cord of compassion and kindness and are detached from animosity and hatred!”*

(Baha'u'llah, *Bahá'i World Faith*, p. 168)

No scripture, no Prophet, no messiah, no avatara omits the mention and practice of this all-powerful virtue of compassion. Life, as we know it, would be impossible without compassion. So what is compassion? The Bahá'í writings state:

“...the Kingdom of God is founded upon equity and justice, and also upon mercy, compassion, and kindness to every living soul. Strive ye then with all your heart to treat compassionately all humankind—except for those who have some selfish, private motive, or some disease of the soul.”

Compassion is understanding and caring about someone who is in trouble or has made a mistake. It is being kind and forgiving because another person really matters to you. It is feeling sorry when someone is hurt (it might be you) and needs someone to understand. It is forgiving someone who hurt you because you understand why they hurt you and care more about that person than your own hurt. It is feeling the pain of someone who is in trouble even if you do not know that person. It is caring deeply and wanting to help—even if all you can do is to say kind words.

When people feel bad or find themselves in trouble, they usually feel very much alone. Feeling alone at times like these

can make things even worse. At such times, people start to believe that one understands or cares about them at all. Being compassionate tells the person that they are not alone. It makes you a friend when someone needs a friend. It gives you a good feeling and makes you useful at the same time. It pleases God and helps you to understand other people and yourself.

Compassion begins by paying attention to yourself and to others. When someone looks sad or is having some trouble in his or her life, it could be any person, even an animal, if you go up and show that you understand and care, it suddenly brings such a powerful positive change. It brings healing, it melts past misunderstandings, and it promotes healthy and happy relationships.

The source of compassion is the all loving Creator, who having created all things continues to shower His bounties even if one is undeserving because He surveys His universe with the eyes of compassion and love. Briefly, it is not only their fellow human beings that the beloved of God must treat with mercy and compassion, rather must they show forth the utmost loving-kindness to every living creature. For in all physical respects, and where the animal spirit is concerned, the self-same feelings are shared by animal and man. Man hath not grasped this truth, however, and he believeth that physical sensation are confined to human beings, wherefore is he unjust to the animals, and cruel.

“O ye who seek to solve the knot,  
Ye live by His compassion and mercy,  
Yet realise it not.  
Ye sit upon the river’s brink,  
Yet crave in vain a drop to drink,  
Ye dwell besides God’s countless store,  
Yet perish hungry at the door.”

There can be no doubt that the universal down slide in human values and the diminishing of divine attributes has brought about a great deal of misery and suffering in every society. It seems that the balance regulating human affairs has tilted so badly in these days that nothing but a great moral and spiritual

enthusiasm will restore it to its normal position and operation. To restore the eternal virtues is difficult today on account of the powerful impact of the mass media systems, the forms of amusements and entertainment and the general moral inertia from which great masses of population in every country on the face of the globe are suffering.

For the recovery of the ethical values of compassion, love, kindness, generosity, helpfulness and courtesy *inter alia*, as a starting point we must begin with a right view of the universe in which we are living. The universe should be viewed as a living organism, everlastingly unfolding and developing in greater complexity and beauty and of which the human being as an individual, is an integral unit. The second requirement as to how we may recover ethical values calls for the recognition of God, the Cosmic Truth, as manifested for today in the revelation of Baha'u'llah.

Ethical principles of themselves have always been ineffective in producing lasting results if divorced from religion. It is, therefore, imperative that the Almighty Creator be recognised as the spiritual source and environment of the soul and furthermore as the bond of unity which binds together all spirits in one common society. The Bahá'í writings assert:

“...no matter how far the world of humanity may advance in material civilisation, it is nevertheless in need of spiritual virtues and the bounties of God. The spirit of man is not illumined and quickened through material sources. It is not resuscitated by investigating phenomena of the world of matter. The spirit of man is in need of the protection of the Holy Spirit. Just as he advances by progressive stages from the mere physical world of being into the intellectual realm, so must he develop upward in moral attributes and spiritual graces. In the process of this attainment he is ever in need of the bestowals of the Holy Spirit.”

The third stage for the obtaining of ethical values is the necessity by the human race to uphold the law of harmony as the basis of conduct in society. It is only when human beings shall have learnt to do this that right and harmonious relationship will

be maintained among the people and the nations of the world. As the law of harmony in space gives us the science of mathematics so the law of harmony in society carries with it the implication of a ‘summum bonum’ or ‘supreme good’ of all humankind. This principle has been enunciated in one form or another by all the great spiritual luminaries of the past. It replaces hatred with love, unbridled ambition and egotism with benevolence, and universal peace would become a permanent reality.

It is in the above context we need to understand the implication and application of the virtue of compassion towards all. At a personal level it would mean the end of greed and selfish exploitation and humans would turn their whole energies to the conservation of the earth’s precious resources and would ensure a just and equitable distribution so that none would know surfeit and none would know want. Universal understanding would replace universal suspicion and intolerance. A truly profound transformation in the society. I would like to conclude with a Bahá’i prayer:

“O Compassionate God! Thanks be to Thee for Thou has awakened and made me conscious. Thou hast given me a seeing eye and favoured me with a hearing ear; has led me to Thy Kingdom and guided me to Thy Path.... O Thou the Compassionate God! Bestow upon me a heart which, like unto glass may be illumined with the light of Thy love, and confer upon me a thought which may change this world into a rose-garden through the spiritual bounty. Thou art the Compassionate, the Merciful! Thou art the Great Beneficent God!”