

## The potential of divine abode practice

Excerpt from *SD 60.2 Mindfulness and lovingkindness: Versatility and harmony in early Buddhist mental cultivation* by TAN Beng Sin (Piya Tan) © 2023.

### 3.2.1 The divine abodes and non-returning

**3.2.1.1** Although the divine abodes do not constitute an independent path to full awakening in early Buddhism, this does not mean that they do not play a significant role in the progress to awakening. This is in fact the theme of both of the Dhammapada verses we mentioned [3.1.2]. **Dh 368** clearly highlights that “dwelling in lovingkindness,” that is cultivating *mettā*, can help us progress on the path of awakening.

**The (Karaḷa, kāya) Brahma, vihāra Sutta** (A 10.208) and its Madhyama Āgama parallel are even more explicit about this: they present a noble disciple’s practice of the divine abodes as particularly helpful for attaining non-returning.<sup>1</sup>

**3.2.1.2** A similarly significant statement is found in the well known **Karaṇīya Metta Sutta** (Sn 1.8 = Khp 9). This Sutta closes by stating that when one cultivates lovingkindness:

<i>diṭṭhiñ ca anupagamma</i>	And not falling into views,
<i>sīlavā dassanena sampanno</i>	virtuous, accomplished in insight,
<i>kāmesu vineyya gedham</i>	having discarded greed for sense-pleasures—
<i>na hi jātu gabbha, seyyam punā-r-etī ti</i>	one will not return to lie in a womb. (Sn 152)

The first 2 lines seem to allude to the overcoming of the first 3 fetters (*sarṃyojana*) of self-identity view (*sakkāya, diṭṭhi*), attachment to rituals and vows (*sīla-b, bata parāmāsa*) and doubt (*vicikicchā*): this refers to **the streamwinner**. The last 2 lines then can only allude to **the non-returned**, one who has overcome both sensual desire and its opposite, *ill will*; and will not return to (be reborn in) the sense-world. This is, in fact, confirmed by the Commentary (KhpA 251,22).<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> **A 10.208**/5:300,12 (SD 2.10) explains that a noble disciple (*ariya, sāvaka*) who develops *mettā* (and the other abodes) in this way will progress to non-returning, similarly stated in MĀ 15 (T1.438a22); on the slightly differing phrasing in Tib version, but which still speaks of a noble disciple, see discussion in Martini 2012:68 f n58.

<sup>2</sup> Sn 1.8/142-152 (SD 38.3). W H Walters (“New light on enlightenment: a convergence of recent scholarship and emerging neuroscience?” *J of the Oxford Centre for Buddhist Studies* 3 2012) is wrong in concluding that the parable of the mother caring for her only child (**Sn 149b**) “apparently, is how one may achieve enlightenment” (2012: 162). The closing verse **Sn 152** should be read with the lovingkindness cultivator “having understood” *abhisamecca* (**Sn 143b**; a durative verb meaning), ie, “with the understanding” of the nature of nirvana. The last verse (Sn 152) refers to the streamwinner who is capable of attaining non-returning. Thus—as Analayo notes (2015d)—“when Crosby 2008:8 concludes that ‘*mettā*, according to this text, is salvific’ [cf Maithrimurthi 1999:65-67 and Gombrich 2009:87] then this is correct only as long as such cultivation is undertaken by a virtuous person and based on the transcendence of views and the vision attained with stream-entry, leading through the removal of sensuality to non-return [sic]. The stanza does not present *mettā* as leading to realization all by itself, without being combined with these other aspects of the path.” (Analayo 2015d: n94, citing Crosby, “Gendered symbols in Theravada Buddhism: missed positives in the representation of the female,” *Hsuan Chuang J of Buddhist Studies* 9 2008:8; Maithrimurthi, *Wohllwollen, Mitleid, Freude und Gleichmut*, 1999:65-67, and Gombrich, *What the Buddha Thought*, 2009:87.)

In other words, **the Karaja, kāya Brahma, vihāra Sutta** (A 10.208) and its parallels as well as **the Karaṇīya Metta Sutta** (Sn 1.8 = Khp 9) may be stating that *mettā* is able to help in our progress from streamwinning to non-returning. Due to the frequent occurrence of teachings on *mettā* in the suttas, it is not surprising that it is so. We will examine this further below [5].

### **3.2.2 Lovingkindness and the mental fetters**

**3.2.2.1** The liberating potential of lovingkindness in this respect [3.2.1] would then be closely related to **the mental fetters** (*saṃyojana*) that the streamwinner must overcome if they are to progress and gain non-returning. More specifically, lovingkindness helps in the overcoming and uprooting of the twin defilements of sensual desire (*kāma-c, chanda*) and ill will (*vyāpāda*).

