

## The Understanding and Practice of *Karuna* from Selected Buddhist Institutions

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### Abstract

This study explores the understanding of *karuṇā* (compassion) among selected Buddhist institutions in the Klang Valley, Malaysia. Using qualitative methods, including in-depth interviews and focus group discussions, the research engaged leaders, committees, and volunteers from Sam Poh Thong Temple and the Shah Alam Buddhist Society. Findings reveal that participants conceptualize *karuṇā* as a universal compassion, a core Buddhist teaching, and an integral element of the Four Brahmavihāras. Their interpretations emphasize its association with wisdom (*prajñā*) and its cultivation through meditation, reflection, and lived experience. The institutions articulate *karuṇā* not only as an ethical principle but also as a guiding framework for community engagement, family well-being, and environmental consciousness. Variations in depth of understanding were noted, with leaders demonstrating more comprehensive knowledge, while volunteers often relied on personal experiences or external learning. Nevertheless, across both institutions, *karuṇā* was consistently regarded as central to Buddhist identity and as a transformative value for fostering harmony and reducing suffering in society. This research contributes to a deeper comprehension of how Buddhist institutions in Malaysia internalize and articulate the meaning of compassion within their religious and social contexts.

## 1. Introduction

This paper investigates how *karuṇā*, a Sanskrit term commonly translated as compassion or mercy, is understood and practised within two Buddhist institutions located in Malaysia's Klang Valley. In Buddhist thought, *karuṇā* is not a passive feeling but an action-oriented virtue; it derives from the Sanskrit root *kara*, meaning "to do" or "to make," and therefore emphasises a commitment to actively alleviating suffering. Theravāda Buddhism identifies *karuṇā* as one of the four brahmavihāras (divine abodes) together with *mettā* (loving-kindness), *mudita* (sympathetic joy) and *upekkha* (equanimity). The Buddha taught that cultivating these states purifies the mind and leads to happiness in this life and favourable rebirths. Unlike *mettā*, which aims at creating happiness for others, *karuṇā* focuses on removing the suffering of living beings. Understanding *karuṇā* as proactive compassion lays the philosophical foundation for the social work undertaken by Buddhist

organisations today. *Karuna* is primarily the pathos of compassion redressing human sorrow, which recognize the fundamental suffering of individual existence, the equal love for all beings, and the practice of substituting other sufferers for oneself. (Smith, 2008, p. 124) Therefore, the meaning of *karuna* can be understood here by grasping the gist of suffering in Buddhism.

Klang Valley is the political and economic centre of Peninsular Malaysia, encompassing the federal capital Kuala Lumpur and surrounding towns in Selangor. It is characterised by high population density, rapid urban development and a mosaic of ethnic and religious communities. Within this region, Ampang and Shah Alam serve as the bases for SPTT and SABS respectively. Ampang hosts a significant Chinese-Malaysian population and thus provides a receptive environment for a Chinese Mahāyāna Buddhist temple like SPTT. Shah Alam, a planned city, is home to diverse communities and functions as the state capital of Selangor. The urban landscape of Klang Valley shapes the outreach strategies of both institutions: they operate within multicultural neighbourhoods where interfaith interaction is frequent and where social services are in high demand. Understanding this geographical backdrop is crucial for contextualising the institutions' activities and their approach to compassion.

This study examines the ways in which Sam Poh Thong Temple (SPTT) in Ampang and the Shah Alam Buddhist Society (SABS) embody this virtue in their teachings and community programmes. Located in the urban and suburban landscape of Klang Valley, both institutions have developed distinctive activities that translate ancient doctrines into contemporary social action. By analysing interviews, focus groups and participant observations, the chapter highlights how monastic leaders, committee members and volunteers interpret *karuṇā* and implement it in realms ranging from community outreach and family education to environmental stewardship and interfaith collaboration. The research thus offers a lens into how Buddhist ethics can be operationalised in modern Malaysia.

## 2. Methodology

### 2.1 Research design

This study adopted a qualitative case study design.

### 2.2 Participants

Six participants were purposively selected from two institutions.

**Table 1** Participant Information

Participant	Role/Position	Institution	Mode of Interview	Date
Venerable Kan	Sing Abbess	SPTT	In-person	17 Jan 2022
Ms. Xuen	Koo Ying Teacher	SPTT	Online (Teams)	24 Jan 2022
Mr. Hong	Chua Wen Volunteer	SPTT	Online (Teams)	18 Mar 2022
Mr. Onn	Chum Let COO	SABS	Focus group	20 Mar 2022
Mr. Chai	Committee Member	SABS	Focus group	20 Mar 2022
Ms. Yeoh	Kimberly Volunteer/PhD student	SABS	Online (Teams)	12 May 2022

### 2.3 Data collection

Interviews and a focus group were conducted between January and May 2022. Sessions were recorded, transcribed, and coded in ATLAS.ti.

