



Sympathy, Empathy, and Apathy in the Light of the Buddha's Teaching

In modern language, we often use three words: sympathy, empathy, and apathy. These words describe how we respond to the suffering of others. Although these are English terms, their meanings can be clearly understood through the teachings of the Buddha in the Pāli Canon.

The Buddha spoke deeply about suffering (*dukkha*) and about how we should relate to other beings. When we compare sympathy, empathy, and apathy with the Dhamma, we can see which attitudes lead to spiritual growth and which lead to unwholesome states.

Sympathy: Feeling Sorry for Others

Sympathy means feeling sorry for someone who is suffering. We see their pain, and we feel sadness for them. This is not wrong. It shows that our heart is not cruel. However, sympathy can still be limited.

Sometimes sympathy includes sorrow and grief. When we become too emotionally affected, our mind loses balance. The Buddha explained how ordinary people react to pain in the *Samyutta Nikāya*:

***"So dukkhāya vedanāya phuṭṭho samāno socati
kilamati paridevati."***

"When touched by painful feeling, he sorrows,
grieves, and laments." (SN 36.6)

This shows that sorrow is a natural reaction, but it is not yet wisdom. If sympathy becomes too much sorrow, it can disturb the mind. Instead of helping others wisely, we may become weak or confused.

Therefore, sympathy is a good beginning, but it is not yet the highest quality taught by the Buddha.

Empathy and Compassion (*Karuṇā*)

Empathy is deeper than sympathy. It means we feel with others. We understand their suffering as if it were our own. In Buddhism, this quality is called *karuṇā*, compassion.

The Buddha praised compassion as one of the **Four Divine Abidings** (*Brahmavihāra*): *mettā* (loving-kindness), *karuṇā* (compassion), *muditā* (sympathetic joy), and *upekkhā* (equanimity). In the *Dīgha Nikāya*, the Buddha taught how to develop these qualities by spreading them to all beings in every direction.

In the *Karaṇīya Mettā Sutta*, it says:

***"Mātā yathā niyaṃ puttāṃ āyusā ekaputtam
anurakkhe,
Evampi sabbabhūtesu mānasaṃ bhāvaye
aparimāṇaṃ."***

"As a mother would protect her only child with her
life, even so should one develop a boundless mind
toward all beings."

This is not only sympathy. It is deep empathy filled with care and protection. It means we open our hearts to all beings without discrimination.



Bhante P. Seelananda
Chief Resident Monk,
Spiritual Advisor
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At the same time, Buddhist compassion is guided by wisdom. The Buddha reminded us in the Aṅguttara Nikāya:

“Kammassakā, bhikkhave, sattā; kammadāyādā, kammayonī, kammabandhū, kammaṇṇisaraṇā.”

“Beings are owners of their kamma, heirs of their kamma...” (AN 5.57)

This teaching helps us understand that while we feel compassion, we also know that each being experiences the results of their actions. Because of this wisdom, compassion does not become attachment or despair. We help others, but we remain balanced.

Apathy: Indifference and Delusion

Apathy means not caring about others’ suffering. It is indifference or emotional coldness. In Buddhism, this state is connected with *moha* (delusion) or sometimes *dosa* (aversion).

The Buddha did not encourage indifference. Instead, he encouraged us to reflect that all beings fear pain and death. In the Dhammapada, it says:

***“Sabbe tasanti daṇḍassa, sabbe bhāyanti maccuno;
Attānaṃ upamaṃ katvā, na haneyya na ghātaye.”***
(Dhp 129)

“All tremble at violence; all fear death.

Comparing oneself with others, one should neither kill nor cause to kill.”

This verse teaches empathy. We should compare others with ourselves. Just as we fear pain, others also fear pain. When we understand this deeply, apathy cannot remain in the heart.

However, we must clearly understand that *upekkhā* (equanimity) is not apathy. Equanimity is wisdom and balance. Apathy is ignorance and a lack of concern. Equanimity sees suffering clearly but does not become disturbed. Apathy ignores suffering.

