

The Brahma Viharas

The Four Immeasurables or Divine Abodes (dwellings)

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Everyone wants to be happy, but happiness cannot be achieved in isolation. The happiness of one depends upon the happiness of all and the happiness of all depends upon the happiness of one. This is because all life is interdependent. To be happy, one needs to cultivate wholesome attitudes towards oneself, others in society, and all sentient beings.

A good way of cultivating wholesome attitudes towards all sentient beings is through meditation. Among the many topics of meditation taught by the Buddha, there are four specifically concerned with the cultivation of loving-kindness (boundless friendliness), compassion, joy, and equanimity. These four are called the *Four Immeasurables* because they are directed to an immeasurable number of sentient beings and because the wholesome karma produced through practicing them is immeasurable.

The term *Brahma-Vihāra* literally means "dwelling (vihāra) in the state of Brahma (divine/godly)." This name comes from both their spiritual significance and their transformative power.

Loving-Kindness, Goodwill, or Boundless Friendliness (Metta)

Of the four emotions, Metta is the most fundamental. It is a quality of the heart that wishes well to all beings without expecting anything in return. At its core, Metta is goodwill—a sincere friendliness and benevolence that embraces all beings and experiences impartially with equanimity.

We innately possess this quality, though it often becomes obscured by layers of conditioning from past experiences. Metta represents an unconditional, inclusive, and boundless friendliness and goodwill toward oneself and all beings. It involves a genuine wish for the happiness and well-being of both oneself and others.

Metta is not about liking, approving, or passively accepting everything—rather, it is the removal of aversion without replacing it with attachment or adoration. One can welcome and befriend even difficult and challenging situations without necessarily approving of them or finding them pleasant.

Mindfulness shapes perception, and Metta transforms reactivity. Rather than passively accepting experience as fixed, mindfulness brings awareness to how we construct it, and Metta transforms the construction. The Buddha repeatedly emphasized that appropriate mindfulness must include skillful perception—particularly goodwill, compassion, and equanimity. Whatever we do should be accompanied by goodwill and friendliness—not as a forced sentiment, but as a natural, spacious quality that allows us to meet life with openness."

Practice: Practitioners cultivate Mettā through meditation and daily actions. This includes affirmations such as "May I be happy and well" and "May all beings be happy and well," extending these wishes universally.

Compassion (Karuna)

Compassion is what Metta feels when it encounters suffering: it wants the suffering to stop. It is a quivering of the heart in response to suffering in the world. When we encounter pain or suffering, the reaction is often to avert. Compassion is an antidote to aversion. We set the intention to care for the suffering of ourselves and others, rather than pushing it away. It is the deep wish that oneself and others be free from suffering and its causes. It includes a profound sense of empathy and a desire to alleviate suffering.

Practice: Developing compassion involves recognizing suffering in oneself and others and wishing for its end. Meditation practices often involve visualizing and feeling compassion for oneself and others, combined with actions that help relieve suffering.

Joy Including Sympathetic Joy (Ananda and Muditā)

Joy is the expression of Loving-Kindness when it encounters happiness, desiring that happiness to endure. It involves appreciating and sharing joy and happiness with others. When we experience joy, feelings of jealousy or judgment may arise, but Sympathetic Joy acts as an antidote to these negative emotions, enabling us to simply rejoice in the happiness of others. Joy encompasses an internal sense of happiness and contentment (ananda) and sympathetic joy (muditā), which is the delight in others' happiness and success. It involves feeling genuine happiness for both oneself and others.

Practice: Cultivating joy involves appreciating one's own positive experiences and successes, as well as those of others. It includes meditation practices that focus on experiencing inner joy and celebrating others' happiness without envy or jealousy.

Equanimity (Upekkhā)

Equanimity is the foundation and fertile ground from which the other three Limitless Qualities arise. It is the mind's capacity to maintain a clear perspective on both external and internal events, accommodating passion without losing balance. This quality acts as a protective guardrail, preventing fatigue, such as Loving-Kindness or Compassion/Empathy fatigue. Equanimity fosters a balanced state of mind that treats all beings with equal care and respect, regardless of personal preferences or biases, thus providing the basis for the other three immeasurables.

Practice: Equanimity is developed by understanding the impermanent nature of all things and recognizing that all beings are responsible for their own actions (karma). It includes meditation and mindfulness practices that help maintain a stable and impartial mind in the face of pleasure and pain, success and failure.

"Out of the soil of Metta (boundless friendliness or goodwill) grows the beautiful bloom of compassion, watered with the tears of joy under the cool shade of equanimity." Long Chen pa