

The Four Immeasurables

Practices and Commentary

By

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The Four Immeasurables

May all beings have happiness
And the causes of happiness.

May all beings be free from suffering
And the causes of suffering.

May all beings never be separate from the supreme joy
That is beyond all sorrow.

May all beings abide in equanimity
Free from attachment and aversion.

What are the Four Immeasurables?

The Four Immeasurables are the four virtuous qualities of loving-kindness (*metta, maitri*), compassion (*karuna*), sympathetic joy (*mudita*), and equanimity (*upekkha, upeksha*).

We use Buddhist meditation practices to cultivate these virtues, radiating these qualities out to all beings, including ourselves. The basic idea is to take each one of the Four Immeasurables, and in turn apply them to ourselves, to those nearby, and outward to all beings everywhere.

Loving-Kindness

Loving-kindness towards all: This is the hope that a person will be well. Loving-kindness is the wish that all sentient beings, without any exception, have happiness and its causes.

The Practice of Loving-Kindness

Compassion

Compassion is the hope that a person's suffering will diminish; It is the wish for all sentient beings to be free from suffering.

The image that is sometimes used for this *Immeasurable*, is that of an armless mother watching her child wash away in a river. The intense compassion of, "*what can I do?*" Another image is that of a cow going to the slaughter; we experience the cow as our own mother, and experience the depth of empathy; the cow has no protection and no refuge.

Compassion is active sympathy, extended to all sentient beings. We feel this for those less fortunate than us. There is nothing more important than developing compassion, and thus purifying our karma. If we think about our karmic vision, we know that what we see is a projection of our own mind – our own impurities. Compassion never fails to purify.

Ideally, compassion is combined with *prajña*, or wisdom. This is the wisdom that understands things as they really are. This is because we know that all sentient beings exist in each other, and take identity from each other. A Theravada scholar, Nyanaponika Thera, had this to say about compassion: "*It is compassion that removes the heavy bar, opens the door to freedom, makes the narrow heart as wide as the world. Compassion takes away from the heart the inert weight, the paralyzing heaviness; it gives wings to those who cling to the lowlands of the self.*"

There is a saying in regard to the experience of compassion: *There is a little grief mixed in with it.* Why might this be so?

To develop compassion, we practice *Tonglen*. *Tong* means 'to send,' and *len* means 'to take.' In this practice, we are sending out positive qualities and taking in other's suffering. This practice is based upon the understanding of what is referred to in Buddhism as emptiness. This means that all phenomena – all things – are devoid of any real, absolute existence. There is no one out there, no suffering, etc. It is an emptiness that is free from seizing and holding. If we don't have this basic understanding, then we lack the base of this practice. We can practice *tonglen* without injuring ourselves when we take on the suffering of others because we have that flash of emptiness. If we bring the suffering of others into our hearts and flash on this natural luminosity, which is our true nature, then that suffering is purified. We aren't taking it on, so to speak.

In Shamatha meditation, there is that space at the end of the out breath, before the next in-breath. Remember how you could rest there for a nano-second or so? That expansive rest is emptiness, the place where the luminous nature of our true being arises. This luminosity is our *true nature*. There is nothing to do. This luminosity is also sometimes called, *the ground of being*.

Tonglen: The Practice of Compassion

Sympathetic Joy

Sympathetic joy is an altruistic joy in the accomplishments of a person, oneself, or other. Sympathetic joy is the wholesome attitude of rejoicing in the happiness and virtues of all sentient beings.

There is worldly happiness, which can provide opportunities for spiritual progress, yet this is impermanent. Then, there is the form of sympathetic joy that comes from rejoicing in the favorable conditions of others and the wish for others to maintain that happiness and spiritual progress. Immeasurable sympathetic joy arises from the wish that living beings are never removed from favorable conditions, out of which may develop the supreme happiness of liberation. It is developed through practicing sympathetic joy for other's happiness – not envy or jealousy, nor competition – and the removal of envy or dislike.

The cultivation of sympathetic joy is also an antidote to envy and jealousy. Sympathetic joy can also be interpreted more broadly, as referring to an inner spring of infinite joy that is available to everyone at all times, regardless of the circumstances (*Sahajacintayogini*). The more deeply one drinks of this spring, the more secure one becomes in their own abundant happiness, and the easier it then becomes to rejoice in the joy of others as well.

The traditional example of the mind-state of sympathetic joy, is the attitude of a parent observing a growing child's accomplishments and successes. It is traditionally regarded as the most difficult of the *Brahmaviharas*, or Four Immeasurables, to cultivate. To show sympathetic joy is to celebrate happiness and achievements in others, even when we are facing difficulties ourselves.

In these practices, we work actively with jealousy and envy because the focus of practice is on the happiness of others. The practice is to find when we feel jealousy and envy, and then wish even more happiness for the other person.

Practicing sympathetic joy allows us to apply relative bodhicitta to those we think have more than us. All comparison, or opposing, beliefs, thoughts, and values are here in this Immeasurable. Here, we consciously rejoice in the good qualities of others, and the positive events in the lives of others. The negativity that we might harbor towards the happiness of others – whether overt or subtle – harms us more than it harms them. With the experience of emptiness, compassion arises, and the boundaries between self and others break down.

The Practice of Sympathetic Joy

Equanimity

Equanimity is learning to accept both loss and gain, praise and blame, success and failure, with detachment equally for oneself and others. Equanimity means, “not to distinguish between friend, enemy or stranger, but to regard every sentient being as equal. It is a clear-minded, tranquil state of mind – not being overpowered by delusions, mental dullness or agitation.”

The Practice of Equanimity



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