### 2.4 Data analysis

Thematic analysis combined pre-set codes and emergent codes. Themes were validated through comparison between participants and institutions.

## 3. Result

This category offers detail information on the understanding of *karuna* from the selected Buddhist institutions. There are four themes under this category. To examine the understanding of *karuna* from the participants, it is

critical to grasp the meaning or definition of *karuna* at first, which will be discussed in theme 1. Apart from that, the analysis in this section embraces understanding of *karuna* on three outlooks which are community, family and animals and environment, which are included in theme 2, 3 and 4 respectively. Through this, data presented have precisely focused on the key themes demonstrating selected Buddhist institutions' understanding on the concept of *karuna* which is also meant to examine participants' understanding on it.

### 3.1 Theme 1: Definition of Karuna

According to the information gathered from participants and the data that is currently accessible, Buddhist institutions are thought to have a thorough understanding of the meaning behind the notion of *karuna*. The researcher had analysed it in a network structure, as is shown in figure 1, to provide a clearer visual of the participants' interpretations of what *karuna* meant:

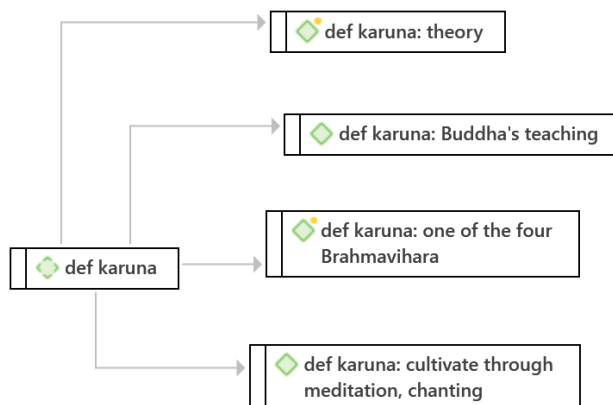


Figure 1 The Main Points of Definition of *Karuna* from Buddhist Institutions.

As seen in the network above, there are four main points extracted from the transcriptions of the participants on the definition of *karuna*. The first main point is *karuna* is a theory, which means compassion in the English translation. As explained by Venerable Sing Kan in a lengthy explanation;

*Karuna* is a Pali word and a Sanskrit word. Same spelling. For the Mahayanist, we refer to the Sanskrit language. Of course, for the Theravada its more on the Pali. So *karuna* here can be in Pali and Sanskrit. So *karuna* means compassion. Compassion in Chinese we called *sefei*. It's a universal compassion whereas there is no discrimination. When we see people suffer, we don't say that I only help the Chinese not the Malays. Therefore, it is universal. Because there is no discrimination. If there is discrimination that is not purely compassion. As for example, Malaysians which is in Selangor affected by flood. So, you see, Buddhist also went in, and other non-Buddhist organizations also went in. Recently we went to Hi-com, and distributed mattresses and majority affected are Malays, we don't mind. So, compassion is when people suffer, we try to help them release their suffering, whether its material of whatever, we try to lessen the suffering. So that is compassion. (Venerable Sing Kan, personal communication, January 17, 2022)

This signifies the meaning of *karuna* and its importance in Buddhism, as agreed by Teacher Chua which he stated that, "*Karuna* if direct translate means compassion. So, compassion is basically an act or providing someone happiness by removing or even solving, I think its removing someone's suffering. So, this is the meaning of compassion." (Chua Wen Hong, personal communication, March 18, 2022) On the same note, Mr. Chai comments on *karuna* being a theory and brings the meaning of compassion. He states that,

"So *karuna* refers to compassion. What do I understand from compassion is like mercy, compass not only your loves, but beyond that. Not only to human beings but towards all sentient beings. Sentient beings in Buddhism context refers not only to human but to animals and other realms. We have *devas* realm, which is the Heaven realm, we also have hungry ghost realm the hell realm etc. so meaning this compassion is really deep from your heart all the way to all these sentient beings. Normally we would also say this compassion to one of our Boddhisatva, the term that we used, we address her as Guan Ying Boddhisattva, and another name is Great Compassionate Boddhisattva. So, she represents this particular value." (Chum Let Onn & Chai Woon Fu, personal communication, March 20, 2022)

There is one interesting added value on the definition of *karuna*, which has been said by Ms. Kimberly on the meaning of *karuna*, she comments that, "Over the years, especially the recent years, I have to emphasize to others, that we have to not only be kind to others but also be kind to yourself. I think compassion is where we reach certain level where you can do whatever you want and had reach your ultimate already, yet you don't stay in that environment and help others. That's how I see it." (Kimberly Yeoh, personal communication, May 11,

2022) This point highlights the meaning of *karuna* that meant not only for others but also for yourself utmost. It shows that *karuna* is when you prioritise taking care of yourself first, then after that you can practice *karuna* towards the others.”

