



The Four Immeasurables

Loving-Kindness

Compassion

Sympathetic Joy

Equanimity

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The Four Immeasurables

Sanskrit *caturapramana*

Tibetan *tseme shyi*

Also known as Divine Abodes (*brahmaviharas*)

The Four Immeasurables are natural expressions of every sentient being's wish to be free of suffering, to be happy and healthy, to experience joy and ease, to be balanced and at peace.

Kindness, compassion, joy, and equanimity manifest as sensations, feelings, thoughts, aspirations, intentions, relationships, and actions. To cultivate them we should explore them on all those levels.

The Four Immeasurables are:

- Emotions that are not self-centered.
- Attitudes and intentions toward others and toward your own experience.
- Excellent objects of calm abiding and clear seeing meditation.
- The seeds of *bodhicitta*, the intention to awaken heart and mind for the sake of all beings.

Immeasurables and the path

The immeasurables support many Buddhist practices, including stability (*shamatha*), insight (*vipashyana*), faith and devotion, awakening heart and mind (*bodhicitta*), mind training (*lojong*) and taking and sending (*tonglen*).

How to Practice

Begin by taking refuge in the Three Jewels and generating the intention to fully awaken for the sake of all beings.

Recall an experience of feeling cared for, a time you felt safe and warm and loved. Recognize, acknowledge and appreciate how good that was. Connect with your natural wish to be safe, happy, healthy, at ease. Feel the genuine, good, and healthy caring that is the source of genuine happiness.

Choose one of the four immeasurables and recall an experience of it. Elicit the feeling. Form the intention to fully experience and embody the qualities of that immeasurable.

Softly say to yourself suitable words or phrases, slowly enough to be aware of how the bodymind responds with various sensations, feelings, thoughts, and memories. Open to your shifting experiences of the immeasurable.

Integrating obstacles

As you cultivate access to kindness, compassion, joy, and equanimity, resistance in many forms will arise: boredom, indifference, anger, greed, fear, jealousy, pride, cynicism, unworthiness and shame. When "obstacles" appear, gently include them in steady, gentle, accommodating awareness. Embrace it all with the very qualities of kindness, compassion, and equanimity that you are cultivating.

Extending the immeasurables

Recognizing that everyone wishes to be safe, to be happy, to be cared for, gradually extend the immeasurables to others:

- Benefactors
- Friends and loved ones
- Strangers
- Difficult people and enemies
- Various groups
- All beings, human and non-human, seen and unseen
- The ten directions

“Focusing on immeasurable sentient beings brings about immeasurable accumulations, immeasurable qualities, and immeasurable primordial wisdom.” (Buddhagupta)

Dedication of practice and activities

At the end of your session, let goodwill, compassion, joy, and equanimity radiate in all directions, embracing all beings, without limit, boundless and immeasurable.

End the session by dedicating the benefits of your practice to the temporal and ultimate benefit of all beings.

Loving-kindness

Pali *metta*, Sanskrit *maitri*, Tibetan *jampa*

- ❖ Loving-kindness is radiant warmth and friendly goodwill that wishes the deepest well-being of oneself and others.

May all beings have happiness and the seeds of happiness.

May all beings be healthy and strong.

May all beings be supported and loved by friends and community.

May all beings have good food, clean water, and beautiful surroundings.

May all beings enjoy the ease of well-being, a happy heart, and peace of mind.

May all beings be safe, healthy and happy, at ease in body, at home in the world.

The *far enemies* of loving-kindness include ill-will, resentment, anger, enmity, and irritation.

The *near enemies* of kindness include selfish affection, shutting down, narrowing, and irritation.

Allies and practices:

- Lovingkindness is a quality of both heart and mind.
- Cultivate friendliness; practice seeing the lovable aspects of beings.
- Cultivate patience. Refrain from letting pain or irritation lead to anger.
- Recognize that all beings are alike in wanting to be happy.
- Remember that we are connected to others in countless unseen ways.
- Be generous to those you don't like.
- Keep kindness grounded in compassion and equanimity.
- Carry kindness into your day by mentally wishing well to random people you encounter.
- Carry kindness into difficult interactions. Even in conflict, wish yourself and the other well.

