

## KARUṆĀ AS DHARMA LEGACY: BUDDHIST COMPASSION IN CONTEMPORARY MORAL CONSCIOUSNESS

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**Abstract:** This article looks into the Buddhist concept of compassion (*karuṇā*) as an essential teaching of *Dharma* and its impact on shaping contemporary moral consciousness. Connected to the Buddhist ethical teachings of *brahmavihāra*, compassion serves as the foundation of fostering empathy and alleviating suffering from human life. The study investigates the philosophical foundations of Buddhist compassion, then contextualises it in *brahmavihāra* and traces its alliance with three planes of existence, abstinences and illimitable, and lastly looks into its influence on contemporary moral consciousness, addressing suffering and the role of compassion in cultivating resilience through its different modes of application. Through a qualitative-philosophical approach, the work analyses the transformative principle of compassion to bridge personal, social, and ecological well-being. Finally, it explores how the legacy of Buddhist compassion motivates universal moral awakening, emphasising peace, non-violence, and moral responsibility through a brief analysis of the evolution of compassion from its foundational principles to contemporary practices including the contributions of influential Buddhist figures.

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## 1. Introduction

Originating from human suffering, as *Bodhi* (“The Noble Eightfold Path”, vi) says, Buddhism centres around two principles: the Four Noble Truths and the Noble Eightfold Path. The first describes the doctrinal aspects, while the second covers the practical aspects or disciplines. These two, doctrines and disciplines, together form *dhamma-vinaya* or *Dharma* in the Buddhist teaching. It is the essence of Buddhism, a popularly known school that followed from what the Buddha taught or spoke to his followers. Dharma thus inspires the practical application of the Buddha’s teachings–doctrines and practices– for the cultivation of a meaningful life until one attains liberation from *samsāra*, i.e. birth, suffering, and death (Piyananda 92). In this sense, Buddhism may be said to promote “righteousness” (Chatterjee 177). From the Buddhist perspective, at the macro level, the universe is a web of interconnected and interdependent events where human existence is an indispensable part, and at the micro level, human is perceived as a system of processes governed by the doctrine of dependent arising (Yeh 92). Interconnectedness is key to all Buddhist teachings (Anālayo, “Dependent Arising”, 1094). Human existence, as part of this cosmic whole, is deeply woven into a network of connections, encompassing fellow individuals, nature, and the larger cosmos. Within each individual, again, lie biological, emotional, and spiritual relationships that shape identity. These internal interdependencies, labelled as “mind/body mechanism” by Bhikkhu and Gunatunge (284), influence actions and thoughts, reinforcing the need to maintain harmony within this complex web of relationships. In Buddhism, this interconnectedness is articulated as “When there is this, that comes to be.” (Ñānamoli and Bodhi 655). Understanding this interconnectedness and dependencies within and out requires individuals to cultivate compassion (*karunā*), one of the four sublime states of mind (*brahmavihāra*). Compassion, an empathetic response to suffering, seeks to alleviate the miseries of oneself and

others by recognizing the interconnectedness inherent in existence and shared susceptibility of all beings (Pensa 36–46). Rooted in the *Dharma*, it promotes non-violence and harmony with nature (Poungpet 49-50, 54-55), providing a solid moral framework for shaping contemporary moral consciousness. Integral to Buddhist enlightenment, compassion, as noted by Taylor (333, 396), aligns with modern reflections on identity. Buddhist figures such as Thich Nhat Hanh and His Holiness the 14<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama demonstrate how compassion can address global challenges and transform global ethical thought. In a world marked by social biases, environmental degradation, and perennial suffering, Buddhist compassion offers a pathway to promote interconnection, empathy, and collective well-being. It helps address contemporary moral dilemmas and nurtures moral consciousness that transcends cultural and ideological divides. As a legacy of *Dharma*, compassion can enrich contemporary moral discourse and outline more inclusive moral awareness.