The second main point highlighted by the Buddhist participants on the definition of *karuna* is it is one of the Buddha’s teachings. As indicated by Teacher Chua, “I think *karuna* from what I understand is the Buddha teaching that tells us to show compassion to others and showing compassion is something everyone can do. Even some of the Buddha’s teachings is quite difficult to follow, but we believe that we should show compassion to everyone.”(Chua Wen Hong, personal communication, March 18, 2022) This is significant because it shows that the idea of *karuna* is one of the Buddha’s teachings in Buddhism. As a result, it has evolved into one of the most crucial ideas in Buddhism that everyone who practises Buddhism, regardless of their denomination or sect, should understand and adhere to.

The third main point as shown in the figure above is *karuna* is one of the four *Brahmavihara*, as stated by Mr. Chai and Ms. Kimberly. The Four *Brahmavihara* are a traditional meditation subject that have been transformed and heavily appropriated by engaged Buddhists.(Chum Let Onn & Chai Woon Fu, personal communication, March 20, 2022) The *Brahmavihara*, or “Sublime Abodes,” are *metta* (loving kindness), *karuna* (compassion), *mudita* (sympathetic joy) and *upekkha* (equanimity).(Kimberly Yeoh, personal communication, May 11, 2022) Apart from that, *karuna* has also been explained in association with wisdom or is known as *prajna* in Buddhism. This has been explained by Venerable Sing Kan as follows; “*Karuna* and *prajna* is a very noble act in Buddhism, which means compassion and wisdom. Wisdom is not only knowledge. A person can be very knowledgeable, but that knowledge, that person can harm others. But when we said wisdom, there is no stain there. No stain in their intention, the mind is very clear and very wise. Knowledge is different. Knowledge can be impure. So that the difference there. Knowledge and wisdom. It’s different.”(Venerable Sing Kan, personal communication, January 17, 2022) As these two ideas are related to one another, it means that once one has attained the level of comprehension and practise of *karuna*, he would also have attained the level of *prajna*.

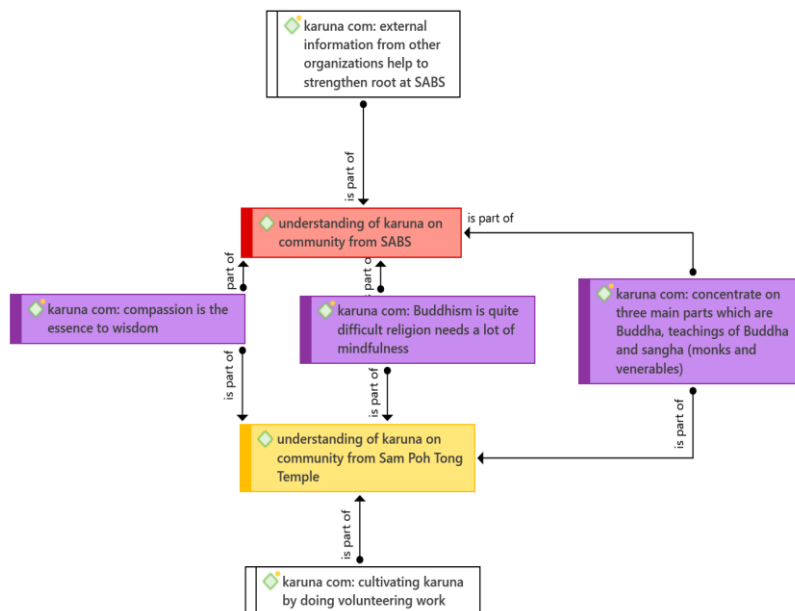
All these concepts can be attained and cultivated through the process of meditation, including *karuna*. This is explained as the fourth point in the definition of *karuna* by Venerable Sing Kan in her statement;

“Those can be cultivated through meditation. You see, meditation in the sense of you understand the nature. The nature of the phenomena of the world and yourself. We said this is the inner world, and the outer world. That realization. Therefore, we need to have concentration. And concentration can be developed through a lot of methods. We said walking meditation, chanting...So, compassion also you can meditate when there is no contact with the outside world. Because normally compassion develops when we see someone suffering. See someone in pain, we go to help. But when there is no contact, you can meditate or you visualize a person is suffering, and now I will bring thought to help when there is no contact with people. But normally it’s through seeing, is through contact. Just how in the history, how Gautama Buddha see the sufferings, when he saw the old men, sick men, the death, the corpse, and aesthetic. There is through contact when you see suffering, the same thing compassion develops when there is contact with outside world. When we see even though a very small pain... It helps to develop the compassion and to not only human being, but whatever there is life... So, we always concern about others, this is compassion.”(Venerable Sing Kan, personal communication, January 17, 2022)

This emphasizes the importance of meditation as it is one of the methods to understand and practice *karuna* in oneself. It shows that meditation will help to realize the importance of not only the concept of *karuna* but also the other concepts related with it. According to her, frequent meditation practice may increase one’s awareness of one’s own emotions as well as those of others. A stronger feeling of understanding and compassion could result from this increased awareness. Although meditation is not the sole way to cultivate *karuna*, many people find that it helps them become more empathic and compassionate in their view of the world.