These defilements are significantly weakened with the attaining of **once-returning** and uprooted by **non-returning**. The **(Tika) Sikkhā Sutta 1** (A 3.85) and the **(Sekha) Uddesa Sutta 2** (A 3.86), and their Saṃyukta Āgama parallels<sup>3</sup> further show that to progress from streamwinning to non-returning requires in particular fulfilling the training in concentration (based on being accomplished in moral virtue and with some deep level of wisdom).

To progress from streamwinning to non-returning, we must fulfill the training in concentration by mastering the dhyanas, with which *sensual desire* and *ill will* are uprooted. The reason is clear and simple: in order to be free from sensual desire which is sense-based, we need to be well acquainted with transcorporeal bliss—that of the dhyanas. When we have overcome sensual desire, its opposite, ill will is also uprooted.

This process of gaining the dhyanas can indeed be accomplished with the help of lovingkindness. Lovingkindness cultivation is thus one of the ways for fulfilling the training in concentration. The experience of inner happiness and peace of deep concentration is able to free us from the sensual pleasures when we are still under the power of our physical senses.

**3.2.2.2** Lovingkindness helps in attaining deep meditation concentration, which in turn is needed for overcoming and uprooting **anger and hatred**, since lovingkindness is, by its very nature, opposed to them. This transformative potential of lovingkindness is widely confirmed by contemporary psychological study and research, which has empirically shown various benefits of lovingkindness cultivation.<sup>4</sup> Studies have shown, for example, that the cultivation of lovingkindness is often effective in reducing, even removing, anger and

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<sup>3</sup> A 3.85/1:232,12 (SD 3.3(2)) and A 3.86/1:233,22 (SD 80.13) with their parallels SĀ 820 (T2.210c1) and SĀ 821 (T2.210c27). Cf **(Tika) Sikkhā S 3** (A 3.87,4/1:235), SD 80.14.

<sup>4</sup> For a survey, see S G **Hofmann** et al, “Loving-kindness and compassion meditation: potential for psychological interventions,” *Clinical Psychology Review* 31 **2011**:1126-1132.; B **Alba**, “Loving-kindness meditation: a field study,” *Contemporary Buddhism* 14,2 2013. [[ResearchGate](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/354111111)] 7 Oct 2023.

psychological distress,<sup>5</sup> as well as the negative symptoms of schizophrenia,<sup>6</sup> and to increase positive emotions and pro-social behaviour.<sup>7</sup>

Hence, undoubtedly, to engage in the practice of **lovingkindness** or any of the other divine abodes, especially compassion, benefits human vis-à-vis adversities and suffering. More significant for Buddhist practitioners is that lovingkindness is a great help for the path of awakening. Although lovingkindness in itself is not a path to awakening, it offers (as we have noted above) great support for the path of awakening.

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<sup>5</sup> J W Carson, F J Keefe, T R Lynch & K M Carson, "Lovingkindness Meditation for Chronic Low Back Pain," *Journal of Holistic Nursing*, 23.3 2005:287-304.

<sup>6</sup> D P **Johnson**, D L Penn, B L Fredrickson, P S Meyer, A M Kring, and M Brantley, "Loving-kindness meditation to enhance recovery from negative symptoms of schizophrenia," *J of Clinical Psychology* 65,5 **2009**:499-509. D P **Johnson**, D.L. Penn, B L Fredrickson, A M Kring, P S Meyer, L I Catalino, & M Brantley, "A pilot study of loving kindness meditation for the negative symptoms of schizophrenia," *Schizophrenia Research* 129 **2011**: 137-140.

<sup>7</sup> B L **Fredrickson**, M A Cohn, K A Coffey, J Pek, & S M Finkel, "Open hearts build lives: positive emotions, induced through loving-kindness meditation, build consequential personal resources," *J of Personality and Social Psychology* 95,5 **2008**:1045-1062. C A **Hutcherson**, E M Seppala, & J J Gross, "Loving-kindness meditation increases social connectedness," *Emotion* 8,5 **2008**:720-724. Notably in a study of *mettā* as a buffer for social stress R W **Law** (2011) found that exposure to even very brief sessions of *mettā* can actually have negative effects for those who are in a negative mood (*An Analogue Study of Loving-Kindness Meditation as a Buffer against Social Stress*, PhD thesis, Tucson: Univ of Arizona, **2011**) [[ProQuest](#)] 7 Oct 2023. Law explains that "engaging in LKM [lovingkindness meditation] may bring attention to whatever feelings the participant is having in the moment. If the participant enters into [an] LKM session in a negative mood (or not in a positive mood), these negative (or non-positive) feelings would become more salient during the meditation. While these negative (or non-positive) feelings may dissipate in a longer meditation session, they may actually become accentuated in the short run in a brief meditation session." (Law 2011:112)