

An Extensive Commentary on the Four Immeasurables

by Buddhagupta

Loving kindness, compassion,
Sympathetic joy, and equanimity—
How to cultivate with diligence
These great immeasurables, I shall now explain.

Focusing on immeasurable sentient beings brings about immeasurable accumulations, immeasurable qualities, and immeasurable primordial wisdom.

Immeasurable Sentient Beings

We cannot calculate the total number of sentient beings, saying, “This is how many there are in the three realms.” And sentient beings are thus said to be immeasurable. As the Bhagavān said in the *Noble Sutra Teaching the Great Compassion of the Tathagatas*:

Son of noble family, the sentient beings living in a space the size of a chariot wheel, visible to a Tathagata, are extremely numerous. But the gods and humans throughout the world-systems of the vast billionfold universe are not like that: the realms of these imperceptible sentient beings are immeasurable.

Therefore, as the immeasurable realms of sentient beings are beyond comprehension, sentient beings are said to be immeasurable.

You might wonder: when cultivating the immeasurables, how should we focus on immeasurable sentient beings and meditate?

All sentient beings of the three realms have been circling throughout the higher and lower abodes throughout beginningless time based on the power of their individual karma. As there is not a single one who, in the course of this wandering, has not been close to us many hundreds or thousands of times, think: “These are my loved ones!” And abide in equanimity, extending the four immeasurables to all sentient beings. This is what is known as *focusing on immeasurable sentient beings*.

Immeasurable Accumulations

The immeasurable accumulations are those of merit and wisdom. All four immeasurables are, in this sense, the cause, since they are the cause or essence of generating boundless gatherings of both merit and wisdom. Thus, in the sutras, the Bhagavan also says:

Son of noble family, to make offerings to someone who is meditating on the samādhi of loving kindness, and who has not yet risen from his or her seat, creates immeasurable merit.

If so much merit can be gained simply by offering gifts to one who is training in immeasurable loving kindness and the rest, what need is there to mention actually practising these immeasurables and meditating on them for oneself? The amount of merit generated thereby will be far, far greater.

This is how immeasurable stores of merit and wisdom are produced. These then serve to generate a boundless collection of qualities, which, in turn, yields limitless wisdom.

Immeasurable Qualities

Immeasurable qualities are the great attributes of enlightenment, such as the powers, the fearlessnesses and the rest. They are the result of the accumulations of merit and wisdom gained through abiding in the four immeasurables. As this is what brings about the great qualities of enlightenment, we must earnestly apply ourselves to these four immeasurables.

Immeasurable Primordial Wisdom

These four dharmas—the four immeasurables—are the focal object of the Tathagatas' immeasurable primordial wisdom. Alternatively, it can be explained that primordial wisdom itself abides in the state of, or as the essence of, the four dharmas of loving kindness and the rest. This is what is meant when we speak of a sphere of experience, or an essence, in which the object of cognition is inseparable from cognitive awareness itself.

Loving Kindness

At the stage of 'devoted conduct', a bodhisattva experiences the "four factors of ascertainment": attainment of appearance, enhancement of appearance, partial engagement in the meaning of suchness, and the unobstructed samadhi. For those bodhisattvas who experience these four factors of ascertainment, the gods, humans, pretas and the like, as well as the realms of hell-beings, are all directly perceptible to their heightened faculties. When they see these gods, humans and others, as well as the beings in the lower realms whose very nature is suffering, these bodhisattvas feel particularly strong compassion for them. At the same time, they realize that these beings have been circling in samsara throughout beginningless time, and, therefore, have all, without exception, been their close relations. As a consequence, they feel great loving kindness towards them all, caring for them as if they were their very own children. They make aspirations that all sentient beings may be liberated from suffering and experience

only happiness, and they act to benefit all beings. This is known as *loving kindness focused on sentient beings*.

Bodhisattvas on the first to the seventh bhumis generate loving kindness towards sentient beings by directly realising the nature of things. Although all phenomena lack any true nature, sentient beings fail to realise this, and, by tightly clinging to things as real, they circle throughout the three realms. These bodhisattvas therefore feel loving kindness towards the beings who suffer in this way. They make aspirations that they might realise the true nature, and they act to benefit all beings through the Dharma. This is known as loving kindness *focused on phenomena*.

From the eighth bodhisattva bhumi onwards, up and including the attainment of enlightenment, corresponds to the level of “spontaneous accomplishment, free of focus”. From the eighth bhumi, bodhisattvas generate loving kindness towards sentient beings while acting for their benefit spontaneously and without thought. They act for beings as in the examples of a precious, wish-fulfilling jewel or a wish-granting tree. Although these bodhisattvas are without ordinary thoughts, great loving kindness still arises spontaneously through the power of their past aspirations, and they act to bring benefit to beings. This is known as *loving kindness free of focus*.

How, then, do ordinary beings, who are just beginning, train in loving kindness that is focused on sentient beings? An ordinary beginner should meditate on loving kindness focused on sentient beings according to the following stages.

There are three types of sentient beings: 1) those one cherishes, 2) those one is indifferent towards, and 3) those one dislikes. Cherished sentient beings can then be further subdivided into three: greater, middling, and lesser. Likewise, those one is indifferent towards and those one dislikes can also be subdivided into the three categories of greater, middling, and lesser. So, in all, there are nine divisions.

