



Introduction to Buddhism Course

Week 6



1. Metta Bhavana - Stage 5

Applying equanimity to our well-wishing

The final stage of the Metta Bhavana allows us to become truly ambitious in our cultivation of positive emotion and well-wishing, as we do our best to apply these qualities as widely as we possibly can. We start by bringing back to our mind's eye the four people on whom we have already concentrated, perhaps imagining them all being present in the same room. The important point at this stage is that, however able to feel positive emotion and well-wishing we feel we are, we try to apply them in an even-handed way to all four recipients – not forgetting ourselves! Having reached this point, we can go further if we wish, expanding the 'target' of our metta to an increasingly broad group of people. We can do this however we like – there are no rules – but the best approach is to engage our imagination and, if we feel so inclined, to let it go free! We can even include non-human beings and perhaps inhabitants, as yet undiscovered, of places beyond this planet!

This stage of equanimity is an expression of the important Buddhist principle that there is no point in seeking happiness just for ourselves – we have the capacity, as humans, to seek it for all living beings.

2. Just Sitting

Just sitting is, in a sense, just as its name suggests! We can see it as a practical application of 'being mode', as we sit with no agenda and no technique as such, simply trying to be as open and accepting as we can to our various experiences in the present moment. Although Just Sitting is sometimes used as a meditation practice in its own right, especially in certain schools of Buddhism, a period of it can also very usefully be added to the end of a more structured practice like the Mindfulness of Breathing or the Metta Bhavana. In this way we allow ourselves an empty, receptive space, ideally without preconceptions, in which we can 'process' the impact of the preceding meditation. This processing doesn't necessarily happen at a conscious level, so it's particularly helpful to have no expectations of Just Sitting – just to be open to whatever comes our way!

3. The importance of making a 'heart connection'

As we near the end of this introductory course, you may be sufficiently interested and inspired by what you've learned to want to go further in

following the ‘threefold path’. However, we should be quite honest with ourselves at this point – this intention might very easily become rather like a New Year resolution! Given the complexity of our lives, and the very many other interests that we might pursue, not to mention doubt and sheer laziness, the most likely outcome is that our interest will tail off sooner or later. At least, this is very likely to be the case if our interest in Buddhism is purely intellectual. We like to see ourselves, in our culture, as predominantly rational beings – after all, we’ve been educated to be that way. This is no bad thing; without education and the ability to analyse things rationally, we can very easily be prey to dubious claims and manipulation as part of someone else’s agenda. As we shall see below, the Buddha didn’t expect his followers to be gullible and just accept anything he happened to say – he urged them to test his teaching ‘in the fire of their own experience’.

On the other hand, if we want to make progress on the spiritual path and not lose our momentum, we need to recognise that our rational faculty alone is not enough. We all know that our enthusiasm for a new direction, and our commitment to it, really come from somewhere else – from our emotional faculty. Things only come alive for us when they move us – this is a very different matter from just being interested at an intellectual level. However rationally we are used to living, we all have an imaginative, emotional side as well; this is what we’re using when we enjoy the spring sunshine, a piece of music, a good novel or – for that matter – really connect with a spiritual tradition like Buddhism. In conclusion, we need to have a firm intellectual understanding of what the Buddha taught but, in order for that teaching to speak to us personally, we definitely need to be able to recognise our own emotional response. This is what Buddhists sometimes call ‘making a heart connection’. To quote Sangharakshita, “the central problem of the spiritual life is finding emotional equivalents to our intellectual understanding”. One very important aspect of this search for ‘emotional equivalents’ is that we need to develop **faith** – but what do we mean by this?

4. What is meant by ‘faith’ in Buddhism?

Faith plays an important part in the Buddhist pursuit of wisdom and it’s important that we understand what it means. ‘Faith’ is of course an English word, which means different things to different people. Like the word ‘religion’, it’s loaded with associations, many of which are not applicable to Buddhism. To begin with, it is most often associated with belief in a creator God, but Buddhists don’t believe in such a being.

In trying to explain what Buddhists see as ‘faith’ it’s probably best to go back to the original word, which comes from the ancient Pali language. **Saddha** is a word that comes from the original Buddhist scriptures and is from a root meaning something like ‘to place the heart upon.’ As we have said, if you want to make progress on the spiritual path – if you want to become wise – your heart has to be in it! Sometimes saddha is translated as ‘confidence’, which generally goes down better with most modern English-speaking people.

