

## 1. The *Karuṇā Bhāvanā*

### Introduction

As we saw last week, the cultivation of compassion is of central importance in Buddhist practice. There are lots of ways and practices to cultivate compassion in Buddhism, but this week we focus on the *karuṇā bhāvanā*, the meditation practice which focuses on the cultivation of compassion and is the second of the ‘sublime abodes’ (*brahma vihāras*). Here we consider some of the principles of the meditation, rather than the formal steps involved in it (which will be covered in the class itself).

*Karuṇā* is the heart’s natural response of *mettā* to suffering. It is the desire to relieve the suffering of another person so that they may be happy. It is usually translated as ‘compassion’ but the full translation might more accurately be ‘compassionate activity which is based upon wisdom’. *Karuṇā* is an active force; it’s a volition, a desire, not just a feeling. When you truly experience *karuṇā*, it’s as if you want to jump up to help someone, not just feel sorry for them. Therefore, the *karuṇā bhāvanā* isn’t about feeling a person’s suffering and the unpleasantness of it. If we just felt that person’s pain without anything else, we’d probably just get bogged down in that. We’d end up in ‘horrified anxiety’ (about which we’ll say more soon), or some similar mental state. It’s about cultivating the positive volition which is *karuṇā*, rather than dwelling on how it feels for *us*.

In a broader sense, what we’re cultivating through the *karuṇā bhāvanā* is the ability to respond, and respond appropriately, with genuine compassion, to whatever suffering we encounter in the world.

### How we approach the practice

Because we’re looking at suffering, which is painful, it’s very important to do it on the basis of *mettā*. It is best to have our *mettā bhāvanā* going well so that we can really engage with this practice. Then, on the basis of *mettā*, we ‘look directly’ at the suffering of the people in the various stages of the meditation. We allow awareness of their suffering to be in our experience simultaneously with the experience of kindly states that we’re cultivating. We bring the *mettā* we’re experiencing to ‘touch’ the suffering you see in the other people.

If we become distracted, we shouldn’t try to create the *karuṇā* again directly – in a way we can’t really do this. Instead, we come back to *mettā*, then introduce an awareness of suffering again, and allow *karuṇā* to re-emerge.

## 2. Compassion and its 'near enemies'

We need to be careful to watch out for unhelpful reactions to suffering. For example, in the stage of the 'difficult person' we can get into stories like "their suffering is their own fault".

As for *mettā*, there are 'near and far enemies' of *karuṇā*. The far enemy of *karuṇā* is **cruelty**. Cruelty here usually means subtly (or not so subtly) enjoying a person's suffering. On the other hand, there are two near enemies of *karuṇā*. The first is **sentimentality**; this is where we are not really engaging with the person, and instead dwelling in a superficial emotional response to their suffering. For example, we may simply say "You poor thing! That's terrible!" but still not really connect with their suffering.

The other near enemy is **horrified anxiety**. Here the suffering is too much for us and we become somewhat alienated from our experience. We feel a little removed from our emotions, a little cut off, a little numbed. We can feel that it's a bit too much to take in, or we feel like just crying with despair. We may feel depressed, without a sense of connection with others, and ask 'what's the point of it all?' This response is more common than we might suppose, especially 'off the cushion' in a suffering world.

It's very important that, if we ever get lost or horrified, we come back to *mettā*, particularly for ourselves if necessary. Horrified anxiety or numbness is definitely not a useful emotion, so there's absolutely no point in getting stuck in it. If we keep getting lost in it, it might be better to leave the *karuṇā bhāvanā* for now and just come back to the *mettā bhāvanā* again for a time.

## 3. Looking out on the suffering of the world

As we've already mentioned, Buddhism regards compassion as an indispensable quality for its practitioners - in fact, the equal counterpart of wisdom. There's no point in having a purely rational understanding of the Dharma, even a quite expert one, if that understanding isn't practically expressed as compassion.

One way of looking at compassion as a response to the suffering we see around us is usefully provided by the Thai monk, Ajahn Sumedho. He describes how a ten-year old child asked him, "If I were to look out into the world as a wise person, what would I see?". He replies, "You would see a world full of creatures, each of them carrying the burden of previous disharmonies and improper actions... A wise person sees a world of beings forced to carry what is hard to bear, and so compassion arises in him. The wise person then goes on to help others in the best fashion he can."

This idea of 'looking out into the world' is one that we can apply to ourselves. There will be many occasions, perhaps every day, when we encounter suffering – maybe in people who are close to us, or through the world news. If we are moved by that suffering, do we know how best to respond? This can be a hard question to answer, but the practice of the *karuṇā bhāvanā* can provide us with a beginning, and a direction.