Compassion

Sanskrit *karuna*, Tibetan *nyingje*

- ❖ Compassion is the courageous heart that wishes oneself and others not suffer.

May all beings be free from suffering and the seeds of suffering.

May all be safe, free from inner and outer harm.

May all beings be free of cruelty and ill will.

May all be free of superiority and pity.

May all be sensitive to suffering, and never shrink from helping others.

May we be free from disease, hunger, poverty, and violence.

May we be free from fear, worry, anxiety, pain, sorrow, and grief.

May we be free from struggle and turmoil.

The *far enemies* of compassion are ill-will, cruelty, and sadism.

The *near enemies* of compassion include pity, despair, contracting to avoid discomfort, trying to control what arises, rescuing and fixing.

Allies and practices:

- Extend compassion to any person or an animal you see that is suffering.
- Extend compassion even to those who are doing evil deeds – because they will suffer because of their behavior. Even if you think someone deserves to suffer, wish them the happiness and freedom that all beings want.
- Extend compassion to happy and successful people, because their pleasure and good fortune may cause them suffering, and in any case will eventually come to an end.
- Know completely the six realms: *Hell realm*: anger and conflict. *Hungry ghost (preta) realm*: grasping and neediness. *Animal realm*: instinctive behavior seeking security and comfort. *Human realm*: jumping from desire to desire, chasing possessions and pleasures. *Jealous god or titan (asura) realm*: inadequacy, jealousy, competitiveness. *God (deva) realm*: pride, privilege, blindness to impermanence.
- Balance compassion with kindness, joy, and equanimity.

Sympathetic Joy

Sanskrit *mudita*, Tibetan *gawa*

- ❖ *Mudita* is appreciation and buoyant gladness for beauty, goodness and virtue, happiness and well-being.

May all beings recognize and appreciate beauty, happiness, success, good fortune, and virtue.

May all beings enjoy good things: food, shelter, friendship, pleasures, peace.

May all beings recognize and appreciate the good in the world and in each other.

May all beings delight in the success and happiness of themselves and others.

May those experiencing sadness and pain never lose sight of their joys and good fortune.

May all beings be free of jealousy, enmity, and competition.

The *far enemies* of sympathetic joy are jealousy, envy, aversion, boredom, comparing, judging, competing, and preserving or enhancing the sense of self.

The *near enemies* of sympathetic joy include careless, exaggerated elation with worldly pleasure.

Allies and practices:

- Gladden the heart by appreciating virtue, good fortune, resources and opportunities -- anything that is good or enjoyable.
- Recall and appreciate your own and others' virtue, happiness, and peace.
- Recognize jealousy, competition, comparison, perfectionism, and overly critical attitudes as obstacles to joy.
- Practice appreciating happiness and joy, whatever its cause; don't worry about whether someone "deserves" happiness; remember every being's actions and karma are their own.
- Extend compassion but also *mudita* to those who are unhappy; they have known happiness and success in the past, and will again in future.
- Keep joy grounded in and balanced with kindness, compassion, and equanimity.
- Carry joy into your day by appreciating everything good, wherever it appears: beauty, nature, art, skill, virtue, acts of kindness.
- Notice when your joy gladdens others, and others' joy gladdens you.
- See "Cultivating Appreciative Joy" in the resources section of NaturalAwareness.net

Equanimity

Pali *upekkha*, Skt *upeksha*, Tibetan *tangnyom*

- ❖ Equanimity is stable, clear balance in the midst of experience. Equanimity sees the equality of all beings.

May all beings rest in great equanimity, free from attachment and aversion and prejudice.

May all be able to respond calmly to the ups and downs of life.

May all be free of confusion, fear, and emotional reactivity.

May all be free of apathy and indifference.

May we care for others, yet know that each is the owner and heir of their own deeds.

May we all know things just as they are, abiding calmly in the midst of change.

The *far enemies* of equanimity are attachment (greed) and aversion (hate), prejudice and favoritism.

The *near enemies* of equanimity are indifference, apathy, and ignoring.

