

In this course so far we have defined compassion as the response of our *mettā* to the suffering that we encounter, and examined how we respond to our experiences of others' suffering. We have viewed compassion as the necessary counterpart of wisdom and considered the dangers of its 'near enemy', horrified anxiety. We saw that our self-clinging is natural (and therefore nothing to be guilty about), but that it can be weakened by kindness. We considered individualism as the prevalent theme of our society, and how Buddhism has something to offer the world that is radically different from this 'common discourse'. Most recently, we saw how living in our 'mind-made' world leads to suffering and how we can see equanimity as an answer to this problem. Of course, all of these theoretical topics have been underpinned by our practice of the four *brahma vihāra* meditations that start with *mettā*, and culminate in *upekkhā*.

## 1. Compassion in modern psychological approaches

Early followers of the Buddha tried to assemble his teachings into effective models to help us understand the human mind and heart. They listed, in surprising detail, a huge number of fine mechanisms in the human body and mind that are subject to the three poisons, but also malleable through our choices to act skillfully. Coming right up to date, modern neuroscientists have provided us with new models that sometimes appear very simple, but can still offer something of value in terms of understanding the more subtle roots of why we suffer, and the importance of developing compassion.

To illustrate one of these models, imagine that your raised arm is your spine, and your hand the brain. The thumb represents the earliest and most primitive part of the brain (the limbic system) which is responsible for responding to, and avoiding threats. The neuroscientists call this activity the 'negativity bias' of the brain, and it evolved long before human beings, in our reptilian ancestors.

Neuroscientists have also found another part of the brain: the prefrontal cortex (represented by the 4 fingers) that is the root of positive feelings such as empathy, sympathy, community and altruism. When explored in psychological experiments, this part of the brain can be seen to become active when we meditate, take part in ritual, or develop compassion. It's interesting that the prefrontal cortex is believed to be approximately half the age of the limbic system. We could say that this newer and less evolved part of our physical brain, with practice, has the capacity to soothe the threat detectors of the reptilian limbic system. The prefrontal cortex is believed to have developed at the same time as the human species evolved into being more community-based, when the hunter-gatherers came together to increase their chances of survival and rear children.

How does this help us? Paul Gilbert (in his book 'The Compassionate Mind') refers to developing compassion in terms of coming into a more caring and sympathetic relationship with ourselves and others, and developing a sensitivity to our human needs and distress.

## 2. The compassionate example of Dr Ambedkar

A powerful, practical example of the exercise of compassion comes from the thinking of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, the father of the modern Indian constitution. He was a 'Dalit' or 'untouchable' in the Hindu caste system who nonetheless managed to get a very rare first-class education in England and America and trained to be a very highly skilled lawyer.

Ambedkar started a political party and was eventually chosen to prepare the constitution for newly-independent India in 1947. He managed to change many laws to improve the position of the terribly deprived lower castes. But still he observed that the Dalits' lives didn't change, living in conditions little better than slaves, derided, and mistreated by all societal castes above them. Ambedkar realised that mere legal changes would not effect transformation for the oppressed if how they saw themselves didn't alter radically. They had so internalized the shame, hatred, oppression, and sheer inhumanity of the Hindu caste system that they still believed themselves to be less than truly human.

Ambedkar spent much of the next two decades searching other religions for a system of belief that could bring about a deep change in the underlying lack of self-worth in his people; he studied Islam, Christianity, Sikhism, Zoroastrianism and Buddhism. He realised that a turning-around in the deepest seat of consciousness would be needed to bring the desired self-liberation, and to override thousands of years of Hindu conditioning. In the end he chose Buddhism because the others religions were all led by messengers of God. He understood that the Buddha was a human being who completely transformed himself, rather than taking the 'word of God' as the irrefutable truth. Inspired by the Buddha's example, Ambedkar converted to Buddhism in 1956 and immediately set about teaching it to many thousands of Dalits in an attempt to bring about their liberation. Only six weeks after leading a ritual 'mass conversion' of some 500,000 of his people he died, at which crucial point our own teacher Sangharakshita took over, bringing many more Dalits to Buddhism and eventually setting up the Triratna movement in India.

All of this Ambedkar did out of compassion and a deep understanding of suffering and how to go beyond it. This was 'compassion in action' in the modern world.

Here then, we must leave this brief tour of what compassion means for Buddhists, and how it can be put into action. Thank you for being part of the course – we hope that, in return for your investment in it, you've gained some useful things for your spiritual 'toolkit'. We also hope to see you again, on whatever courses or at whatever of our events appeal to you, before very long.