## 2. Buddhist Compassion: Foundations and Ethical Principles

The central teaching of Buddhism is the alleviation of human suffering, which requires understanding reality as it is—called *Dharma*, which is variously described in Buddhist texts as: one of the three jewels, natural law, universal moral law, the building block of basic elements, and above all, the Buddha’s teaching (Keown 8, 67, 97). It is the guiding principle that leads to freedom from suffering. The Buddha’s teaching encourages individuals to live by truth to overcome suffering and attain Nirvana. This multi-layered concept of *Dharma* extends both physical and moral life, offering a path of moral integrity (*sīla*), mental cultivation (*samādhi*), and wisdom (*paññā*) as outlined in the Noble Eightfold Path. *Dharma*, in simple words, explains the truth of existence and how to live meaningfully, articulating reality and guiding individuals toward it. The Four Noble Truths explain human suffering in four stages—identification, origin, cessation, and the path to cessation—which Harvey (“An Introduction to Buddhism”, 51; Mathai 302) has compared to early Indian healing practice of diagnosing, identifying, determining curability, and

prescribing treatment. Buddhism also teaches the basic marks of existence—suffering, not-self, and impermanence. The Buddha said, all conditioned things are unsatisfactory, not-self, and impermanent (Dhammapada 20:277–279). Since everything arises due to certain causes and conditions, and ceases when those causes and conditions end (Harvey, “An Introduction to Buddhism”, 65–66), attachment to them becomes the cause of suffering. Ignorance to this impermanence is the root of human miseries. Ignorance is one of the three unskillful roots (*akuśala mūla*) (Keown 51, 53, 56, 68), the rest being greed and hatred. Though greed and hatred also lead towards unwholesome activity, they stem from ignorance. Overcoming them requires cultivating compassion—for oneself and others—one of the four *brahmavihāras*. Individuals must understand and practice the principle that everyone loves himself dearly and hence the same love that one has for oneself must be shown to others. As everyone loves to be happy and does not desire suffering and unpleasant things, it is unethical to inflict suffering on others (Udana 47). Reducing one’s suffering aligns with allaying the suffering of others. Again, cleansing one’s mind improves the ability to help others better, while helping others foster wholesome mental qualities and karmic outcomes, enhancing self-improvement (Harvey, “An Introduction to Buddhism”, 266). Thus, allaying ignorance does not only require wisdom but also spiritual practices and morality.

### 3. Contextualised Compassion in *Brahmavihāra*

The Buddha taught that perceiving the self, composed of five aggregates (*pañcakkhandā*) (Bodhi, “A Comprehensive Manual of Abhidhamma”, 26), as a permanent entity and desiring everlasting satisfaction for it creates a chasm between self and others, leading to painful egotism. To reduce this gap and lessen suffering, the Buddha introduced various techniques, notably the *brahmavihāra* (Miller 209). *Brahmavihāra* combines ‘brahma’ (noble) and ‘vihāra’ (dwelling or abiding), meaning ‘noble living’ or ‘living with goodwill’ (Sayadaw 19). It is practiced in four (meditative) ways: *mettā* (friendliness or loving-kindness), *karuṇā*

(compassion), *muditā* (sympathetic joy), and *upekkhā* (equanimity). These four attitudes are called “great habitations” (Dhar 87) or Brahma-like or divine abodes because cultivating them enables the mind to dwell in the realm of Brahma (*Brahmāloka*). They are also called immeasurable, requiring boundless cultivation of virtues. In the *Tevijja Sutta* of the *Dīgha Nikāya* (The Long Discourses of the Buddha), the Buddha talked to a group of enthusiast Brahmins about these meditative practices to seek communion with the Brahma: “Then, with his heart filled with loving-kindness, he dwells suffusing one quarter, the second, the third, the fourth. Thus, he dwells suffusing the whole world, upwards, downwards, across, everywhere, always with a heart filled with loving-kindness, abundant, unbounded without hate or ill-will” (*Dīgha Nikāya, Tevijja Sutta*: 76). Similarly, he described dwelling with compassion, sympathetic joy, and equanimity (*Tevijja Sutta*: 78). The four *brahmavihāras* represent the ideal way for connecting to all and managing social relationships. Loving-kindness begins with oneself and extends to preceptor, friends, neutral persons, and even enemies. Compassion, originating from loving-kindness, involves recognising others’ suffering as one’s own, extending even to animals (Finnigan). Sympathetic joy is the ability to rejoice in others’ joy, and equanimity promotes impartiality and non-judgement in all interactions. These four sublime states build a theoretical and meditative framework with significant transformative potential for individual and collective well-being through moral development and emotional balance. From September 2019 to March 2020, the author participated in an online *brahmavihāra* meditation course guided by Ven. Dhammapala Bhikkhu. The sessions focused on nurturing the four divine states through meditative phrases such as ‘may all beings be happy, healthy, and peaceful’ (for loving-kindness), ‘may all beings be free from all kinds of suffering, mental and physical’ (for compassion), ‘may all beings rejoice in others’ joy’ (for sympathetic joy), and ‘may all beings be equanimous’ (for equanimity). This regular practice deepened ethical awareness and embodied the principles of compassion and interconnectedness. Hence compassion functions alongside the

