

The greatest love

Lovingkindness (*mettā*) is the first of four positive emotions, also known as the divine abodes or perfect abidings (*brahma, vihāra*). While the ancient brahmins claim that they are the only way to God and heaven, the Buddha brings them right down to earth, declaring that they can be cultivated in our own hearts. Rather than external deity and making promises of heaven, by cultivating the godly qualities of compassion (*karuṇā*), appreciative joy (*muditā*) and equanimity (*upekkhā*), we experience godliness and heaven right here and now.

Heaven is not an after-death place where only the chosen or select few can go. It is right here where we are, when our hearts are consistently filled with lovingkindness, so that those around us, too, feel empowered to be their true happy selves. To show lovingkindness is to accept others as they are, like allowing a good seed to grow, giving it all the wholesome conditions so that it will blossom into a fruitful and shady tree.

Lovingkindness is the foundation for these divine qualities in the sense that we must start with cultivating lovingkindness successfully before proceeding on to the other levels of positive emotions. The 5th century commentator, Buddhaghosa, further explains: Why is lovingkindness alone spoken of so distinctly? Because it is the foundation of all the four divine abodes,¹ and also on account of its fulfilling all of the wholesome states beginning with giving (Vism 9.124/325).²

The divine abodes are said to be “perfect, divine” (*brahma*) because of they are the best of emotions and because of their faultless nature. They are the best ways to relate to others. As the High Gods (*brahmā*) are fearless, even so these emotions infuse such godliness in us. They are called “immeasurable” (*appamāṇā, appamāṇ-ñā*) because they can reach out to immeasurable beings. (DhsA 192-197; Vism 263-270)³

The Buddha has both incomparable compassion and supreme wisdom. Everything that a teacher can possibly do, he has done for us. He teaches not only humans, but also the gods, the beings of other realms, and even animals benefit from his presence.⁴ Above all, the Buddha shows us how in this world itself, in this body itself, we can see salvation and liberation.

For, we are as we think. Thinking often uses words without feeling. The Buddha teaches us how to feel, to love, beginning with ourselves. Just as we love ourselves, so too we should love others. This is the beginning of a good society as well as a true individual.

¹ The four are listed in **Saṅgīti S** (D 33.1.11(6)/3:223 f).

² On the primacy of lovingkindness, see further **Mettā Bhāvanā S** (It 1.3.7) = SD 30.7 (1.2.1.2).

³ For a description of the immeasurable or divine abodes with similes, see **Tevijja S** (D 13.76-79/1:251) = SD 1.8. On the divine abodes with the elements, see **Vuṭṭha Vass’āvāsa S** (A 9.11.4/4:375 f) = SD 28.21. On how the divine abodes limit karma, see **Brahma, vihāra S** (A 10.206/5:299) = SD 2.10.

⁴ See the reflection on Animals Go To Heaven:

<http://piyaweeeklyreflection.googlepages.com/090121AnimalsGoToHeaven.pdf>

The Greatest Love by Piya Tan

In the field of human conflict, those who die for us we call “fallen heroes.” Those who defend us and the values that we cherish, and continue to do so are called true “living heroes.” Buddhaghosa gives a famous parable of the four persons and the bandit.

Once a monk was sitting with someone dear, a neutral person, and a hostile person. A bandit comes along and demands only one of them for a human sacrifice. If the monk says, “Take me,” he lack self-love; if he says “Take this or that person,” he lacks other-love. But, he says, “Let no one die,” and he convinces the bandit not to kill. He has the greatest love of all.

In fact, it is harder to live for those we truly love and things we truly cherish. The Buddha does not die for us: he lives for us. No greater love has a man than this, that he lives for us, teaching us that we have the capacity and power to free ourselves from suffering.⁵

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⁵ This reflection is based on a section in the essay on **Spiritual friendship: A textual study** = SD 34.18.