### 3.2 Theme 2: Understanding of Karuna from Buddhist Institutions on Community

The Buddhist institutions are active and pro-active, where the informants disclose the profound understanding of *karuna* on community and how it should be started to develop a better sort of community with the concept of *karuna*. As a result, figure 2 below provided an illustration of the key points in this case.



**Figure 2** The Network of Main Points on the Understanding of Karuna on Community from Buddhist Institutions.

The Buddhist institutions shared three main points on the understanding of *karuna* on community as shown in the above figure in purple colour boxes. The Buddhist institutions believe that *karuna* is the essence to *prajna* (wisdom). This is the understanding that need to be understood by all Buddhists. As stated in the first theme, these two concepts are related to each other. Venerable Sing Kan explained on how to cultivate these two notions, as she states that, “How are we going to cultivate these two values? In fact, to free yourself from suffering you must have these two values. So, each time when we pray it reminds us that compassion is the essence to wisdom. Wisdom can get through meditation, through the recitation of the Buddha’s names using beads.”(Venerable Sing Kan, personal communication, January 17, 2022) It can also be practised through the realization of feeling content. As explained by Teacher Koo on one of the ideas of giving out during the event of *Pindapata*, “It’s the same thing goes to the Buddhists, like what we have is enough, we don’t need to be greedy or want more, there are so many people out there who the chance didn’t have to give like food, and more in need of it. We want to encourage them that today if we can donate, or to share, just show compassion to the others. It’s okay to not having much to donate but be as satisfy when we got the thing, food or anything that is just enough for us.”(Koo Ying Xuen, personal communication, January 25, 2022)

Another important note to highlight here on the understanding of *karuna* on community, specifically on the point of *karuna* is the essence of *prajna* as highlighted by Ms. Kimberly. She said, “We do this on a daily basis, but I personally don’t think that we sort of look up to this icon, Buddha, because when Buddha has said this, let’s try to apply because it takes wisdom as well. How they cover compassion, it should be reflected in daily life. Sometimes being a good listener can be one of the compassion acts. These are some of the compassion acts that I’m learning beside the teachings of Buddha. I am more a practical person; I prefer more practical things that I can directly apply. It’s very important for community to also practice on daily basis.”(Kimberly Yeoh, personal communication, May 11, 2022) In Buddhist philosophy, the road to enlightenment is said to require both *prajna* and *karuna*. The way that wisdom guides altruistic action is one way to understand the relationship between *karuna* and *prajna*. Hence, the interaction of *karuna* and *prajna* is visible in a straightforward act of generosity, and a simple act of kindness. When wisdom is combined with compassionate action, the result creating a more profound and meaningful impact.

The second point shared by both Buddhist institutions on the understanding of *karuna* on community is that Buddhism is quite a difficult religion which need mindfulness. On this note, Ms. Kimberly states that, “I find that Buddhism is quite a difficult religion, not everyone can take it because the first few teachings is life is all about suffering, you have to understand your pain, and the cause and effect, like you can pray more and do more good deeds to reduce your bad deeds or to give you calm and peace of mind, but then you are still going through sufferings, no one can take on your behalf, so it’s a very difficult religion because you have need to look inwards, you need to understand yourself and realize I am this type of person so how can I improve and be a better person, let’s say I want to be a kind person but you keep getting cheated and I still continue being kind so you are being not a smart person, you are not wise enough. I think from there, once we realize that we have lots of negative emotions, or we realize that we are very short tempered, and we are okay with Buddhist centre with being kind and all, but back in the corporate you are being mean to your junior without yourself aware. So, it

needs a lot of mindfulness. One way that this dharma speaker shares that you can always have a mantra like short key phrase that can be your tagline, whenever you are in panic, unconscious, start to breath heavily, anger coming up, talking to someone who don't understand, or get insulted, you don't want your reaction to come out immediately with thinking or regret, so you have a mantra or short phrase."(Kimberly Yeoh, personal communication, May 11, 2022)

This highlights that to cater to the complexity of Buddhism, one should have ways to divert himself from the weakness and thus improve yourself along the way of understanding the knowledge in Buddhism. It can be a transformational experience to engage with the complexity of Buddhism, which includes a broad spectrum of ethical, intellectual, and contemplative teachings. Within the framework of Buddhist teachings, the participant offers some strategies for navigating the path of understanding and progress, such as practicing mindfulness meditation to develop awareness of your thoughts, feelings, and actions by repeating a mantra. Many Buddhist traditions place a strong emphasis on mindfulness, which can aid in the development of an organised and focused mind.