Allies and practices:

- Recognize every being is alike in wanting happiness and not wanting to suffer.
- Equanimity depends on clarity and insight; don't ignore what arises in and around you.
 - See how attraction turns into grasping and greed.
 - See how aversion turns into rejecting and hate.
 - See how indifference turns into apathy and ignoring.
- Recognize that no object, experience, or being is inherently good or bad.
- Watch for exaggerated feelings of pleasure and displeasure. Don't be shocked by the inevitable winds of pleasure and pain, gain and loss, praise and blame, good and bad reputation.
- Remember that each being is responsible for their own karma.
- Carry equanimity through your day by cultivating physical, emotional, and mental balance. Slow down. Stay grounded in the body. Don't ignore stress.

The interdependence of the immeasurables

As you practice the immeasurables over time, you'll discover how they overlap and support each other.

- ❖ Kindness counters the tendency of equanimity to fall into detachment.
- ❖ Compassion counteracts the decay of loving-kindness into possessiveness.
- ❖ Joy keeps compassion from falling into despair.
- ❖ Equanimity helps joy from falling into careless elation.

You may also experience how the immeasurables challenge specific habitual perspectives and patterns.

- ❖ Sympathetic joy may be difficult for competitive people; compassion undermines the drive for power.
- ❖ Loving-kindness may be difficult for people with addictive tendencies; sympathetic joy releases possessiveness.
- ❖ Compassion may be difficult for people who compulsively take care of others; equanimity undermines the habit of taking control.
- ❖ Equanimity may be difficult for people who are detached and distant; cultivate the warmth of loving-kindness.

For discussion of the dynamics between the immeasurables, see Salzberg's *Lovingkindness* and McLeod's *Wake Up to Your Life*, pp. 294-300. Buddhaghosa has an extended commentary on ways to dissolve ill-will and resentment.

Quotes

“Loving-kindness is the way to purity for one who has much ill will, compassion is the way for one who has much cruelty, joy is the way for one who has much aversion, and equanimity is the way for one who has much greed.” (Buddhaghosa, *The Path of Purification*, chapter 9)

Loving-kindness is characterized as promoting the aspect of welfare. Its function is to prefer welfare. It is manifested as the removal of annoyance. Its proximate cause is seeing lovable beings. It succeeds when it makes ill will subside, and it fails when it produces selfish affection.

Compassion is characterized as promoting the aspect of allaying suffering. Its function resides in not bearing others’ suffering. It is manifested as non-cruelty. Its proximate cause is to see helplessness in those overwhelmed by suffering. It succeeds when it makes cruelty subside and it fails when it produces sorrow.

Gladness is characterized as gladdening produced by others’ success. Its function resides in being unenvious. It is manifested as the elimination of aversion (and boredom). Its proximate cause is seen beings’ success. It succeeds when it makes aversion subside, and it fails when it produces merriment.

Equanimity is characterized as promoting the aspect of neutrality towards beings. Its function is to see equality in beings. It is manifested as the quieting of resentment and approval. Its proximate cause is seeing ownership of deeds thus: Beings are owners of the deeds... It succeeds when it makes resentment and approval subside, and it fails when it produces... indifference.” (Buddhaghosa, *The Path of Purification*, chapter 9)

“Equanimity counteracts judgment or prejudice. Loving-kindness counteracts shutting down to what arises in experience. Compassion counteracts fear of pain and discomfort. Joy dismantles the pattern of grasping at experience to validate our sense of who we are.” (McLeod, *Wake Up to Your Life*, p.292-294)

“Great fullness of being, which we experience as happiness, can also be described as great love. To be undivided and unfragmented, to be completely present, is love. To pay attention is to love.” (Salzberg, *Lovingkindness*, p.15)

“The Pali word *metta* has two root meanings. One is the word for “gentle.” *Metta* is likened to a gentle rain that falls upon the earth. The rain does not select and choose--“I’ll rain here, and I’ll avoid that place over there.” Rather, it simply falls without discrimination. The other root meaning for *metta* is “friend.” To understand the power or force of *metta* is to understand true friendship. The Buddha actually described at some length what he meant by being a good friend to the world.” (Salzberg, *Lovingkindness*, p.24)

