

Metta and The Four Immeasurables

The Brahmavihāras or Divine Abodes

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We all want to be happy, yet happiness is not a possession we can secure by ourselves and hold apart from others. It arises in relationship — in how we meet ourselves, other people, and every living being. The Buddha taught four qualities of heart that reshape that meeting: loving-kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy, and equanimity. Cultivated deliberately, they become the ground from which a wholesome life grows.

These four are called the brahmavihāras — literally the “dwellings” (vihāra) of brahma. In the Buddha’s usage brahma does not point to a creator god; it carries the older sense of the highest, best, most sublime. To dwell in a brahmavihāra is to inhabit the noblest available way of relating to experience. They are also called the *appamaññā*, the immeasurables, because they can be extended without limit, beyond our usual boundaries of self-interest, preference, and attachment.

In the early texts, these qualities are described as a liberation of mind (cetovimutti). One “abides pervading one direction with a heart imbued with loving-kindness, then a second, a third, and a fourth; above, below, around, and everywhere; to all as to oneself — abundant, exalted, measureless, without hostility and without ill will.” The image describes a way experience is organized. Ordinary awareness is organized around a center — me, here — with everything else arranged as periphery. The immeasurables loosen that center. The field of care stops falling off with distance from the self and becomes boundless, without a privileged middle.

The four are not fixed qualities that a “me” possesses or lacks. They are modes of relating that arise and strengthen under particular conditions, and that surface most readily when ordinary self-concern loosens its grip. Loving-kindness “for oneself,” in particular, is not ego-inflation; it is the withdrawal of the special exemption we normally grant ourselves — meeting oneself with the same friendliness we would offer anyone.

This has a practical consequence. The brahmavihāras cannot be manufactured on demand. Willing yourself to feel loving-kindness works about as well as commanding a plant to grow. What can be done is what a gardener does: tend the conditions under which these qualities arise of their own accord. A settled body, an unhurried pace, attention turned toward another’s situation, the company we keep, the intentions we set — these are the soil and the water. The practices below are not incantations that produce a feeling by repetition; they are ways of tending. We do not force the bloom; we tend the causes and conditions, and the bloom arises. And the tending runs both ways: each time goodwill answers a moment instead of hostility, or care instead of avoidance, that response grows a little more available the next time — we are ourselves among the conditions we are shaping.

Loving-Kindness, Goodwill or Boundless Friendliness (Mettā)

Of the four, mettā is the most fundamental; the others are mettā meeting particular circumstances. It is a quality of heart that wishes well to all beings without expecting anything in return — a sincere, benevolent friendliness that embraces beings and experiences impartially.

Human beings have the capacity for mettā, though its expression is shaped by conditioning. Mettā is not liking, approving, or passively accepting everything. It is the removal of aversion without replacing it with

attachment or adoration. One can welcome even a difficult situation without approving of it or pretending it is pleasant.

Mindfulness shapes perception; mettā transforms reactivity. Rather than treating experience as a fixed given, mindfulness reveals how we construct it, and mettā changes the construction — not as a forced sentiment but as a spacious, natural willingness to meet life with openness.

Near enemy: sentimental or attached affection — goodwill that has quietly become clinging or preference. *Far enemy:* ill-will and hatred.

Practice: silent phrases such as “May I be well, may I be happy, may I be peaceful and at ease.” Widening to “May all beings be well, may all beings be happy, may all beings be peaceful and at ease,” extended outward in widening circles — from oneself, to a close friend, a neutral person, someone you find difficult, all beings, and finally oneself again.

Compassion (Karuṇā)

Compassion is what mettā feels when it meets suffering: it wants the suffering to ease. It is the heart’s quiver in response to pain. Our reflex before suffering is often to turn away; compassion is the antidote to that aversion — the intention to stay present with the suffering of oneself and others rather than flee it, together with the wish that beings be free from suffering and its causes. Compassion also asks for discernment: we cannot end all suffering or control the lives of others, so the practical question is what response, given these particular causes and conditions, is most likely to ease suffering rather than add to it — sometimes helping, sometimes listening, sometimes allowing another to make their own choice.

