



Manchester  
Buddhist  
Centre

# Buddhism Level 1 Course

## *Week 4 – The Buddha's Teaching on Human Relations*



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### 1. How the Buddha helped all sorts of people

After his Awakening, the Buddha was concerned that he wouldn't be able to communicate his experience to others – 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 Awakening, 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 great act of compassion has deeply inspired Buddhists ever since.

Buddhist 'scriptures' are very extensive, and are full of examples of the Buddha finding many different ways of communicating aspects of Reality to different people, depending on what he thought they needed to hear. These give us a strong flavour of both the Buddha's wisdom and his compassionate response to the suffering of human beings. For example, he had an encounter with a notorious and violent robber called Angulimala – his name translates 'Finger Necklace' because he wore a long string of human fingers around his neck, taken from all the victims that he had killed and robbed. The Buddha, rather than running away from him as everybody else understandably did, engaged him in conversation and helped him to realise that he was constantly running away from his own guilty conscience. Angulimala was powerfully impressed by the Buddha's fearless, composed personality; he expressed his remorse and actually became one of the Buddha's community of monks.

Another story describes the Buddha's skilful means towards Kisa Gotami, a young mother who had been driven half-crazy when her only child died. Unable to accept that he was dead, Kisa asked the Buddha to prescribe a remedy for him. The Buddha gently suggested that she should go from house to house around the town, begging for mustard seeds for the child. There was an important condition to this quest: that she should only accept seeds from

those houses where nobody had ever died. Kisa, carrying out the Buddha's instruction, soon came to understand that death had touched everybody she met, in every single house – by means of this realisation she was brought to her senses and was able to accept that her son, too, had succumbed to the inevitability of impermanence. Not only did Kisa find acceptance of this very difficult truth, she was also deeply moved by the Buddha's wisdom and compassion, and she too became one of his followers.

As a way of addressing the universal problem of suffering in a very practical way, to which ordinary people could easily relate, the Buddha taught the famous model of the **Four Noble Truths**. These are as follows:

### **1. The Noble Truth of suffering**

Whether we like it or not, we regularly experience suffering. This may be through sickness, old age and death, or just because we usually can't have what we want (or are forced to do what we don't want to!).

### **2. The Noble Truth of the causes of suffering**

We suffer because we crave for what we think we want, we experience aversion to what we don't want, and we are ignorant of how things really are – in other words, much more complex than our little selves. As we shall see, these three habits – craving, aversion and ignorance – are sometimes known as the 'three roots of suffering'.

### **3. The Noble Truth of the ending of suffering**

It is possible to free ourselves of the three roots of suffering, if only we understand how. Having understood those roots, we can begin to attack them.

### **4. The Noble Truth of the path leading to the end of suffering**

The challenge for human beings is clearly to find a spiritual path which allows us to give up the three roots. This is much more easily said than done - it is one thing to understand a concept, but a very different thing to relate to it, as we say, with our hearts. Buddhist teachings have adopted a huge number of models and devices to help the Buddha's followers to make this leap of imagination. Two of the best-known of these, throughout the Buddhist world, are the **Noble Eightfold Path** and the more condensed 'Threefold Path' of ethics, meditation and wisdom.

## **2. How do we know how best to behave?**

A very important aspect of the Buddha's teaching lies in the area of **ethics**. Let's be clear – this isn't the same thing as what might be called 'morality' in other faiths – it doesn't have anything to do with our being told how we should behave. Instead, Buddhist ethics are an application of the law of 'Dependent Arising and Cessation' that we met last week, in the specific area of human relations. We can summarise the Buddhist ethical code in the maxim "actions have consequences". Just as all things arise in dependence on pre-conditions, so every action – absolutely without exception – has its resulting outcomes.

This ethical dimension of Dependent Arising and Cessation is often described as the **Law of Karma**. 'Karma' generally means action, but specifically an action that is a matter of human choice. In other words, karma is concerned with our **intentions**, so we can say that Buddhist ethics are the 'ethics of intention'. It's very important to recognise that there are various *other* sorts of actions that also have consequences. For example, being exposed to a virus can cause us to become ill, but this is unlikely to have anything to do with our intentions or the way we exercise them. It's therefore important to remember that the law of karma is only one aspect of the wider law of Dependent Arising and Cessation.