The Balanced Heart in the Buddha’s Teaching

The Buddha always taught the Middle Way. In our emotional life, this means we should avoid two extremes: too much sorrow and cold indifference. If sympathy becomes overwhelming grief, the mind becomes weak. If we do not care at all, the heart becomes hard. The ideal way is compassion supported by wisdom and balanced by equanimity.

After his enlightenment, the Buddha first thought that the Dhamma was deep and difficult to understand. But then great compassion arose in him for beings “with little dust in their eyes.” Because of compassion, he decided to teach the Dhamma. This story is recorded in the *Vinaya Piṭaka*. This shows us that true wisdom does not lead to indifference. It leads to compassionate action.

Conclusion

Sympathy, empathy, and apathy are three different responses to suffering. According to the Buddha’s teaching, sympathy is a good beginning, but it is not enough. Apathy is unwholesome and rooted in delusion. The highest response is wise compassion — *karuṇā* — supported by *mettā* and balanced by *upekkhā*.

When we practice loving-kindness and compassion meditation, our heart becomes soft but also strong. We understand suffering clearly, but we do not become overwhelmed. We care for others, knowing that all beings are subject to *kamma* and impermanence.

In this way, the Buddha’s teaching transforms our emotions into part of the path to liberation. Compassion guided by wisdom becomes not only a feeling, but a noble quality leading toward *Nibbāna*.



STEPPING INTO 2026 WITH BLISS AND CLARITY

"We need to have a plan but not the worry." Bhante Seelananda

On the sunny morning of 1st January 2026, members and devotees gathered joyfully in the Shrine Hall of Mangala Vihara Buddhist Temple (MV) to usher in the first day of 2026. The congregation came together to participate in the temple's New Year Blessing Service and to make meritorious offerings (dāna) to the Saṅgha, setting a meaningful tone for the year ahead.

Led by Bhante Seelananda, MV's Chief Resident monk, together with the resident and invited Bhantes, the session began with veneration of the Triple Gem. This was followed by an uplifting and thoughtful New Year address delivered by Bhante Seelananda.

In his talk, Bhante shared a meaningful story from the Jataka tales - no. 538 of Prince Temiya. As a child, Prince Temiya, displayed an unwavering determination and profound patience in his aspiration for spiritual freedom, choosing renunciation over worldly power and royal privilege. To avoid the throne destined for him, the prince endured years of hardship by pretending to be crippled, deaf, and mute.

At the age of 16, his father, the king, ordered the charioteer Sunanda, to secretly end the prince's life in the forest. At the very brink of death, Prince Temiya revealed himself—radiant, strong, and resolute—stopping Sunanda from committing the grave act. Overcome with remorse and awe at the prince's radiance, Sunanda sought forgiveness and enquired about the source of his inner strength after 16 years of hardship and apparent abandonment by his royal parents. Prince Temiya explained that his resolve to take the path of renunciation arose as he saw the danger of attachment to worldly power and privilege. It was this clarity of purpose that sustained him through years of silent perseverance.



Figure: Welcome address by Bhante Seelananda

This story demonstrates the unwavering conviction of Prince Temiya through years of hardships without regrets for the past or worry for the future. Drawing from this inspiring account, Bhante reminded everyone of the importance to have a plan for the future but not to be burdened by worries. He encouraged all to live in the present and cherish each encounter. Reminding all that the person we are speaking to is the most important person at that moment.



Figure: Blessings chanting by the Sangha



Figure: Distribution of holy water and 5-colour thread



Figure: Devotees queueing up mindfully during the distribution

Following the motivating Dhamma talk, the Sangha chanted blessings for the devotees. Holy water and five-colour threads were then distributed in an orderly manner. The morning programme continued with the Morning Puja service, followed by the offering of Sanghika Dāna and transference of merits.