other *brahmavihāra*, rooted in loving-kindness and blooming in sympathetic joy and equanimity. To fully develop empathy, the mind first cultivates goodwill, then learns rejoice in others' joy, and finally sustains a non-judgemental attitude of indifference. "Besides being best cultivated based on a well-established foundation in *mettā*, compassion finds its complements in the remaining two *brahmavihāras*, sympathetic joy and equanimity" (Anālayo, "Compassion and Emptiness", 39). There is a strong link between the meditative cultivation of compassion and its expression (Anālayo, "Compassion in the *Āgamas* and *Nikāyas*", 9–10). The *Karajakāya Brahmavihāra Sutta* (AN 10.5.1.9) describes this process as radiating compassion in all directions. As this practice deepens, self-centredness and ego-based beliefs fade. Ho et al. (3) describe compassionate practice as a transformative path where individuals abandon narrow boundaries, engaging more empathetically with others, even in conflict situations.

In Buddhism, as mentioned in the *Abhidhamma*, compassion is intricately related to the understanding of the three worlds (*triloka*) and the mental features of abstinences (*virati*) and illimitable (*appamāna*). These ideas emphasise the moral and spiritual foundations of the Buddhist compassion in allaying suffering of oneself and others. The Buddhist doctrine of dependent arising states that individuals are responsible for their actions: present conditions stem from the past, and that present actions determine our future condition. According to karma, one's *kuśala* (wholesome) and *akuśala* (unwholesome) deeds determine rebirth across any of the 31 realms of existences (Bodhi, "A Comprehensive Manual of *Abhidhamma*", 186), grouped into three broad realms (*triloka*): the realm of sense desires (*kāmaloka*), the realm of form (*rūpaloka*), and formless or immaterial realm (*arūpaloka*). The lowest, *kāmaloka*, includes eleven states, with human rebirth as the fifth. *Rūpaloka* is a peaceful realm attained through wisdom and moral conduct, inhabited by the Brahmas. *Arūpaloka*, the most subtle, consists of formless consciousness, attained through *jhanas* or mental absorption.

The realm of sense desires consists of two planes– woeful (*apayabhūmi*) and blissful (*kāmasugatibhūmi*) (Bodhi, "A

Comprehensive Manual of Abhidhamma”, 189-191). The woeful plane is fourfold, hell, the animal kingdom, the sphere of *petas* (ghosts), and the host of *asuras* (titans). Above this plane are the lowest heavens or blissful sensuous plane, viz., i) the human realm, ii) four great kings, iii) thirty-three gods, iv) *yama* gods, v) delightful realm, vi) gods who rejoice in their creation, and vii) the gods who lord over the creations of others. In the human realm, individuals are drawn to sensory desires – sights, sounds, smells, tastes, and touch – which lead to attachment and suffering. Here, Buddhist compassion works as an antidote to the self-centredness, desire, and attachment. It encourages practitioners to understand the nature of (not-)self and its state of bondage (*samsāra*), perpetuated by the interplay of causes and conditions (dependent arising). Suffering, in this view, is not inherent but arises due to attachment and ignorance. The Buddha emphasised that liberation follows from cultivating boundless states that transcend the ego-bound self. Realising emptiness, where the self lacks inherent existence, through true compassion leads to liberation (Anālayo, “Compassion and Emptiness”, 83). Compassion, therefore, serves as both a response to suffering and transformative practice that dismantles the false idea of a substantial self, revealing the interconnected nature of all existences.

This compassionate alignment helps individuals transcend the narrow boundary of self-interest and practice ethical abstinences (*virati*) to prevent harming others. The *viratis* are beautiful mental factors or *cetasikas* that encourage deliberate restraint in speech, action, and livelihood (Bodhi, “A Comprehensive Manual of Abhidhamma”, 88-89). The three types of *viratis*—right speech (*sammavāca*), right action (*sammakammānta*), and right livelihood (*samma-ajiva*)—reflect the mind’s aversion to wrongdoing and are marked by non-transgression in conduct, speech, and livelihood. These wholesome mental factors guide individuals on the path of spiritual progress, peaceful coexistence by restraining evil deeds. *Appamāna* (illimitable) refers to the four *brahmavihāras* because they extend towards all beings. However, only compassion and

sympathetic joy are classified as *cetasikas* under this category (Bodhi, “A Comprehensive Manual of Abhidhamma”, 89) because they directly respond to others’ suffering unlike loving-kindness and equanimity. Cultivating these illimitable attitudes, particularly compassion, fosters a boundless mental state that transcends the barriers between self and others, promoting universal empathy. The notion of rebirths within the three realms along with abstinences and illimitable is closely tied to compassion. For all beings share the cycle of rebirth, each individual has likely experienced life as an animal, ghost, hell-being, or god, and may be do so again. Recognising this common journey encourages compassion for all sentient beings (Harvey, “An Introduction to Buddhist Ethics”, 29).