In considering how karma affects us, we can simply say that an ethical action (in other words, one carried out as the expression of ethical intentions) is one that results in happiness, for oneself and for others. An unethical action is one that results in suffering.

There are three kinds of ethical action, according to Buddhist thought – physical action, speech, and acts of the mind. The relevance of the last of these is that an ethical thought will result in happiness, while an unethical thought will result in suffering. Wishing someone well, for example, makes us feel happy, and we'll probably do things to try to help that person. If we wish harm to someone, however, such a state of mind is an unpleasant one, and if we act from that state, we'll cause more suffering.

The mind is in fact the most important of the three areas of action, because our physical actions and our speech are expressions of our mental states. One of the most famous Buddhist writings, the Dhammapada, begins with the words:

*Experiences are preceded by mind, led by mind, and produced by mind. If one speaks or acts with an impure mind, suffering follows even as the cartwheel follows the ox (drawing the cart).*

*Experiences are preceded by mind, led by mind, and produced by mind. If one speaks or acts with a pure mind, happiness follows like a shadow that never departs.*

### 3. Reactive and creative, unskilful and skilful

Buddhism doesn't speak in absolute terms of good and bad, but in terms of **skilful** and **unskilful** actions. This means that our actions are not judged to be good or bad (much less still wicked or evil) but only relatively skilful or unskilful. This also means that with practice we can become more and more skilled in action.

As we've seen already, there are three roots of unskilful behaviour – **greed, hatred and ignorance**. All unskilful mental states grow from these roots, so it's important to understand them. They are unskilful because when we act from these states of mind we suffer, or we cause others to suffer.

1. **Greed** is the desire for experiences and possessions that you don't need for your continued well-being and happiness. Hunger is not greed, but is a natural bodily function that lets you know that you need to eat. If we didn't obey the feeling of hunger we would eventually die. The same is true for thirst. We also experience desires for communication, beauty, truth and freedom, which are all, according to Buddhism, healthy desires that don't result in suffering. Greed is a response to feeling of inner emptiness, and we often try to 'fill' this emptiness with new possessions or experiences such as food, drink or drugs. Greed is unskillful, not because it's evil or wicked, but simply because it leads to suffering.
2. **Hatred** is an attitude of hostility towards others, often because they obstruct the gratification of our greed. Sometimes we feel hatred towards someone or something that threatens our well-being in some way. Whatever the reason for our hostility, it tends to make the situation worse, causing more suffering.
3. **Ignorance** is the sum total of our deluded beliefs – beliefs that cause suffering when acted on. Examples are the belief that happiness will be achieved if we can somehow get everything we want, or that our best interests are served by 'looking after number one'. Such beliefs cause suffering - again, not because they are evil, but because they are based on a mistaken notion of reality.

The opposites of these three unskillful roots are (1) contentment and generosity; (2) friendliness and kindness; and (3) awareness. When we act from these states we bring about happiness, both for ourselves and for others.

This, then, is the basis of the language of 'unskillful' and 'skillful' actions – the first type add to the total of suffering (for ourselves and others), while the latter add to the total of happiness (again, for both ourselves and others). As we saw a little earlier, this distinction has nothing to do with passing judgement – that, in itself, could be seen as an unhelpful, unskillful action. Rather, it's to do with weighing up the options before us and doing our best to understand which of these is most likely to reduce suffering and increase happiness. Another sort of language that helps in this scheme of things is that of 'reactive' and 'creative'. When we act relatively unthinkingly, merely in a reflexive response to something that has been done to us, we are being reactive and therefore (usually) fairly unskillful. On the other hand, if we think about the various conditions that contribute to a situation and try to add to that situation with intelligence, we are being creative and (hopefully) skillful. Of course, it can be very hard to spot the skillful, creative response in some situations (about which we shall say more next week!).