The New Year gathering concluded on a warm and communal note, with devotees enjoying a simple lunch of vegetarian bee hoon and laksa. With hearts uplifted and minds gently steadied, the community stepped into 2026 guided by clarity and quiet confidence.



Figure: Sanghika Dana and transference of merits



Figure: Morning Pujā Service

DELIVERING BLISSFUL CNY BLESSINGS TO THE HEART OF HOMES



Figure: CNY Address by Bhante Seelananda

go of anger, renewal takes place within. Bhante concluded by encouraging the congregation to cultivate one good habit in the new year — a simple but powerful step that will lead to prosperity and well-being.

The Sangha lunch dana followed the morning Buddha Puja. The meal was prepared by the students of Myanmar Dhamma Studies and devotees, who readily stepped forward to serve as many regular kitchen volunteers were occupied with their Chinese New Year (CNY) commitments. After the offering, devotees assembled once again in the Shrine Hall to receive Bhante's blessings. CNY goodie bags were then distributed to all participants, adding a festive touch to the meaningful gathering.

The Lunar Year of the Fire Horse commenced on a cool, rainy morning. Yet the wet weather did not dampen the joyful spirits of devotees who gathered at the Shrine Hall to usher in the New Year on an auspicious note. The session began with Buddha Puja at 11 a.m., followed by an inspiring address by Chief Resident Monk, Bhante Seelananda.

Bhante reminded everyone that true renewal begins in the mind and heart. When the mind is pure and calm, happiness naturally follows. A person with a good heart who performs wholesome deeds will reap good fortune. On this celebratory occasion, Bhante encouraged us to express gratitude to our family members, speak kindly, and listen more patiently. Forgive any wrongs that others may have done to us. When one forgives and let



Figures: Our volunteers have been hard at work preparing the temple to welcome the Chinese New Year

Photo credit: Sister Janet



The CNY Blessing Service has been a time-honoured tradition of Mangala Vihara since its inception in 1960. Another noteworthy practice is the CNY House Visit. The tradition was rooted in the spirit of inclusivity from the early days, when MV's late founder, Venerable M.M. Mahaweera Maha Nayaka Thera would visit every member's home during Chinese New Year.

As the years pass, some veteran members have reduced their visits due to age and health reasons. Although many are unable to attend the CNY Blessings Puja in person, their hearts still long for the calm and uplifting blessings from Bhante. MV's CNY house visits fulfil the wishes of elderly devotees during this special season. A beautiful spiritual cycle of mutual support between the lay community and the monastic Sangha.

This year, the newsletter spoke with Brother Patrick Sng, who shared about these simple yet meaningful visits. A devoted member of MV for over 50 years, Brother Patrick is one of the regular volunteers who ferries Bhante from the temple to the homes of requesting members.

One of the visits was to his aunt's home. The spirited and joyful 90-year-old warmly welcomed Bhante into her residence. The visit lasted about 30 minutes, during which Bhante chanted sutta and verses of blessings for householders. Depending on the number of requests received, Bhante may conduct up to three visits a day.

Members and devotees can submit their requests for CNY home visits by completing a simple form . The visits usually begin on the third day of the CNY holidays, with the schedule carefully coordinated by members of the Management Committee.

Through these heartfelt house visits, the blessings of the Triple Gem continue to reach the homes — and hearts — of the faithful, carrying peace, gratitude, and renewed joy into the New Year.



Figure: (From right) Bhante Khemananda, Bhante Suneetha, Bro Patrick Sng, Sis Lucia Sng, Ho Guak Chin (88 yo) and Ho Guay Koon (93 yo)



Figure: Blessings for the householders



Figure: Recitation of sutta and blessing verses by visiting Bhante



MVYA: A New Chapter for Young Buddhist Practitioners



We are delighted to introduce Mangala Vihara Young Adults (MVYA), a new community for those aged 21 to 40+ who wish to walk the Middle Path together.

MVYA is born from a simple aspiration to create a gathering space where young adults can explore how Buddhist values can be brought into real-world practice.

