

**The Practices of the Divine Abodes:
Kindness, Compassion, Appreciative Joy and Equanimity
By Mark Nunberg**

The Buddha offered the Divine Abodes as a skillful, wholesome place for the mind to reside. These practices aim at uncovering the heart's natural capacity to love, care for and appreciate all beings unconditionally, including ourselves. This is love for love's sake; there is no expectation or agenda involved, and no preference. It is a love that goes out to all equally. These practices are designed to help us get in touch with that wellspring in our hearts from which unconditional love flows. These powerful emotions are best recognized as the profound absence of all flavors of aversion in the mind and heart.

This unconditional love is called *metta* in the ancient Pali language. Most frequently translated as "lovingkindness", its root meaning is closest to "friendliness". Other possible translations are love, kindness, or benevolence. *Metta* is an integral aspect of the Buddha's teachings and practices, and has three distinct roles: it is a meditation practice that is used to develop the beautiful qualities of the heart; it may form the basis of Samadhi (concentration or absorption) meditation; and it offers a means of recognizing, strengthening and healing our sense of connectedness to all beings through a commitment to universal love and non-harming.

Often we make the mistake of wanting the heart to be loving, compassionate and joyful, so we fall into the trap of imitating some image or idea we have of what that might mean. You might want to investigate the experience of love as being more about what is not there than about what is there. When you experience moments of the mind settling down, make a point of noticing the absence of ill will. Once recognized, practice keeping this experience, the absence of aversion, in mind as the meditation object. See this absence of ill will as love. Do your best to sense its goodness and beauty, and cultivate a deepening appreciation for it. Notice its capacity to expand to fill the space of the body and mind. Notice as other people come to mind that this kind & compassionate presence is also willing to include them and on and on.

The Buddha considers *metta* or this goodness of the heart as a boundless quality of the mind. It doesn't run out. The more it is recognized and held in view, the more it expands and happily meets whatever presents itself in one's experience. Love is capable of filling the space of the present moment until there is nothing left that is not included in its radiance. The Buddha taught that we taste the experience of liberation, a mind free of greed, anger and delusion, in any moment when the mind is established and resting in *metta*.

The Buddha recommended the following contemplation:

I will abide pervading one direction with a mind imbued with metta (same with compassion, appreciative joy and equanimity); likewise the second, likewise the third, likewise the fourth; so

above and below, everywhere and in every way. I will abide pervading the all-encompassing world with a mind imbued with metta; abundant, exalted, immeasurable, without hostility, and without ill-will.

Metta Practice: At times it will be very skillful to train the mind by recalling and keeping one's attention on the wholesome attitude infused with kindness, friendliness and well-wishing. Remember, this basic goodness/generosity of the mind is not seeking anything in return. It has the simple wish, "May all be happy and at ease." The so-called near enemy of this meditation is desire or attachment because it may look like love and therefore go unnoticed. Practitioners often begin with an image or particular being for whom loving feelings are most easily remembered and felt.

There are many ways to begin to strengthen this reflection so it is important to feel free to experiment and see what actually works in your mind. Traditionally the order of offering metta is to ourselves, a benefactor (someone who has really taken care of you), a dear friend, a neutral person, a difficult person, and all beings in all directions without excluding any being. Change the order according to what works for you.

One way of practicing involves three activities. First, we make an effort to remember the person to whom we are sending metta. You might use an image or recall what qualities of this person are most inspiring. Second, we pay attention to the energetic heart center. Finally, we repeat certain phrases that evoke our feelings of friendliness or warmth for this person.

The four traditional *metta* phrases are:

May you/I/all beings be safe from harm.

May you/I/all beings be peaceful and happy - free from distress.

May you/I/all beings be healthy - free from affliction.

May you/I/all beings live with ease and joy.

It is helpful to connect to the meaning of each phrase as it is repeated as a simple act of generosity, the offering of your good wish. Feel free to be creative with the phrases. You may want to simplify and use just one, or come up with your own word or phrase.

