
WORSHIP

Practicing the Four Immeasurable Qualities

A Universal Buddhist Practice for Awakening the Heart

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ABSTRACT Originating in pre-Buddhist times and present in the teachings of several yogic traditions of India, the cultivation of the four immeasurable qualities (Brahmavihara or Apramana) is taught as essential across Buddhist traditions. These qualities—loving-kindness, compassion, appreciative/sympathetic joy, and equanimity—are practiced as heart meditations, companions to mindfulness and insight. While the practices associated are from the Buddhist tradition, they are universally welcoming to people of all faiths or of none, to cultivate an awakened heart in service to others.

This Worship service follows the format of a traditional dharma talk, followed by guided meditation instructions. The purpose of gathering for this worship service is to hold a traditional dharma talk, followed by guided meditations based on the practice discussed. The topic of this dharma talk is the Brahmaviharas, also known as the Four Immeasurable Qualities. The text for the teaching is very short and has many different translations; this is how I was taught:

May all beings have happiness and the causes of happiness.

May all being be free from suffering and the causes of suffering.

May all beings not be separated from joy devoid of suffering.

May all beings dwell in equanimity, free from attachment and aversion.

These four lines seem simple and straightforward, each representing one of the four qualities: loving-kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy, and equanimity, each practiced in turn as a meditation, but there is quite a bit to unpack. This talk will briefly cover each of these in turn, why we practice each one, and how they are related. Afterwards, there will be meditation instruction in the actual practice. The focus of the practice instructions will be on the second line, which is the practice of compassion.

As we start, I want to note that I titled this service “a universal Buddhist practice for awakening the heart.” This is universal in two ways. First, it is universal because these teachings and practices are part of all Buddhist traditions. Second, and more than that, thinking about those short lines of text, as well as what follows, that this is not explicitly Buddhist—this practice is appropriate for those of any faith or no faith. It is okay to incorporate one’s own understanding in this practice, to bring one’s own faith to the forefront. I will sometimes speak in Buddhist terms, but you are more than welcome to incorporate a Christian, Hindu, secular, etc. understanding into what we do together.

First, we have “*may all being have happiness and the causes of happiness.*” This line is our call to practice loving-kindness, to wish that others, as well as oneself, are happy, healthy, at peace. The primary intention of this as it relates to working with our own minds is to overcome the affliction of anger. The meditation itself goes through stages: kindness for self, then a loved one, then a neutral person, then an enemy, then all beings. What we are doing is trying to combat feelings of anger in general by making the focus progressively more difficult. Over time in the practice, we realize that everyone wants to be happy, to find happiness, and is deserving of such. When we are angry, we stifle happiness in ourselves. Furthermore, we create a difficulty relating to others in a kind way. We can think of times in our own lives where a situation made us angry. What was the better response—to respond with patience and kindness, or to respond with anger? Cultivating this kindness can be challenging when we are frustrated, so we do it in practice to later bring it out into the

world. In the Buddhist tradition, we believe that this kindness is our nature—the essence of our Buddhahood, so really we are just dusting it off in our practice. Similarly, one could see this fundamentally as an expression of God’s love in us.

The other important point in the text is that there is not just happiness, but there are causes of happiness. In acting out of kindness in the world, we play an active role in being a cause for happiness and wellbeing. In very small ways, we create that change. I’m a huge fan of the way author Susan J. Stabile approaches this in the book *Growing in Love and Wisdom: Tibetan Buddhist Sources for Christian Meditation*. She says, as you practice, you can think “How wonderful it would be if everyone had happiness and its causes. May they have these. I shall help them to have these. Lord Jesus, please guide and strengthen me to be able to do so” (2013, 126). I personally don’t include the last part in my own practice, as a Buddhist, but this is one of those ways you can make this practice your own in the context of any faith. The point is that there is an aspiration towards action—to want to be kind in the world.

Kindness comes first. Next is compassion, which will be today’s meditation practice. “*May all being be free from suffering and the causes of suffering.*” Loving-kindness and compassion sometimes seem like we are talking about the same thing, but really they are meant to be complements to each other. Loving-kindness targets anger; compassion targets hate. Working together, they sustain each other—the enmity and anger we are trying to overcome with practicing loving-kindness is a cause of suffering, a cause of hate to be overcome.

When we look at compassion, we are focusing more directly on beings that are suffering, which is beyond wishing them happiness. Here we see that loving-kindness practice focuses on a potential, while compassion focuses on an actual. When we recognize our own suffering, we yearn to be free of it. Similarly, when we approach the suffering of others, it inspires us to action, to ease suffering. Being free of its causes again is recognizing the potential to be free and the potential that we have to free ourselves and others—it is a call to action beyond what we do on the meditation cushion.