In a rapidly-changing world, we seek to understand how the Dhamma can be lived meaningfully in our daily lives, whether at work, at home, or in our relationships.

None of this would be possible without the supportive ecosystem of MVBT, including the foundation laid by our founder, the late Venerable Mahāweera, the generosity of donors like the late Mdm Chew Quee Neo, and the ongoing advice and encouragement from MVBT's Management Committee, MV Chief Resident Monk Ven. Seelananda, Bhante Cakkapala and MVYA's spiritual advisers, Ven. Suneetha and Ven. Nyanika.

It is in this spirit of gratitude that we launch MVYA, hoping to continue MVBT's tradition of sharing the Dhamma in ways that are accessible, practical, and relevant to our modern lives.

A Busy Start for Us!



It has been a fruitful beginning for the Young Adults group, with two events already under our belt.

On 11 November 2025, we organised a temple visit in collaboration with the NUS Buddhist Society, where students were welcomed to Mangala Vihara.

The visit included a guided tour of the temple, an introduction to its history, community and its activities, as well as a dialogue with Ven. Suneetha. It offered the university students a warm glimpse into MVBT's temple life and practice.



Shortly after, on 22 November 2025, we held our inaugural MVYA event titled "The Art of Right Speech: Navigating Your Relationships."

A panel of speakers comprising Ven. Suneetha and 4 Buddhist lay practitioners shared insights on Right Speech in the contexts of couples, work, and family, followed by breakout sessions where participants gathered in smaller groups to share experiences and support one another in an open environment.



We were deeply encouraged by the participants' reflections, including how the session inspired them to practise the four sublime qualities of loving-kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy, and equanimity in everyday conversations.

Looking Ahead

The MVYA committee now looks forward to continuing this journey of exploring how the Dhamma can be applied in our modern lives in practical, meaningful ways.

Whether you are a lifelong practitioner or newly curious about Buddhism, you are warmly invited to be part of this growing community.

If you would like to be updated on upcoming MVYA activities, please look out for our event materials at Mangala Vihara or drop us an email at mangalavihara.ya@gmail.com.





THERAVADA BUDDHISM STUDIES IN CHINESE: MAKING THE DHAMMA ACCESSIBLE TO ALL

“以经典为本，循闻思修之道，让佛法融入生活，启发智慧与慈悲，”

Sister Jina Tan, Facilitator of TBSC

Since its inception in 1960, Mangala Vihara (Buddhist Temple) has been the cornerstone of Theravada Buddhist education in Singapore. In its early years, Buddhist studies were conducted primarily in English guiding students along their path of learning and practice. In 2010, Mangala Vihara took a significant step forward by introducing the first **Theravada Buddhist Studies in Chinese (TBSC)**, opening the door for Buddhist studies to a broader Mandarin-speaking community. This marked an important milestone in making the Dhamma more accessible to students from diverse backgrounds.

The Chinese course was initiated by Mangala Vihara former resident monk – Bhante Raja with the strong support of Chairman Dr Lim Ah Swan. This pioneering move was not only historic for Mangala Vihara, but also for Theravada temples in Singapore where English had been established as the default medium of instructions. It reflects a timeless principle, that the Dhamma should be taught in a language that is clear and well understood by its audience. Indeed, in the 45 years of Buddha's missionary, the Buddha had preached in various dialects so that people from all walks of life could understand and benefit from his teaching.

Objective

TBSC class was inaugurated on 8th January 2010, with an overwhelming enrolment of 103 students ranging from 20 to 75 years old. The course aims to provide students with a strong and clear understanding of Buddhism while encouraging them to apply and practice the learnings in their daily lives and spiritual practice. It also seeks to foster a supportive and wholesome sense of camaraderie among students (Kalyāṇamittatā), nurturing lifelong values and skilful qualities grounded in the Dhamma.