Remember - use what helps you to connect with the wholesome feeling/attitude of kindness right here in the heart. Notice if the heart feels open, closed, or nondescript. At times, a good feeling in the heart might arise and become predominant. At these times let the attention go to this upwelling and radiating experience of the heart. You can let any thoughts or images about a particular person drop away as the attention rests in the wholesome radiant quality of the heart

itself.

Keep in mind these same principles you used to cultivate *metta* as you develop your skills with the Divine Abodes of compassion, appreciative joy and equanimity.

Compassion Practice: When the wise and sensitive heart opens to suffering, the attitude or emotion of compassion or *karuna* arises. Recognize the heart's ability to be close to and genuinely care for the alleviation of suffering without being overwhelmed by the suffering. We often begin this practice by bringing to mind a person who is clearly suffering. Then find a way to sense the compassion including/expanding so that no being lies outside its radiance. A traditional order might be: someone experiencing difficulty, oneself, a benefactor, a dear friend, a neutral person, a difficult person, and all beings.

Possible phrases:

I care about your suffering, care enough to be close.

May wisdom and love protect you always.

May you be at ease with these challenging conditions.

May you be free from suffering, and free from the roots of suffering.

Appreciative Joy Practice: When lovingkindness sees beauty and happiness it is expressed as appreciative joy or *mudita*. The aim of *mudita* is to turn *metta* toward the beauty or happiness of another being and connect with joy and our genuine wish that this happiness continue, no matter how mundane it might be. As the heart connects with and appreciates another's happiness, the attention stays with the experience of appreciation. The so called near enemy of appreciative joy is the mind becoming lost in the feeling of exuberance and therefore losing its connection with the goodness perceived in another. The traditional order of this practice is as follows: someone enjoying happiness, dear friend, benefactor, neutral person, difficult person, all beings. Traditionally we don't use oneself for *mudita* practice, but I find that simply letting the feeling shift from appreciative joy to gratitude allows us to easily include oneself.

Possible phrases:

May your happiness/success continue, may it increase, may it never end.

Your happiness/success/joy makes me happy.

Equanimity Practice: Equanimity or *upekka* is the expression of love when it understands the conditional unfolding of all things. Equanimity is an essential foundation for all authentic expressions of love and brings a strong flavor of peace to these beautiful emotions. Feel free to add the quality of equanimity to any of the other Divine Abode practices as a means to go beyond attachments and fears. Equanimity allows one to remain intimate even when things are

confusing or there seems that there is nothing one can do. It is equanimity that allows love to be unconditional. It is equanimity that understands that a person's happiness or unhappiness is due to the person's past causes and conditions, not our wishes for the person. Still, equanimity allows the goodwill & good wishes to generously flow to that person. One traditional reflection goes like this, "You are the owner of your actions. Your happiness and your sorrow depend upon your actions, not upon my wishes for you. Still, I care for you and wish well for you."

Two other equanimity phrases:

This is a lawful universe; everything unfolds according to causes and conditions.

Still, I care about your life, even if I cannot alleviate your suffering.

May all beings relate with wisdom and ease to the changing, uncertain conditions of life.

Forgiveness Practice: When beginning a time of formal reflection on one of the Divine Abodes, you might find it useful to begin the practice with a short forgiveness reflection such as the one that follows below. Bring to mind people who feel safe to bring to mind. You don't need to immediately go to those memories where the pain is overwhelming.

In whatever way I have hurt you, intentionally or unintentionally, I ask your forgiveness.

For all the ways you have hurt me, intentionally or unintentionally, I forgive you.

For all the ways I have harmed myself and others, intentionally or unintentionally, I forgive myself.

If you would like more guidance you may consider purchasing Sharon Salzberg's book, [Lovingkindness: The Revolutionary Art of Happiness](#), published by Shambhala.

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