

A warm welcome to this ‘Buddhism – Going Deeper’ 6-week course – we hope you will thoroughly enjoy it! Over that period, we shall be developing some of the themes that you have already covered if you attended a ‘Buddhism Foundation’ course, and we shall also have plenty of meditation practice, in particular looking at the meditations, all based on the *mettā bhāvanā*, that are particularly concerned with developing compassion and another two important states of mind.



(Image: Avalokiteśvara, Bodhisattva of Compassion)

The course is a relatively new one, originally written and delivered in 2019, then revised in 2021. Its basic structure is to introduce the meditation practices mentioned above – sometimes collectively called the *brahma vihāras* or ‘sublime abodes’, and to look at six different ways in which we can consider compassion in the context of Buddhism. There will also be glimpses of devotional activity, including introductions to two of the archetypal *bodhisattvas* – enlightened beings.

## **1. What *mettā* is, what *karunā* is, and how they’re different**

We all know what it is like to feel aspects of suffering in our daily lives: at the least, we can experience feelings of stress, anxiety or depression; the feeling of tension (physical or otherwise). We also, inevitably, witness the suffering of other people – whether those who are close and dear to us, or strangers about whom we hear in the news. We all also recognise the deep, natural wish to be free of suffering. This release from suffering was the Buddha’s lifelong project: “I teach only two things: suffering and the end of suffering.”

By the time you join a ‘Going Deeper’ course like this one you will probably be very familiar with the idea of universal kindness (a convenient translation of the Buddhist term *mettā*) and its systematic cultivation through the *mettā bhāvanā* meditation. Compassion (sometimes called *karunā*) is simply what arises when our universal kindness encounters suffering. (Later on we’ll also be looking at the ‘flip side’: what happens when kindness meets joy, or the things that give rise to joy.)

It really can't be emphasized enough that compassion has an absolutely crucial role in the Buddhist tradition. In many parts of this tradition the Buddha is recorded as saying that, if one really acts with compassion, that is all that is required for spiritual development. In fact, the two principle qualities of an Awakened being are seen as wisdom and compassion, and these qualities are actually inseparable.

## 2. Saluting the Three Jewels

On this course, we shall begin each week with the brief ritual of 'saluting the Three Jewels.' This can be seen as an act of a heartfelt response to the achievement of the Buddha to free himself from suffering, and our potential to do the same. If and when a person feels so moved, 'saluting the Three Jewels' is an opportunity to remember and to express our internal positive feelings about the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha), and the Buddha's exemplification of both wisdom and compassion.

### How we salute the Three Jewels:

First of all, it is important to know that saluting the Three Jewels is a choice. Some people feel comfortable to do so straight away, for other people it takes much more time. Ideally, we turn towards and, if possible, stand in front of some representation of the Three Jewels (for example, a simple Buddha image or a more elaborate shrine). Then the following words are usually said out loud together, either in unison or in 'call and response'.

**Namo Buddhaya** (Homage to the Buddha – the Awakened or Enlightened one);

**Namo Dharmaya** (Homage to the Dharma – the teachings of the Buddha);

**Namo Sanghaya** (Homage to the Sangha – the community of the Buddha's followers);

**Namo Nama** (emphatically so);

**Om** (with my body);

**Ah** (with my speech);

**Hum** (with my heart or mind) – pronounced 'hung'.

After you have said the words - and only if you really wish to - you can then simply bow from your waist, maybe until the crown of your head is in alignment with the Buddha figure before you. It's important to stress that there is really no right or wrong way of engaging in this ritual, and you certainly shouldn't feel that you're expected to carry it out if you feel unable to relate to it.

## 3. How do we respond to our experiences of others' suffering?

In looking at how we can exercise compassion, it's important to examine our own relationship with suffering - how do we typically respond when we encounter it? There's no doubt that doing so can be a very painful experience! As we shall see next week, it's important to know when our response is one of genuine compassion, and when it's actually something else. In this regard, one helpful way of looking at compassion is through the position of 'solidarity with' or 'being alongside' someone's suffering.

As a practical exercise between this class and next week's, try to be aware of the various ways in which you respond to experiences of others' suffering.