The last point shared by both Buddhist institutions on the understanding of *karuna* on community is that both institutions concentrate on three main parts which are Buddha, teachings of Buddha and *sangha* (monks and venerable). One of the teachings is on impermanency. As stated by Venerable Sing Kan, "After the chanting we will have *dharma* talk on impermanency. Impermanency of things. Nothing is permanent. After the chanting we will talk something about Buddhas teachings of impermanence. Nothing is permanent. You and I one day we will go. Because that is the chance the opportunity when people realize what is impermanence. The body is there, we can see it is impermanence."(Venerable Sing Kan, personal communication, January 17, 2022) Teacher Koo supported this by saying that "We will focus on Buddha and talk about other Bodhisattvas as well."(Koo Ying Xuen, personal communication, January 25, 2022) Teacher Chua adds, "In SPTT we provide sharing, like a sharing session where the people will come and attend by listening to the sharing of Venerable and the understanding on the teachings of Buddha, which include *karuna*."(Chua Wen Hong, personal communication, March 18, 2022) The same comments from the representatives of SABS, as said by Mr. Chum, "One of our objectives of the SABS is to propagate the teachings of Buddha, which is our core activities. Over the years, we have been doing a lot of propagating on the teachings of Buddha, and also activities, as well as organizing many Dharma talks by the monks or layperson. All in all, is in our objective of the Buddhist society is to propagate Buddha's teachings."(Chum Let Onn & Chai Woon Fu, personal communication, March 20, 2022) Ms. Kimberly stressed on this point that, "We pay homage to three main parts, first one is Buddha, second teachings of Buddha and third is sangha which is the monks and venerable that teach the teachings of Buddha. Our main goal is to bloom and prosper our respective association."(Kimberly Yeoh, personal communication, May 11, 2022) All these explanations serve to demonstrate how crucial it is to value the three major components of Buddhism which are the Buddha, his teachings, and the sangha, since doing so will enable the Buddhist community to comprehend the meaning of *karuna* and put it into action.

The other points in the network above on the understanding of *karuna* to the community is that *karuna* can be cultivated through volunteering work. Teacher Chua believed that practising the knowledge is very important as it is wisdom, and one of the actions is by doing volunteering work. He states that, "But I think in Buddhist practice, we don't restrict in just learning, we still need to apply what we learn. So, in *karuna*-wise, what we apply in cultivating *karuna* is by doing volunteering work, because doing a volunteer work is a selfless act, we stop thinking about ourselves and start to think about others, like how can I help them, and after we help, we really hope that what we do can reduce the pain or suffering for the others."(Chua Wen Hong, personal communication, March 18, 2022) Apart from that, one crucial point shared by Ms. Kimberly on the same note is that the external information from other organizations help to strengthen root at SABS. She comments,

"Theoretical wise actually I seek outside, probably I share some info about other organizations that I'm into. Those external one help me to strengthen my root at SABS. It is the external influence... After attending a number of workshops, it can be a few days straight or two hours, it helps to inspire people to take up more leadership role in Buddhist Thera... I actually learn as well, like attending talk on Sunday morning.... The group I mentioned which is D'Cradle and some organizations I will pay the commitment fees like RM50 for seven Saturday course. in this they will share with you from different aspects, and from there I learn on the basic of Buddhism like 4 of this, 8 of that, 3 of this, yeah, I learn those as well because SABS is more on chanting and prayers also dharma sessions as well but not program in particular. If you want, I can share with you the posters that I attended from other courses elsewhere. There's one actually it is very shocking for me because it's seven or eight topics, it's a series and they cover topics on office politics, work life balance, wealth generation, financial management and surprisingly all these actually the Buddha has said before. So, the topics are actually based on scripture. Office politics, there is good and bad politics, we can't avoid so how do we use wisdom, doesn't mean that I have to follow the evil one or whatnot. The speakers are professionals like psychologist, psychiatrist, and they used the scriptures to plan for the whole topics. These things I learn and bring it back to my daily life."(Kimberly Yeoh, personal communication, May 11, 2022)

Thus, the Buddhist institutions have expounded such comprehensive and existential details in understanding of *karuna* on community. All participants from Buddhist institutions have acknowledged the important part of grasping the meaning of *karuna* on community. As intermediaries in community, the Buddhist institutions have been instrumental in providing new information and knowledge for people to embrace *karuna* towards forming a better kind of community. This indicates how Buddhist institutions are trying to convey the Buddha’s teachings including the concept of *karuna* to the community at large not only through the medium of conveying the message to people, but also through showing good examples.