At first, visualise someone you cherish in a middling way and practice feeling towards them just as you do towards those you cherish greatly, such as your own parents. Once you are familiar with this, visualise all those to whom you are indifferent, and practice feeling towards them just as you do towards those you cherish most. Then visualise those you mildly dislike and practice feeling towards them just as you do towards those you cherish most. Once you are used to this, visualise someone you dislike in a middling way and practice feeling towards them as you do towards those you cherish most. Then finally consider those you really dislike and train in feeling towards them the kind of love you feel for your own parents.

Through this, we can train in focusing on all sentient beings, who, throughout the course of beginningless time, have been dear to us and have even been our own parents. And, as

we train in this way, even though we begin by focussing on just the members of our own family, we gradually extend the practice until it is infinite.

Compassion

Compassion focused on sentient beings who are suffering is the compassionate wish to dispel the sufferings of all beings, who are plagued by the three sufferings (of suffering upon suffering, and the rest) or the eight sufferings (of birth, and so on).

Compassion focused on sentient beings who do wrong is the compassionate wish to eliminate all the harmful actions of beings whose conduct is unvirtuous, as they are the root or cause of the sufferings just mentioned.

Compassion focused on sentient beings who are not completely liberated as they lack the necessary conditions is directed towards those who cannot hear the Dharma as they lack a spiritual teacher. As it says in a tantra, “Those who don’t follow a teacher, who don’t hear the Dharma, and who aren’t liberated, are freed through compassion.”

Sympathetic Joy

Sympathetic joy is delight in the various kinds of wealth that sentient beings possess: material riches, the Dharma, and happiness.

Sympathetic joy focused on perfectly gathering the accumulations is the joy that we feel towards our own great gatherings of virtue.

Sympathetic joy focused on the taste of sacred Dharma is the joy we feel when we (and others) experience the taste of hearing the Dharma, or the taste of contemplation and meditation.

Equanimity

Those who act for the welfare of sentient beings should have equanimity towards the fortunate and the unfortunate alike. Rather than discriminating, by acting only for the benefit of the fortunate and never for the unfortunate, we should act for the benefit of both in equal measure.

The expression “eight worldly concerns, including gain and loss” also refers to happiness and suffering, praise and criticism, renown and obscurity. Being neither delighted nor upset by these situations, we should remain in equanimity. These eight worldly concerns are so called because they are well known to, and found among, the mundane.

How do we maintain equanimity with regard to these eight concerns?

Suppose you acquire great wealth or possessions: do not allow yourself to become too elated or attached to them. Conversely, if your wealth or possessions decline or you fail to acquire any, do not feel despondent or sad. This is known as *equanimity that is free from happiness and sorrow in the face of gain and loss*.

Even if someone you are attracted to were to anoint your body with perfume, sandalwood and the like, to caress you, and to treat you with honour and respect, you must not become overjoyed or attached to such pleasures. And even if an enemy were to abuse you physically, by beating and striking you, you must not become angry. Instead, joyfully accept the pain of being struck and beaten, rather than concentrating on the suffering. This is known as *equanimity that is free from happiness and sorrow in the face of joy and suffering*.

If a friend were to praise you with sweet words, describing you in glowing terms, you shouldn't feel delighted or think of yourself as superior. Whereas, if an enemy were to discover your faults and proclaim them, you shouldn't become sad or depressed. This is known as *equanimity that is free from happiness and sorrow in the face of praise and criticism*.

Even if many people come to hear and know of your talents, don't take delight in this acknowledgement of your attributes, thinking, "Now that so many people know of my good qualities, I will surely become famous and never be forgotten!" Alternatively, if few people ever hear of or acknowledge your qualities, don't feel sad, thinking, "My qualities are overlooked. What a pity!" This is known as *equanimity that is free from happiness and sorrow in the face of recognition and non-recognition of one's qualities*.

"Accumulations" refers to the accumulations of merit and wisdom already explained above. *Equanimity in regard to gathering the accumulations on special and ordinary occasions* means that we shouldn't differentiate, thinking, "I shall practise virtuous accumulations on this occasion, but not at other times." Instead, we must practise virtue at all times.

In reference to all the meditative trainings
In the four immeasurables, the 'Brahmic' states,
I have composed and set this down for beings' sake:
May all be unobscured, swiftly to awaken!

This concludes An Extensive Commentary on the Four Immeasurables composed by Buddhagupta.

| Translated by Samye Translations (trans. Laura Swan), 2011.
Revised and edited for Lotsawa House, 2016.

Bibliography

Tibetan Editions

"tshad med bzhi'i rgya cher 'grel pa". bstan 'gyur (snar thang). BDRC W22704. 225 vols. [Narthang]: [s.n.], [1800?]. Vol. 118: 37–43

"tshad med bzhi'i rgya cher 'grel pa". In tshul khrim rin chen. bstan 'gyur (sde dge). BDRC W23703. 213 vols. Delhi: Delhi Karmapae Choedhey, Gyalwae Sungrab Partun Khang, 1982-1985. Vol. 110: 37–42

Version: 1.3-20240919

Note: In the Derge and Narthang editions of the Tengyur the author's name is given as Buddhagupta. Elsewhere this text is attributed to Buddhaguhya.

Source:

<https://www.lotsawahouse.org/indian-masters/buddhagupta/four-immeasurables-commentary> downloaded 2024 Nov 27.

[Buddhaguhya (Buddhagupta) (c.700 CE) was a Vajrayana Buddhist scholar-monk who taught at Nalanda and Varanasi. Vimalamitra was one of his students.]