Right now, we can acknowledge the difficulty in practicing this after the last few years. Many of us have suffered great illness, great loss. We see violence and suffering at home and abroad. What have we done, what can we do in the face of tragedy? In whatever ways

we can, small and large, we aspire to not be overcome with grief, with our own suffering, to be of service to others in whatever ways we can. It is important to remember this while meditating, to show compassion for oneself, and to not push beyond what we are of.

How do we keep ourselves from being overwhelmed in the face of anger and hatred, in our acknowledgement of suffering? This is the third Immeasurable. “*May all beings not be separated from joy devoid of suffering.*” The term for this is “mudita” and most often is translated as sympathetic joy—finding delight in the joy of others. This works to reverse the overwhelm of compassion practice. We can see the suffering of the world, but we can also see the joy in it. Practicing delighting in the joys of others—or, in some commentaries, rejoicing in the virtue and goodness of others—is targeting our envy, our ambition, our pride, our arrogance. It is practicing to reverse coveting—to desire something that belongs to another, to desire their joy. When I say it balances our ambition, this is because it has no outward goal; it does not strive to make some kind of active change in the world we feel like we need to push ourselves into, something we can become attached to. It is simply learning to feel joyful in the joys and accomplishments of others—a delight for the good in world. This joy can be refreshing.

Finally, we have equanimity. “*May all beings dwell in equanimity, free from attachment and aversion.*” Sometimes the end of this line is translated as “free from passion, aggression, and ignorance.” These are known as the three poisons in Buddhism, the three afflictive emotions to be overcome. We practice to dwell in equanimity for two reasons. The first point is so that we do not get swayed by the emotional affect that can come from focusing on the first three practices. The second is to help us in moving toward a life of service that is more universal. Attachment or passion here is clinging to or pulling in those experiences, people, etc. that we like, that make us happy. Aversion or aggression is the pushing away of those experiences and people we don’t like, we have disdain towards, we don’t agree with. The last one, ignorance, refers to an indifference towards everything in between. In order for our kindness, compassion, and joy to be Immeasurable, it cannot discriminate. It cannot hold onto the things we love while pushing others away. Being in service to others to end suffering becomes universal. That is equanimity.

What follows are the guided meditation instructions for the practice of compassion.

The meditation practice goes in stages, focusing our minds on different objects where we can focus our heart of compassion. The object of the meditation is the person or persons we are focusing on as well as the wish for them to be free of suffering. If your mind wanders, just lightly recognize that you are wandering and make the conscious decision to return to the focus, the object of meditation.

The objects will be compassion for self, then a loved one, then a neutral person, then someone we dislike or with whom we have issues. We can see here we work with attachment, a loved one, indifference, a neutral person, and aversion, someone we don't like. Doing this for ourselves is not in a lot of traditional teachings, but feels pretty important in a culture where we tend to get down on ourselves and be our harshest critics, so we add that one in first.

Please take a comfortable upright seat, feet flat on the floor, and start by just resting your mind. Do this by focusing lightly on the sensation of your breath as it leaves your body. Just rest here for a few minutes.

Now, focus on oneself. May I be free of suffering and the causes of suffering. How wonderful would it be to be free of suffering and its causes. May I have this, may I find guidance and strength to have this. Focus on the sensation of suffering rather than letting your mind wander in a story about the suffering—focus on the emotion itself. The story of what caused the pain can make this overwhelming, particularly with the suffering in recent years. So focus on the feeling itself. May I be free of suffering and its causes. Meditate in this way for three to five minutes.

Next, move your attention to a loved one, someone you hold very dear. How wonderful it would be if my loved one was free of suffering and its causes. May they have this. I shall help them to have this. May I find guidance and strength to be able to do so. Meditate in this way for three to five minutes.

Next, focus on a neutral person. A cashier at your local grocery, someone you saw on the train last week, someone in the room you've never met. How wonderful it would be if this person was free of suffering and its causes. May they have this. I shall help them to have this. May I find guidance and strength to be able to do so. Meditate in this way for three to five minutes.

Next, move your attention an enemy. Someone you dislike, have difficulty with. Maybe not your worst enemy, or a warlord in a far-off country—something you can work on without being overwhelmed. How wonderful it would be if my enemy was free of suffering and its causes. May they have this. I shall help them to have this. May I find guidance and strength to be able to do so. Meditate in this way for three to five minutes.

Finally, we focus on all sentient beings, starting close and moving out. Start with those around you, then those in the building, then the city, the country.

Remember all sentient beings, not just people. May the birds be free, dogs and cats, ants and cockroaches. How wonderful it would be if my all beings were free of suffering and its causes. May they have this. I shall help them to have this. May I find guidance and strength to be able to do so. Meditate in this way for three to five minutes.

Once you reach a place where you cannot take your focus any larger, let go of the entire project. Return your focus to that simple sensation, the movement of the breath leaving the body. Rest here.

REFERENCES

Stabile, Susan J. 2013. *Growing in Love and Wisdom: Tibetan Buddhist Sources for Christian Meditation*. New York: Oxford University Press.