### 3.3 Theme 3: Understanding of Karuna from Buddhist Institutions on Family

From the information derived by the participants, they unanimously agreed that most important aspect of understanding of *karuna* on family system is through the commitment in providing *dharma* education to children and parents. Apart from that, they highlight the importance of learning *dharma* at a young age so that it will foster a good growth for the children. Apart from that, the importance of having an outdoor activity instead of regular *dharma* talks will eventually attract the interest of young generations to join. They also agree that to form a good family system, it always starts with an individual. As being part of the *dharma* education, *karuna* is an important foundation for a happy and healthy family. To visualise the data gathered on this theme, figure 3 below shows a network of Buddhist institutions’ understanding of *karuna* on family system.

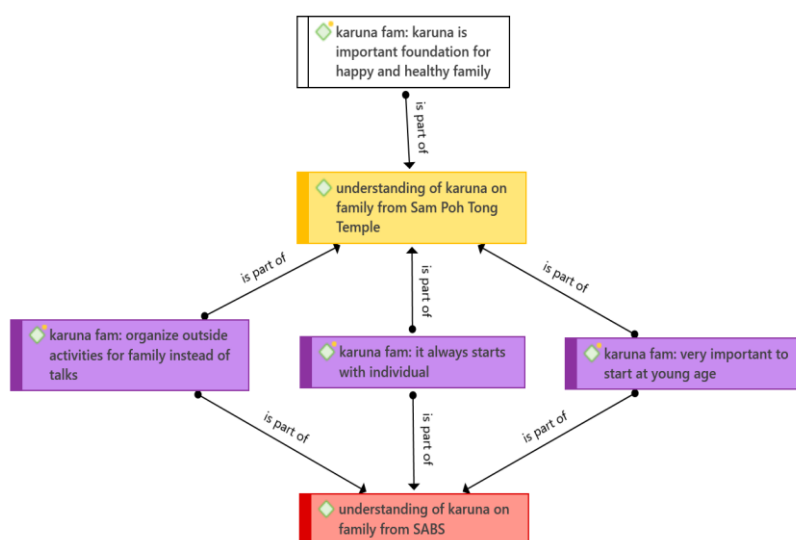


Figure 3 The Understanding of Karuna on Family from Buddhist Institutions.

In order to emphasise this point, Ms. Kimberly made the remark that one of the issues with parents in modern society is that they no longer participate in the Sunday talks, leaving only their children behind while they are away going somewhere else. She addressed the issue in a lengthy explanation,

“Some of them they are bringing their own kids. While in Buddhist centre, the parents they jot of place because Saturday class is on other courses like Mathematics, robotics, and so on. Their parents will jot them on the weekend and go do groceries because it’s AEON Big is right opposite there. So, all the parents go to Buddhist centre to place their children and hang out at the mall while waiting for their children. When I said that some of the Buddhist friend, they are young parents, they said they actually feel guilty about it but then that is the only personal time they have, so that’s why we drop the kids there at Buddhist centre. We have to also understand that parents expect kids to be better, like go and attend the moral class, on Sunday morning first you need to share with the kids that why are we here. I don’t attend Sunday talk, I need to sleep, I’m an adult and I need to sleep, and not to mention the kids probably they even more reluctant. So, there is one thing that I see and observe, but I am just an outsider opinion because I don’t involve specially in this Sunday class. I understand that there are numbers of other Buddhist centres also they are more particular with arranging Sunday school kids, not active but in Kinrara which is Meta Buddhist Society, they actually will need the parents to attend session also on the first year, you have to commit every Sunday, both parents should attend. They hold everything in line and the kids might grow much better, I see this is for the future.”(Kimberly Yeoh, personal communication, May 11, 2022)

Therefore, the Buddhist institutions concur that it is crucial to address the young generations' desire in learning about it in order to instil an awareness of *karuna* on family system. However, parents must be able to set aside time for studying the *dharma* teachings, which includes comprehending the idea of *karuna*. They may also join the class which specifically prepared for the adult members of the institution. However, the institutions concur that planning outdoor activities for both children and parents rather than merely lectures are crucial. As Venerable Sing Kan comments, "You don't have talks rather you have the outside activities." (Venerable Sing Kan, personal communication, January 17, 2022)

The Buddhist institutions believe that the understanding of *karuna* in family system starts with the individual. In response to this, Ms. Kimberly comments that; I think this is one practice how the Buddhist society helps. When we talk about family, or country, it always starts with individual. (Kimberly Yeoh, personal communication, May 11, 2022) Thus, as one of the initiatives done by both institutions is teaching the students on the basic knowledge like 5 precepts. Teacher Koo comments on this saying that, "Normally because our students are quite young, so normally we will teach them about the 5 precepts first, also the importance to show compassion to others. We will tell them the stories of Buddha and different kinds of activities, like they will have role play on the stories of Buddha, since he is born and enlightened till his death. We will focus on Buddha and talk about other Bodhisattvas as well." (Koo Ying Xuen, personal communication, January 25, 2022)