Near enemy: pity or sentimental grief — sorrow that keeps the sufferer at arm’s length and subtly places us above them. *Far enemy:* cruelty.

Practice: recognizing suffering clearly in oneself and others, allowing the heart to be moved by it, and, where possible, acting to relieve it.

Sympathetic Joy (Muditā)

Muditā is mettā meeting another’s happiness and wishing it to endure — gladness at others’ good fortune and success. When we meet someone else’s joy, envy or comparison may arise; muditā is the antidote, freeing us simply to rejoice. (It is worth distinguishing muditā, the technical name for this immeasurable, from ānanda, a general word for joy or bliss.)

Near enemy: giddy exhilaration, or a joy tangled with comparison — “good for them, and what about me?” *Far enemy:* envy and jealousy; also boredom or aversion toward another’s good fortune.

Practice: noticing others’ successes and delighting in them deliberately, and learning to appreciate one’s own genuine joys without guilt or grasping.

Equanimity (Upekkhā)

Equanimity is a clear, balanced perspective on inner and outer events — the capacity to accommodate strong feeling without being swept away. If mettā is the soil the other qualities grow from, upekkhā is what keeps them from toppling: the guardrail against compassion-fatigue, against love curdling into attachment, against joy inflating into giddiness. It meets all beings with equal regard — not by growing cold, but by not playing favorites.

Equanimity is not indifference. That is precisely its near enemy: a detached unconcern that looks serene but has simply stopped caring. Genuine upekkhā remains fully engaged; it is warmth that has found its balance. We can care about what happens while recognizing that outcomes arise from many conditions, most of them beyond our control. Our task is not to control the process but to take part in it as wisely as we can — dependent arising taken to heart: things emerge from conditions, change as conditions change, and pass.

Near enemy: indifference, apathy, aloof detachment. *Far enemy:* craving and resentment — the partiality of grasping at some and pushing others away.

Practice: resting in the impermanence of all conditions, and in the recognition that beings are heirs to their own thoughts, communications, and actions. Steadiness is trained by meeting pleasure and pain, praise and blame, gain and loss without collapsing toward either.

How the Four Fit Together

The four are one movement seen from four angles. Mettā is the base disposition of goodwill. Turned toward suffering it becomes compassion; turned toward flourishing, sympathetic joy; and equanimity holds all three steady and unbiased. Tradition names mettā the root and upekkhā the culmination — not a contradiction so much as the difference between where warmth begins and what keeps it in balance.

Seen this way, the four are less four states to generate than one disposition arising in different forms as conditions change: when goodwill meets suffering, compassion comes to be; when it meets good fortune, joy comes to be. This also accounts for the near enemies. Each is what appears when we grasp at a quality instead of tending its conditions — forced compassion curdles into pity, forced joy into giddiness, forced equanimity into indifference, forced love into attachment. The counterfeit is what forcing produces; the genuine quality is what tending allows.

Practiced this way, the four are not a state to attain but a way of taking part in the conditions of a life. We cannot control all that shapes us, yet we are part of what shapes us — and each time goodwill answers instead of hostility, care instead of avoidance, or gladness instead of envy, the ground grows a little more fertile for the next such response. This is less a spiritual attainment than a practical way of tending the causes and conditions of a less reactive, more openhearted life.

“Out of the soil of mettā grows the beautiful bloom of compassion, watered with the tears of joy under the cool shade of equanimity.” — attributed to Longchenpa

Reflection Questions

1. On tending rather than forcing. Think of a time you tried to *make* yourself feel goodwill toward someone — and what actually happened. What conditions in your life make kindness come easily, and what conditions make it nearly impossible? If we can't summon these qualities on command, what does that change about how we practice?

2. On someone you find difficult. When you reached someone you find difficult in your life, what did you notice? Did the phrases go flat, or speed up, or did you find yourself negotiating — wishing them well *if* they changed? Where in the body did the resistance show up? What might it take to wish someone well without needing them to be different first?