## 4. The Metta Bhavana meditation – developing positive intentions

This week we introduce this second meditation practice which is very important in the Buddhist tradition. 'Metta Bhavana' is a term taken from the ancient Indian language Pali – we tend to use this rather than an English translation, because the latter doesn't fully convey the true spirit of the Pali term. Looking at this a little more closely:

**Metta** translates (approximately) as 'unconditional friendliness' or 'loving kindness'.

**Bhavana** translates as 'cultivation' or 'development'.

We can therefore say that the **Metta Bhavana** is the cultivation of loving kindness or unconditional friendliness. We can also say that it's about learning to make our intentions more positive (or skilful, or creative) – so it's essentially an ethical practice.

The Metta Bhavana is, in various ways, an extension of techniques you've already learned. The Mindfulness of Breathing is concerned with cultivating awareness of the body, and requires an attitude of coming back to the object of meditation without judgment and with kindness. This non-judgmental attitude is actually a reflection of metta. Metta is the attitude that meets whatever comes into our experience with kindness, openness and patience. It's important to remember that, although our initial response might not involve these qualities, we can choose to cultivate them. Practising the Metta Bhavana involves deliberately cultivating awareness of ourselves and others, and specifically our intentions or wishes towards ourselves and others.

Like all other practices, it starts with awareness of the body and of our thoughts, feelings and emotions. We begin by getting a sense of ourselves at present and acknowledging whatever we find with kindness.

Metta is said to be 'unconditional friendliness', but what do we mean by 'unconditional'? We can better answer this by first looking at what **conditioned** behaviour is. Our conditioned responses are based on our habits of liking and disliking, as well as the mentality whereby we do something for someone and we expect to get something in return. A couple of examples of this might be:

1. You hold open a door for someone out of a friendly intention. Unfortunately, the other person rushes past you and doesn't say "thank you". You feel anger or resentment. If you reflect on this, you might realise you have a hidden expectation - you want the other person to acknowledge that you have put yourself out for him.
2. You buy a friend a present for her birthday. You spend a lot of time thinking about what you are going to buy and then spend a lot of money on it. When you give her the gift she is very happy and tells you how much she appreciates you. When it comes to your birthday you get a card and a

small amount of money. You feel disappointed, dwell on the matter and begin to think that your friend is inconsiderate and doesn't care about you. Again, although your motivation at the time of buying the gift seemed to be friendly, you realise that your motive was actually mixed. When your birthday came around you expected your friend to make a similar amount of effort for you.

These two examples show us how we may act in a conditioned way, wanting something in return for what we see as our 'good deeds'.

What, then, does it mean to act **unconditionally**? It simply means that we do things without an expectation of reward. It requires that our kindness is sufficiently robust to absorb the effects of others' actions when they don't act the way we want them to. However, and importantly, it doesn't mean that we become an 'emotional doormat'. If we are upset about something we can still find an appropriate way to express how we feel. In fact, expressing ourselves in this way may be an act of 'self-metta'. Crucially, we need to realise that we cannot directly change others - we can only really change ourselves.

The ideal of metta is that we should always act unconditionally. We probably won't achieve the ideal, but we can certainly work to move slowly closer towards it, and this is a hugely positive aim in itself. Don't be misled - it takes a lot of practice, but this practice has a great starting point when we recognise and acknowledge our conditioned responses. By observing our long-established habits with kindness to ourselves, reflecting on the meaning of metta and practising the Metta Bhavana we can slowly but surely change our habitual behaviour.

The practice has 5 stages, in which we cultivate metta towards:

1. Ourselves
2. A good friend
3. A 'neutral' person
4. Someone we find difficult
5. All of the above in equal measure, then finally all beings

During this and the following two weeks we'll be gradually developing our practice of all of these stages.

## 5. What you could do in the week ahead

- To meditate 6 out of 7 times a week. You could alternate (a) the Mindfulness of Breathing, stages 1 to 4 and (b) the first 2 stages of the Metta Bhavana.
- Look for examples, in your everyday life, of choices that could be described as 'ethical' – in other words giving you a choice between unskilful or skilful, reactive or creative. Your examples could range from the trivial to the life-changing – but they're all valid!