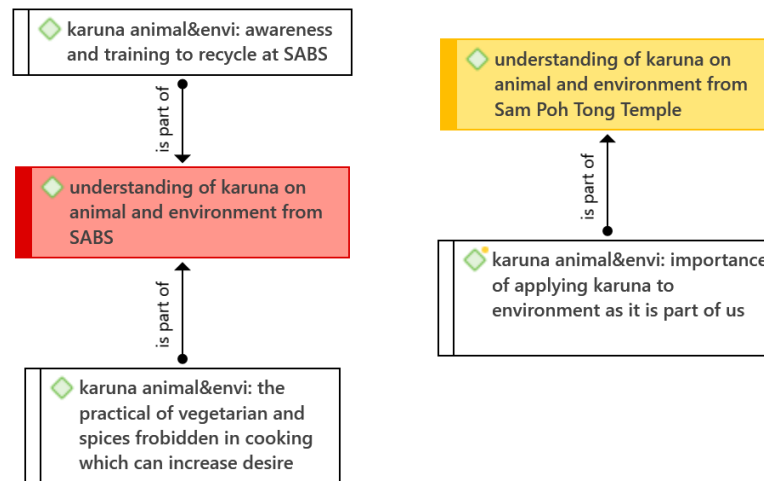
Additionally, the members of both Buddhist institutions concur that young children should begin receiving *dharma* education at a young age. Commenting on this, Venerable Sing Kan addressed the issue on the reality of children nowadays in a long explanation,

"Because nowadays children are different from our time you see. We are more disciplined. Nowadays its different. So, we don't implement so much on the compassion, we sort of focus more on the moral values in general. Because this compassion it's too young for them to understand. So, we focus more on the moral, how to respect their parents, how to share, how to help their parents. Nowadays children they don't read, they don't know how to communicate. In our time, we will greet the teacher, or will run to teacher to help. But nowadays, they will try to hide somewhere. You see, nowadays children don't know how to communicate. And even they communicate is rude. We don't talk directly, no interaction. So, the same thing when I went to have some food, I will observe parents and children all with their phones, they don't talk. Same table, no communication. That is very bad. So, when children have problems, they don't know how to tell. Either they keep quiet, or they share their problems with friends. So, this is a family issue. Family problem." (Venerable Sing Kan, personal communication, January 17, 2022)

This explains why it is important to start *dharma* teachings early on since they will influence children's personalities and behaviours. *Dharma* teachings also involve moral and ethical instruction. Another participant adds that *karuna* is propagated in an easier manner that children will understand and practice it by giving them examples of how *karuna* is. As Teacher Chua comments, "Our target audience is parents and children. We teach them about what *karuna* is and how you implement *karuna* in your life, how can you bring happiness not only to others but to yourself, what kind of marriage you get when you do *karuna*, because in Buddhism we talk about this cause and effect, when you do good things most likely good things will happen to you." (Chua Wen Hong, personal communication, March 18, 2022) This is agreed by another participant that she comments, "I think it's very important to start young. For my personal opinion, the team of Sunday school are doing a very good job, it's a huge size, and their main goal is to help out with the community. The class size is so huge because normally students are attending every week, and the class will change between English and Mandarin part. Parents also have to play their role." (Kimberly Yeoh, personal communication, May 11, 2022) In order for the children to start young, it undoubtedly lies to the role of parents in making this action into reality.

### 3.3 Theme 4: Understanding of Karuna from Buddhist Institutions on Animals and Environment

The awareness of *karuna* on animals and the environment as well as on people appears to be given focus and prominence by Buddhist institutions. The visualisation of it is shown in figure 4 below.



**Figure 4** The Understanding of Buddhist Institutions on the concept of Karuna towards Animal and Environment.

To ascertain the assertion of this theme, one of the members from SABS further emphasizes on the awareness and training of recycling at SABS that, “This needs a lot of awareness and training because we in Malaysia we usually throw everything in one plastic and throw, so we are consistently training people here by having different kinds of recycle bin so that they would dump the rubbish based on the categories.” (Chum Let Onn & Chai Woon Fu, personal communication, March 20, 2022) Another participant highlighted on the practicality of vegetarianism and spices forbidden in cooking that can cause the rise of desire as in the comment, “There is a term in Mandarin that there are 5 spices that they will not eat. This is the monk thing, probably the garlic I think it’s because of the probability to increase the desire. This is rooted from the love towards animals and health purpose.”<sup>1</sup>

Apart from that, the understanding of *karuna* can be seen in the explanation of one of the participants from SPTT on the importance of applying it to the animals and environment as both are part of human life. He explained,

“*Karuna* as I said is to provide happiness and removing suffering so it can be applied to almost anything, as long as it’s a living being, as you said just now, animal is one of the living things that is very close to us. We do have to apply *karuna* because it’s a living thing and respect the appearance of them... To the environment, why it is very important because environment will eventually affect us. When we apply *karuna*, the environment will become healthier and with it, we are staying, and we can be healthy and good as well. By protecting environment, is protecting the earth which is the place we stay and share and by doing that we can ensure that we are living a less suffering life. Because if we pollute our own environment then we don’t have a very comfortable place to stay and how can we be happy like that. Eventually by protecting environment we are protecting ourselves.”