#### **4. Buddhist *Karunā* and Contemporary Moral Consciousness**

Rooted in the Buddha’s early teachings, compassion has evolved from an individual spiritual pursuit into the foundation of societal and ethical consciousness—shaping literature, motivating historical figures and movements, and transcending religious and cultural divides to influence global morality. The Buddha emphasized compassion as an antidote to perennial suffering in the cycle of rebirth, as demonstrated in early texts, the *Pali Canon*, and *Mahāyāna sūtras*. His core teachings—the Four Noble Truths, the Noble Eightfold Path, and dependent origination highlight the interconnectedness of all beings and the relation between individual emancipation and the welfare of others (Harvey, “An Introduction to Buddhist Ethics”, 38–39). *Pancasīla* (five precepts), though framed as abstentions (from killing, stealing, sexual misconduct, lying, and intoxicants), embody compassion in their essence, nurturing positive virtues. Historical figures like Ananda, the Buddha’s close disciple, demonstrated compassion through his selfless service to the sangha, advocacy of gender inclusivity in the sangha, and comforting the anguished, such as guiding Cunda through remorse after offering pork meal to the Buddha (*Dīgha Nikāya, Mahāparinibbāna Sutta* 4.42; Hecker). The *Jātaka* tales such as *Sasa Jātaka* (Cowell, Vol III, 34–37) and *Vassantara Jātaka* (Cowell, Vol VI, 246–305) portray the Buddha’s



past lives as personification of compassion, kindness, and forgiveness. These stories reiterate generosity and compassion as a moral value that transcends self-interests. This legacy continues to encourage ethical ideals globally.

Compassion took on an extended role with the emergence of *Bodhisattova* models in *Mahayana* tradition. In *Bodhipathapradipa* (The Lamp for the Path to Enlightenment), Atisha classifies beings into three categories based on their motivation: lesser, middling, and superior. Superior beings follow the Bodhisattva path, aiming to end the suffering of all beings alongside their own. This path involves developing bodhicitta—the Awakening Mind—arising from profound compassion (*karuṇā*) for the suffering of others (Williams 194–195). Mahāyāna places compassion at its base, viewing it as the motivating force of this tradition. Nagarjuna, the founder of the *Madhyamaka* school, links compassion to his central doctrines of emptiness and interdependence. For him, the meditative path involves refuting the belief in intrinsic existence (*svabhāva*), conceptually and then directly, leading to the non-conceptual insight into the emptiness of all things (Williams 80–81). From this understanding, compassion emerges naturally as an altruistic response to the suffering caused by attachment to the illusory self. Through understanding and practice, compassion guides the meditator along the Bodhisattva stages (*bhūmis*), culminating in Buddhahood, where wisdom and compassion are unified. Nagarjuna redefines compassion as a boundless and unbiased, rooted in the rejection of intrinsic existence and the interdependence of all beings (Garfield 226–229, 231–237). This redefinition positions compassion as a collective responsibility, not just a personal virtue. This idea resonates with Zen, where compassion is expressed through everyday actions and seen as inseparable from wisdom. It also echoes in the Dalai Lama’s teachings, which articulate compassion as key to global ethics and interconnectedness. These perspectives continue to shape contemporary moral consciousness, demonstrating compassion as essential to addressing suffering at individual, societal, and global levels.

Zen Buddhism views compassion not as a doctrinal study

but as an extension of direct experiential insight into emptiness and non-duality (Kim Ch 3). Compassion arises through the practitioners' experience of interconnectedness (zazen). For Dogen Zenji, a key figure of Zen, enlightenment and compassionate actions are inseparable. It is practice-realization. Drawing on *Mahāyāna* idea of "skillful means", Dogen highlights the compassionate and adaptive strategies of the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas to guide others toward enlightenment. This concept bridges self and others, uniting individual awakening with collective liberation, thus affirming the unity of wisdom and compassion in Zen practice (Kim Ch 2; Wol 331–337). Similarly, Dalai Lama promotes compassion as the foundation of global ethics, highlighting its role in nurturing peace and harmony (Nandhikkara and Rao 151). For him, compassion involves commitment, responsibility, and respect for others alongside a non-violent and non-aggressive mindset (Dalai Lama and Cutler 114). It develops inner peace and resilience by deepening empathy and connection. As he notes, generating compassion means willingly accepting others' suffering for a higher purpose, creating a sense of connectedness and a willingness to help (Dalai Lama and Cutler, 117–118). His teachings shape universal compassion as both spiritual practice and a foundation for a peaceful and accommodating global society.

