

This week we introduce the fourth and last of the ‘sublime abodes’ (*brahma vihāras*), and consider the very important question of why our view of the world is heavily distorted from reality.

## 1. How the ‘mind-made world’ is constructed

We know from basic Buddhist teachings that our mental suffering arises from the three ‘poisons’ of craving, aversion and delusion. However, Buddhism goes on to give psychological explanations for why we’re subject to the poisons in the first place. One way of looking at this question is to say that, although we live in a world of which, these days, we have a pretty sophisticated objective understanding, our internal view of this world is usually very badly distorted. From infancy, we take on ways of dealing with the data that swamp our senses that allow us to order that data into something useable. However, this process of ordering brings us to a place of relationship with the world that is extremely skewed toward our own, subjective needs.

For example, the teaching of the Five *Skandhas* (a world that is sometimes rather clumsily translated ‘aggregates’) describes how we process the ‘raw data’ of seeing, hearing and the other senses (including the ‘mind sense’) in five successive layers. From that deluge of raw, unstructured data we learn to define **forms** that seem somehow significant. These forms are not all equal in our experience – some of them we regard, from very early on, with **feelings** of pleasure, others feelings of displeasure or pain (and some just neutral feelings). Then, we learn to **interpret and categorise** all of our experiences, using memories (accurate or otherwise) of encounters with similar forms and feelings. Next, we develop **preferences**, moving towards those things we repeatedly regard as pleasant, and avoiding those we regard as unpleasant. Finally (and crucially, from a Buddhist viewpoint) we reach a position of having, in a sense, **consciousness** of a version of the world. As part of this definition of our world as ‘out there’, we have also effectively defined ourselves as separate and ‘in here’. Here, we might say, lies the very heart of our delusion.

## 2. Equanimity as an answer to the problem

The fourth of the ‘sublime abodes’, equanimity (*upekkhā*) can ultimately be seen as a powerful antidote to the preferences (also called ‘**habitual tendencies**’ or *samskāras*) that play an important role in creating our personal, deluded world (as described above). Equanimity is an attitude of accepting our pleasant and painful experiences (i.e. **feelings**) from a place of *mettā*. We shall still experience such feelings (Buddhist psychology sees them as effectively ‘hard-wired’) but, in practicing equanimity, we learn a different way of dealing with them, in terms of loosening our habitual tendencies. To use a metaphor, the

winds (or gales!) of pain and pleasure still blow around us, but we now have resilience to them. Like a well-designed tall building, we give to the wind just enough to avoid being damaged by it. Practising dwelling in this state of equanimity through meditation, reflection and study, we can gradually loosen the grip of the three poisons (craving, aversion and ignorance) on our thoughts, communication, and physical actions.

### 3. The *upekkhā bhāvanā* meditation

In this practice, we transform our usual craving and avoidance into a feeling of indiscriminating objectivity and ‘dispassion’ to whatever arises, and to all the types of person we meet. The *upekkhā bhāvanā* is effectively a mixture of the previous three meditations (on loving-kindness, compassion and sympathetic joy), in which *mettā* comes to fruition.

Importantly, the *upekkhā bhāvanā* includes the perspective of impermanence – the intuitive understanding that all things in our experience are always changing. Another useful idea that we can apply to the meditation is that of the ‘worldly winds’. These are a metaphor for the spectrum of our experience – the things that can ‘blow us over’, in one direction or its opposite. These worldly winds are traditionally arranged into four pairs of opposites: pleasure and pain; gain and loss; praise and blame; fame and infamy. To extend the metaphor, although people may be blown about by these winds, that is not the whole picture of those people – it’s only the conditions of *karma* acting upon them.

Bodhipaksa (who was mentioned in week 2) refers to *upekkhā* as ‘even-minded love’. Through developing this, we can practice being less intoxicated by pleasure and less debilitated by pain.

### 4. Introducing Green Tārā



In week one we were introduced to Avalokiteśvara, who is a *bodhisattva* – an Awakened being – who symbolically personifies compassion. Possibly an equally famous mythic being who has this connection is Green Tārā, illustrated here. In this representation, the position of her right leg symbolizes readiness to act in the relief of suffering, and her right hand is held in the gesture of generosity. According to legend, Green Tārā was born from a teardrop that fell from the eye of Avalokiteśvara when he perceived the scale of the world’s suffering.