The welfare of all living things, including people, is directly related to environmental protection. According to the above statement, Buddhism places a strong emphasis on comprehending and reducing suffering through the notion of *karuna*. To be compassionate towards the environment is to understand how one’s own health and the health of the earth are intertwined. Environmental degradation frequently results in a range of negative outcomes, such as biodiversity loss, climate change-related disasters, and pollution of the air and water. One can lessen suffering for all living things, including oneself, by actively trying to safeguard the environment. A Buddhist is inspired to address and stop this suffering by *karuna* as a compassionate reaction. As evidenced by these Buddhist participants’ descriptions of how institutions modify stringent rules and regulations, which highlights the significance of understanding *karuna* on animals and environment, it can be seen the participant understand well of *karuna* to animals and environment.

A few conclusions can be made on the understanding of *karuna* among the Buddhist institutions. Firstly, it is important to note here that the understanding of *karuna* depends on the understanding of Buddhism in general. If a Buddhist does not understand the importance of Buddhism knowledge, he can never understand the meaning of the other concepts in Buddhism, including the concept of *karuna*. Therefore, the basis of Buddhism education is essential to grasp the meaning of *karuna*. It can be said that the understanding of *karuna* is more prevalent among the leaders than committee and volunteers from SPTT institution, as the explanations and knowledge shared by the leader are profound and comprehensive. However, from SABS institution, as observed by the present researcher, one of the participants among the volunteers seemed to be able to explain in length

<sup>1</sup> (Kimberly Yeoh, personal communication, May 11, 2022)

on the meaning of *karuna*, as her justifications amounts to more than the leader and committee as can be seen in the table of the number of equations before. The reason is because this participant has been getting external knowledge from other Buddhist institutions as well and has also participated in many workshops and seminars that can benefit her in increasing knowledge on Buddha's teachings. Therefore, it can be seen here that the understanding of *karuna* can be instilled and improved from many sources of knowledge. Nevertheless, although their understandings vary in depth, all the Buddhist institutions understand well that the key point on the understanding of *karuna* is part of the *Brahmaviharas*, and it is one of the most significant concepts in Buddhism.

Secondly, it can be said that the understanding of *karuna* on community reflects a moderate understanding from the respondents. They expressed similar views on three points which are *karuna* is the essence of *prajna*, Buddhism is quite a difficult religion to understand as it is philosophical in nature and there are three main parts that should be concentrated in Buddhism which are Buddha, teachings of Buddha and *sangha*. However, there are some significant points highlighted by some of the participants which they emphasized on the importance of having external information from other organisations which can help them strengthen the root in the Buddhist institution that they are involved in. Another one is the necessity of volunteering work in cultivating *karuna*. These are some of the valuable points expressed by the participants that shows how they really try to grasp the understanding of *karuna* to themselves as well as others.

Thirdly, the understanding of *karuna* on a family system from the Buddhist institutions was reflected clearly. They have explanations on the importance of having a good family system that is built upon the Buddha's teachings and the significance of starting with a good individual. This part shows that they understand the importance of an individual who possesses a good background of *dharma* education to form a good family system. Some of them also addressed alarming issues of family matters that are happening in the current time which is quite challenging and thus, concluded that with a good understanding of *karuna*, it will help to cater to the family problems. Fourthly, the participants from Buddhist institutions expressed similar views on the understanding of *karuna* on animals and environment. All of them portray a considerable degree of reverence towards animals and environment as how the Buddha respect all beings without any difference. They are mostly aware of the importance having a good of understanding *karuna* to instil good behaviour towards the animals and environment. Even though the elucidations on these themes are rather brief and abbreviated, yet it is understandable and definite to the researcher.

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## Conflict of Interest

Authors declare that there is no conflict of interests regarding the publication of the paper.

## Author Contribution

The authors confirm contribution to the paper as follows: study conception and design: Najiah Athirah Jamaludin, Nur Suriya Mohd Nor; data collection: Najiah Athirah Jamaludin; analysis and interpretation of results: Najiah Athirah Jamaludin, Nur Suriya Mohd Nor, Sarah Hamizah Zainal Abidin; draft manuscript preparation: Najiah Athirah Jamaludin, Sarah Hamizah Zainal Abidin. All authors reviewed the results and approved the final version of the manuscript.

## Appendix A: An Example

Authors including an appendix section should do so before the References section. Multiple appendices should all have headings in the style used above. They will automatically be ordered A, B, C etc.

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