“Equanimity’s strength derives from a combination of understanding and trust. It is based on understanding that the conflict and frustration we feel when we can’t control the world doesn’t come from our inability to do so, but rather from the fact that we are trying to control the uncontrollable. We know better than to try to prevent the seasons from changing... We may not prefer [change], but we trust it because we understand and accept its rightful place in a larger cycle, a bigger picture. Can we apply the same wise balance to

the cycles and tides of pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral experiences in our lives?”
(Salzberg, *Lovingkindness*, p.145)

“For one who mindfully develops boundless loving-kindness seeing the destruction of clinging, the fetters are worn away.” (Itivuttaka 1.27)

“Having meditated on gentleness and on compassion, I have forgotten the difference between myself and others.” (Milarepa)

“May all creatures, all living things, all beings one and all, experience good fortune only. May they not fall into harm.” (Anguttara Nikāya 4.67)

“Goodwill [mettā] doesn’t mean that you have to like people. And you’re not thinking of goodwill as a magic cloud that’s going to spread out and make everybody happy. You simply want people to find true happiness, to understand the way to find true happiness, and to actually have the willingness and strength to do that. In one of the phrases where the Buddha describes goodwill, he says, “May these beings look after themselves with ease.” You’re not necessarily saying you’re going to be there for them. You’re hoping that they’ll be there for themselves, in line with the principle that happiness comes from each person’s actions.” (Thanissaro Bhikkhu, *Metta through Samvega*)

“Do not overlook the beginning -- the soft, often inconvenient work of cultivating boundless love. This is not a lesser stage. It is the ground upon which all true realization rests. Before the mind can be realized, the heart must love in all its entirety.” (Namgay Dawa Rinpoche)

“If you expect your life to be full of ups and downs, then your mind will be much more peaceful.” (Lama Yeshe)

“To awaken is to realize the infinite value of each moment of your own life as well as the life of other beings, then to continue to act accordingly.” (Kazuaki Tanahashi)

The Karaniya Metta Sutta

This is what should be done
By one who is skilled in goodness,
And who knows the path of peace:

Let them be able and upright,
Straightforward and gentle in speech,
Humble and not conceited,

Contented and easily satisfied,
Unburdened with duties and frugal in their ways.
Peaceful and calm and wise and skillful,

Not proud or demanding in nature.
Let them not do the slightest thing
That the wise would later reprove.

Wishing: In gladness and in safety,
May all beings be at ease.

Whatever living beings there may be;
Whether they are weak or strong, omitting none,
The great or the mighty, medium, short or small,

The seen and the unseen,
Those living near and far away,
Those born and to-be-born —
May all beings be at ease!

Let none deceive another,
Or despise any being in any state.

Let none through anger or ill-will
Wish harm upon another.

Even as a mother protects with her life
Her child, her only child,
So with a boundless heart
Should one cherish all living beings;

Radiating kindness over the entire world:
Spreading upwards to the skies,

And downwards to the depths;
Outwards and unbounded,
Freed from hatred and ill-will.

Whether standing or walking, seated or lying down
Free from drowsiness,
One should sustain this recollection.
This is said to be the sublime abiding.

By not holding to fixed views,
The pure-hearted one, having clarity of vision,
Being freed from all sense desires,
Is not born again into this world.

~ *Karaniya Metta Sutta (Sutta Nipata 1.8)*, translated from the Pali by the Amaravati Sangha.

Further Resources on the Immeasurables

Buddhaghosa. *Path of Purification (Visuddhimagga)*. Chapter 9: The Divine Abidings.

Buddhagupta. An Extensive Commentary on the Four Immeasurables.
LotsawaHouse.org.

McDonald, Kathleen. *Awakening the Kind Heart*.

McLeod, Ken. *Wake Up to Your Life*. Chapter 7.

Salzberg, Sharon. *Lovingkindness: The Revolutionary Art of Happiness*.

Shantideva. *The Way of the Bodhisattva (Bodhicaryavatara)*.

Taranatha. *Essence of Ambrosia*. Contemplations 35-42.