

The Four Divine Abodes and Fraternity

A Theravāda Perspective

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We find in the teachings of the Buddha the “four divine abodes” that define how Buddhists should relate to one another. The kinds of relations described by the Buddha in these teachings provide a method for building relationships that Pope Francis describes as “fraternal.” These four divine abodes—loving kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy, and equanimity—are described by the Buddha in the following ways:

Mettā (Loving Kindness)

This kind of love lacks the desire to possess. In the ultimate sense there is no possession and no possessor. This is the highest kind of love: it is love without thinking of oneself, knowing well that this

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so-called “self” is a mere delusion. Loving kindness comes from a deeper source within and embraces all beings, be they noble-minded or low-minded, good or evil. The noble-minded and the good are embraced because loving kindness flows spontaneously. The low-minded and evil are included because they are the ones most in need of love. In many evil persons, the seed of goodness may have died merely because warmth for its growth was lacking. It perished from “cold” in a loveless world.

Loving kindness embraces all beings, knowing well that we all are fellow wayfarers—brothers and sisters as Pope Francis says—through this round of existence, all of us overcome by the same law of suffering. This kind of love lies like a soft but firm hand on ailing beings, unchanging in its sympathy, unwavering, and unconcerned with any response it meets. It is a comforting coolness to those who burn with the fire of suffering and passion. It is life-giving warmth to those abandoned in the cold desert of loneliness; to those shivering in the frost of a loveless world; to those whose hearts have become empty and dry from repeated calls for help, from deepest despair.

Loving kindness is a sublime nobility of heart and intellect that knows, understands, and is ready to help. Loving kindness that is strength and gives strength is the highest love. Loving kindness which the Enlightened One called “the liberation of the heart,” and “the most sublime beauty,” this is the highest love.

Karuṇā (Compassion)

Compassion removes the heavy bar, opens the door of freedom, and makes the narrow heart as wide as the world. Compassion lifts from the heart the inert weight, the paralyzing heaviness; it gives wings to those who cling to the lowlands of self. Through

compassion the fact of suffering remains vividly present to our mind, even at those times when we personally are free from it. It gives us the rich experience of suffering, thus strengthening us to meet it prepared when it does befall us or another person.

Compassion reconciles us to our destiny by showing us the lives of others, often much harder than our own. Behold the endless caravan of beings, men, women, and animals, burdened with sorrow and pain! The burden of every one of them we also have carried in bygone times during the unfathomable sequence of repeated rebirths. Behold this, and open your heart to compassion! This misery may well be our own destiny again! He who is without compassion now will one day cry for it. If sympathy for others is lacking, it will have to be acquired through one's own long and painful experience. This is the great law of life. Knowing this, keep guard over yourself!

The compassion of the wise man does not render him a victim of suffering. His thoughts, words, and deeds are full of pity. But his heart does not waver; unchanged, it remains serene and calm. How else should he be in order to be able to help?

May such compassion arise in our hearts! It is a compassion that is the sublime nobility of heart and intellect, that knows, understands, and is ready to help. Such compassion is strength and gives strength! This is the highest compassion. And what is the highest manifestation of compassion? To show to the world the path leading to the end of suffering, the path pointed out, trodden and realized to perfection by Him, the Exalted One, the Buddha.

Muditā (Sympathetic Joy)

Not only compassion but also sympathetic joy with others opens your heart! Small, indeed, is the share of happiness and joy allotted

to beings! Whenever a little happiness comes to them, you may rejoice that at least one ray of joy has pierced through the darkness of their lives and dispelled the gray and gloomy mist that enwraps their hearts.

Your life will gain in joy by sharing in the happiness of others as if it were your own. Have you observed how in moments of happiness people's features change and become bright with joy? It is in your power to increase such an experience of sympathetic joy by producing happiness in others, by bringing them joy and solace. Noble and sublime joy is a helper on the path to the extinction of suffering. Not the one who is depressed by grief but the one possessed of joy finds that serene calmness leading to a contemplative state of mind. Sympathetic joy refers to a sublime nobility of heart and intellect that knows, understands, and is ready to help. Sympathetic joy that is strength and gives strength. This is the highest joy.

Upekkhā (Equanimity)

Equanimity is learning to accept loss and gain, good-repute and ill-repute, praise and censure, sorrow and happiness, all with detachment, equally, for oneself and for others. Equanimity is not to distinguish between friend, enemy, or stranger but to regard every sentient being as an equal. It is a clear-minded tranquil state of mind that is not overpowered by delusions, mental dullness, or agitation. Here are passages from a discourse of the Buddha (*Digha Nikaya*, 13) about these four divine abodes:

- Here, monks, a disciple dwells pervading one direction with his heart filled with loving kindness, likewise the second, the third, and the fourth direction; so above, below and around;

he dwells pervading the entire world everywhere and equally with his heart filled with loving kindness, abundant, grown great, measureless, free from enmity and free from distress.

- Here, monks, a disciple dwells pervading one direction with his heart filled with compassion, likewise the second, the third, and the fourth direction; so above, below and around; he dwells pervading the entire world everywhere and equally with his heart filled with compassion, abundant, grown great, measureless, free from enmity and free from distress.
- Here, monks, a disciple dwells pervading one direction with his heart filled with sympathetic joy, likewise the second, the third, and the fourth direction; so above, below and around; he dwells pervading the entire world everywhere and equally with his heart filled with sympathetic joy, abundant, grown great, measureless, free from enmity and free from distress.
- Here, monks, a disciple dwells pervading one direction with his heart filled with equanimity, likewise the second, the third, and the fourth direction; so above, below and around; he dwells pervading the entire world everywhere and equally with his heart filled with equanimity, abundant, grown great, measureless, free from enmity and free from distress.

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