About the Course

TBSC is a non-examination Mandarin-medium Buddhism Course with a structured six-year syllabus. It covers key topics such as The Life of the Buddha, the Dhamma, the Sutta, the Dhammapada, Abhidhamma, Applied Buddhism and Insight Meditation. The course is offered on a donation basis so that learning remains accessible to all. The classes are primarily conducted by volunteer lay teachers.

Classes commenced on the second Friday of January in each curriculum year. Every student receives lecture notes prepared by the teachers. In addition to weekly classes, students also participate in chanting and meditation sessions. They are encouraged to practise and cultivate the qualities of Compassion, Truth, and Loving-kindness in their daily lives.

Benefits

Over the past 15 years, countless students from all walks of life have benefitted immensely from the Chinese studies programme. Many have gained a deeper and clearer understanding of Buddhism, moving beyond purely ritualistic or superstitious practices towards a more grounded and meaningful appreciation of the Dhamma. The course helps to cultivate wholesome values, broaden perspectives on life, and promote mindfulness in everyday activities. Many graduates continue their journey of service by returning to Mangala Vihara as volunteer teachers, joyfully giving back to the community, walking an inspiring and meritorious path from student to teacher.

May Theravada Buddhism flourish among the Mandarin speaking population in Singapore.

To find out more about this course, please contact the secretariat at +65 6744 4285 or email secretary@mv.sg



Figures: Camaraderie among students from all walks of life, coming together to learn the Dhamma. Lessons are conducted by volunteer lay teachers.



Figures: Classes are conducted every Friday on level 2 and 3. Pūjā service is held before the lessons.



Photo credit: TBSC



April 2026

- 05 Apr - Cheng Beng Day: Transferring of Merits

May 2026

- 01 May - Sila Samadana (Precepts Observation [Meditation] Retreat)
- 30 May - Vesak Eve: Mahasamaya Sutta Chanting
- 31 May - Vesak Day

June 2026

- 06 Jun - Memorial Day: Ven M M Mahaweera Mahanayaka Thero & Ven Dr P Gnanaram Anunayaka Thero

A Journey Beyond Borders: Mangala Vihara's Inaugural Overseas Meditation Retreat



Introduction

From 14 to 19 December 2025, Mangala Vihara (Buddhist Temple) held its inaugural overseas Meditation Retreat, a 5-day, 6-night programme at Song Yan Resort in Bukit Tinggi, Malaysia. It was an honour to have Venerable Bhante U Dhammasara, a highly respected Myanmar Theravāda Buddhist monk, renowned for his teaching of Samatha (calmness) and Vipassanā (insight) meditation, to lead the retreat. He was joined by MV resident monks, Bhante Cakkapala and Bhante Nyanika, together with 47 participants for this meritorious undertaking.

Bhante Dhammasara received his higher ordination in 1994 and underwent extensive meditation training under the guidance of Venerable Pa-Auk Tawya Sayadaw Bhaddanta Āciṇṇa (Sayadawgyi) at Pa-Auk Tawya Monastery in Mawlamyine. Since 2007, Bhante has been teaching meditation at various Pa-Auk centres: from 2007 to 2008 at Pa-Auk Tawya, Thanlyin (Yangon); during the 2009 vassa at Pa-Auk Tawya, Pa-An, Karen State; from July 2010 to June 2012 at Pa-Auk Tawya, Thanlyin; and from July 2012 onwards at Pa-Auk Tawya, Rempang, Batam.

The Preparation

The first overseas meditation retreat organised by Mangala Vihara was thoughtfully planned and organised by the temple's designated retreat organisers. Preparations began as early as May 2025, from surveying shortlisted venues to fine-tuning the daily schedules with the resident venerable. Every detail was carefully considered to ensure that each participant would have fulfilling retreat experience.

Registration opened in July 2025. Each participant contributed a nominal fee, that covered accommodation, meals, two-way travel and group insurance. A comprehensive briefing session was held on 30 November 2025 to familiarise participants with the retreat guidelines and logistics.