We could define Buddhist faith as *a feeling for a reality that is beyond what we*

currently experience. We have to be careful here – this definition doesn't mean to say that there is literally another world, different from the one we live in, that we have to try to get to. This 'other reality' is simply *this world seen in another way* – a more realistic way. According to Buddhism, wisdom is the faculty that sees things as they really are – when you have wisdom you see. Faith is the faculty that feels for that wise way of seeing, in fact it is attracted to it - you could even say wants it. Therefore, there is a strong connection between faith and wisdom – faith is the desire for wisdom.

There is a traditional, threefold formulation of faith, called the 'three grounds of faith'. The first - **faith grounded in intuition** - is the initial glimmering that there may be another such reality. When you have this intuition you don't know that there is such a thing, but you have a feeling, an intuition, that there is. Many people today, influenced by a 'scientific' approach to life, and perhaps also disillusioned by Christianity or other religion, distrust faith and intuition. This is understandable, because the kinds of things that some people have faith in are often not verifiable by reason or experience – to put it bluntly, they are sometimes quite irrational.

The second ground of faith – **faith grounded in reason** – is where that intuitive feeling is tested by reason. It feels right, but is it? Does it make sense – is it reasonable? We sometimes hear of religious faith being opposed to reason, but in Buddhism these things are not opposed. Buddhism is not irrational, and every claim that Buddhism makes to the truth *can and should* be tested for its reasonableness.

The third 'ground of faith' is **faith grounded in experience**, and this is where faith and wisdom come together. In the second ground of faith your intuition was tested by reason – you had to see whether what you had faith in stood up to reason. But reason, for Buddhism, is not the last word on the subject. It's possible to think something through and get it wrong. In the third ground of faith your intuition and reason are tested by experience. The 'experience' that is meant here is the seeing of the way things really are – it is *the experience of wisdom*.

5. The relationship between wisdom and compassion

In regarding wisdom as the third level of the threefold path, it's very important to recognise that the Buddha is revered as much for his compassion as for his wisdom. In fact, we can really say that the two are indistinguishable – there is no wisdom without compassion, and no compassion without wisdom. When we come to understand the first Noble Truth (of suffering), and we appreciate how we are never far from it, the only valid response is to look for ways to bring relief from suffering to as many living beings as possible. In the context of Buddhist belief, the most meaningful way in which those who are suffering can be helped is through enabling them to hear the Dharma, and thereby to understand the other three Noble Truths - of the causes of suffering, its end and the path leading to its end.

After his Enlightenment, the Buddha was concerned that he wouldn't be able to communicate his experience to others – it was perhaps too subtle. He even thought for a while about not sharing his discovery at all. Around this time a vision came to him, in which he visualised humanity as a great lake of lotus plants. Some were still buried deep in the mud at the bottom, some were growing up into the water, and some were even beginning to flower, breaking through the surface of the water into the light of the sun. Through this he saw that there were some who would be able to understand his Dharma. Even those of us who are 'in the mud' possess the potential to transcend our suffering.

According to legend, this vision touched the Buddha's heart with a great compassion for the sufferings of human beings. In response to this, he resolved that he would find every possible means to communicate the Dharma to as great a range of people as he could. Although he couldn't directly convey the experience of his enlightenment, he could use many indirect 'skilful means' to help to bring those who listened closer to it. This is what he did for the next 45 years, right up to his death at the age of eighty. This was surely a very great act of compassion that has deeply inspired Buddhists ever since.

6. What comes next?

If you've enjoyed this introductory course or, better still, feel inspired by it, you're probably wondering 'where to go from here'. You might want to commit to a more advanced course, either as another 6-week evening course, or as a 'day retreat'. On the other hand, if you'd like to carry on your own personal investigations for the time being, you might be wondering what to read, given the bewildering amount of material that's available on Buddhism.

The next 6-week **evening course** is called 'Going Further with Buddhism'. It will build directly on the foundations of this course, developing one of the themes that you've already met in considerably more detail. Please consult the Buddhist Centre reception, or look on our web site for the start date of the next 'Going Further' course. It will start and finish at the same times as this course, and the scale of charges will be the same. Please book through reception in the usual way.

An alternative approach is to come to a '**day retreat**'. Although the subject matter is necessarily condensed, there is an advantage that you can completely immerse yourself, for a few hours, in Buddhist teaching and meditation. There should be one of these scheduled before very long after this course, so please look for details through the routes mentioned above. Charges are £45 if you're fully-waged, £35 (low waged) or £20 (concessions) – again, please book through reception.

Good luck in your future explorations – maybe we'll see you again before long!