Thich Nhat Hanh, founder of engaged Buddhism, placed compassion at the heart of his philosophy. He defines it as a mental state and process that seeks to alleviate others' suffering. It arises when one deliberately accepts others' suffering. Thich Nhat Hahn integrated wisdom and morality, viewing enlightenment and compassion as inseparable. "Seeing and understanding are the elements of liberation that bring about love and compassion" (Nhat Hanh, "Peace in Every Step", 62). To develop understanding, individuals have to practice looking at all beings compassionately (Nhat Hahn, "Peace in Every Step", 80; "The Heart of the Buddha's Teaching"). For him, compassion is a verb—it must be achieved through action. His teachings emphasize that understanding our interconnectedness is not abstract theory but a call to act against social disparity, injustice,

violence, and environmental degradation. This aligns with the *Gitā* concept of *Dharma* and *karma*, where *Dharma* embodies one’s righteous duties and *karma* forms a vital law of cause and effect (Muniapan and Satpathy 178). In *The Heart of the Buddha’s Teaching*, Thich Nhat Hanh introduces “deep listening” as a model of compassion, which removes suffering by allowing space for empathy and understanding.

The enduring legacy of Buddhist compassion shapes modern moral discourses providing insights into moral responses (interconnectedness, empathy, and the importance of alleviating suffering) across individual, social, professional, and global crises, including climate change. It bridges traditional wisdom with contemporary ethical challenges. As discussed, clinging to abiding self-gratifying identity contradicts impermanent nature of reality. Letting go of this attachment fosters awareness of not-self, promoting objectivity, compassion, and a reduced self-centredness. This shift supports a moral consciousness rooted in concern for all beings and the removal of suffering. Fry and Vu (41) suggest this understanding enhances self-reflection and reduces ego-centric propensities, increasing ethical sensitivity. Vu and Burton (428, 431, 440) describes this as self-decentralization, which supports moral reasoning through the practices of skillful means and the middle way.

Compassion, aligned with not-self, emerges as a reasoned, wise response embedded in an ethical framework dedicated to alleviating suffering (Strauss et al. 17; Sharma 282–290). Modern compassion-based therapy and Buddhist insight meditation emphasize not-self as key to nurturing moral consciousness, non-violence and resilience (Gilbert et al. 1019). Madden et al (690–691) show that promoting a de-centred self, enhances organizational compassion, echoing Buddhist teachings against self-interest (Kanov et al. 808, 811, 812). Practices such as *Brahmavihāra* meditation enhance ethical decision-making in leaders, reducing fear, anger, and biases, thereby benefiting both employees and management (Jayawardena-Willis et al. 151). Modern mindfulness-based cognitive therapy also shows how compassion integrated with self-compassion improves mental

resilience and helps navigating the landscape of suffering more effectively (Dunne and Manheim 2377–2379; Feldman and Kuyken 143). In the context of climate crisis-borne suffering, Buddhist compassion—highlighting interconnectedness and equanimity—extends to ecological concerns, persuading collective moral action (Cairns et al. 97–102).

## 5. Conclusion

The evolution of Buddhist compassion from its origin in early Buddhist teachings to its influence on global moral movements highlights its transformative power as a global moral legacy. The Buddha's teachings, historical disciples and followers, contemporary figures like Thich Nhat Hanh and His Holiness the 14<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama, Buddhist Sanghas and organizations including Buddhist meditation teachers have demonstrated that compassion is a moral and practical response to suffering or challenges of the modern world. Its practical use has proved that it is not merely a solitary practice for individual liberation but also a way to develop an empathetic attitude toward all beings, shaping an organized worldview that is relevant in addressing today's complex social and ethical issues. It reinforces an important aspect of compassion that it is fundamentally a practice rather than a theoretical concept. As said earlier, compassion is a verb, an action, that discloses its full significance through application in real-life situations. The present study, constrained by its theoretical scope, stresses the need for more scientific research and quantitative investigations into the practical dimensions of Buddhist compassion, which remain beyond its purview.

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