In addition, Bhante Dhammasara personally conducted pre-retreat meditation instruction sessions via Zoom on 5 and 6 December. These sessions provided practical guidance on meditation methods and encouraged participants to begin their practice ahead of the retreat.

About Song Yan

Set amidst tranquil and scenic surroundings, Song Yan Resort provided an ideal environment for the five-day Samatha (calmness) meditation programme. The pristine 22-acre eco-friendly resort opened in 2010, is located 1500 feet above sea level in the heart of Bukit Tinggi, just a 30 minutes' drive from Kuala Lumpur. Song Yan is well known for promoting a healthful vegetarian lifestyle, environmental conservation and organic farming. Retreatants were nourished with thoughtfully prepared meals made from freshly harvested ingredients from the resort's own farm.

During the retreat

On the day of departure, retreatants gathered as early as 6:00 am at Mangala Hall. During registration, lanyards containing travel and rooming details were distributed to each person. Two large coaches were arranged to ferry everyone from Singapore to the resort, with volunteers assisting in loading luggages, meditation mats, and other requisites. A Buddha statue from MV Sīmā House was carefully hand-carried for veneration during the retreat's pūjā services.

The group made a stop for an early lunch at a well-loved local dim sum restaurant in Yong Peng – Restoran One Plus One. The restaurant owner kindly arranged non-meat takeaways for vegetarian retreatants. The group arrived at the resort around 4:00 pm. After settling into their lodges and cottages, retreatants gathered for dinner at 6pm at the main dining hall.

That evening, everyone assembled at the level-two assembly hall of the main house for the first Dhamma talk. Bhante Dhammasara delivered an insightful and methodical discourse on the Noble Eightfold Path, setting a clear and inspiring foundation for the days ahead.

Over the next four days, all the retreatants engaged in an intensive yet fulfilling Samatha meditation practice. Each day began at 4:30 am, with alternating sessions of one to one and a half hour of sitting meditation and half-hour mindful walking, interspersed with meal and personal breaks. The day concluded with an evening Dhamma talk, during which Bhante Dhammasara elaborated on the progressive steps towards deep concentration. During the retreat, practitioners also benefited from group and individual interview sessions, where they could clarify doubts and receive direct guidance from Bhante.

Daily pūjā services were led by Bhante Cakkapala in the early morning, before lunch, and in the evening. Retreatants observed the Eight Precepts and were supported with nourishing organic breakfasts and lunches prepared by Song Yan Resort. Participants were also blessed with many opportunities to practise dāna, offering meals to the Saṅgha and serving fellow Eight Precepts observers.

Situated in the highlands, the resort experienced a cool and often misty climate, with early morning temperatures dropping to as low as 20 degrees Celsius. On one fair-weather afternoon, retreatants enjoyed a mindful Dhamma walk around the resort grounds. On the eve of the final day, participants formally expressed their appreciation to the Saṅgha through a dedicated dāna (offering) session.

On the last day, retreatants collectively sought forgiveness from the Saṅgha bringing the retreat to a meaningful close. The conclusion was marked by the warm generosity of the resort owner, who treated both the Saṅgha and retreatants to a delicious lunch and a durian feast before everyone set off on the journey home.

With Gratitude

The Retreat Organising Committee would like to express its heartfelt gratitude to Venerable Bhante U Dhammasara for gracing the retreat and for his immersive, generous, and unreserved teaching and guidance. Deep appreciation is also extended to Bhante Cakkapala and Bhante Nyanika for their unwavering support of all lay participants throughout the retreat. Sincere thanks are also extended to all volunteers and kappiyas for ensuring the smooth running of the programme, with special appreciation to the

team at Song Yan Resort for their warm hospitality, kind support, and generosity.

Finally, to all the participants, thank you for your dedication, diligence, and wholehearted involvement throughout the retreat. May all be well and happy, and may you make great strides in your practice.



Photo Credits: Brother Ryan Sim, Brother Low Chee Kang and Sister Gladys Ng