

Radiation of lovingkindness

Excerpt from SD 60.2 Mindfulness and lovingkindness.¹

4.1.2.1 Considering the growing frequency of difficulties [eg 4.1.1.2] with lovingkindness meditation as taught and practised today, it's time that we re-examine the standard instructions for lovingkindness meditation and bring to them new perspectives. To begin with, the idea of using the verbal formulas to cultivate lovingkindness to specific individuals—starting with oneself and proceeding to a dear friend, then a neutral person, followed by a hostile person—is *not* found in the early Buddhist texts.²

In the suttas, called “the early Buddhist texts” (EBTs), compiled between the 5th and the 3rd centuries BCE,³ the cultivation of the 4 immeasurables (*appamāṇa* or *appamañña*) or divine abodes (*brahma, vihāra*) by way of radiating them in all directions. **The (Brahma, vihāra) Subha Sutta** (M 99), records the well known metaphor of a **mighty conch-blower** who “with little difficulty makes a proclamation to the 4 quarters,”⁴ even so:

[one,] with a heart⁵ of **lovingkindness**, dwells suffusing one quarter;
so, too, the second; so, too, the third; so, too, the fourth;
thus above, below, across, everywhere, and to everyone,
he dwells suffusing all the world with lovingkindness
that is vast, grown great [exalted], immeasurable, without hate, without ill-will.
(M 99,24-27/2:207 f), SD 38.6

4.1.2.2 In the ancient India, blowing a **conch-shell** was a regular means of communication over distances and for important rituals. Hence, it was employed in warfare, too, for communicating strategic moves, since its pervasive sound could be heard above the battle din. Even today, the conch is blown during certain ceremonies, especially at the start of Hindu *pūjā* or ritual worship.⁶

Furthermore, the blowing of a conch requires skill and strength. One has to breathe into the abdomen and thorax. The lips need to be properly puckered to create the vibratory force to sound the conch. Different kinds of conch sounds are made by adjusting the lips and tongue. The conch sound is then pervasive and resonant. The spread and beauty of the conch-sound is thus an apt illustration for the radiation of lovingkindness in all directions.⁷

The cultivation of lovingkindness and of compassion—these 2 are popular with psychology specialists and researchers—thus needs both strength and skill. The key idea of

¹ <http://www.themindingcentre.org/dharmafarer/wp-content/uploads/60.2-Mindfulness-lovingkindness.-piya.pdf>

² Analayo, “Immeasurable meditations and mindfulness,” *Mindfulness* 10 2029:2620-2628. Analayo further refers to his “Compassion in the Āgamas and Nikāyas,” *Dharma Drum Journal of Buddhist Studies* 16 2015:1-30.

³ **Analayo**, “The historical value of the Pali discourses,” *Indo-Iranian Journal* 55 **2012e**:223-253. **Sujato & Brahmali**, *The Authenticity of the Early Buddhist Texts*, Perth, Australia, 2015: ch 3. [OCBS].

⁴ *Saṅkha, dhama*, M 99,24-27/2:207 f = S 42.8/4:322.

⁵ “Heart,” *citta*.

⁶ The conch is the shell of the giant sea-snail, *Turbinella pyrum*, abundantly found in the Indian Ocean. The **conch** is blown thrice before a *pūjā*, and also during such occasions as honouring the earth deity (*bhūmi pūjā*) (as ground-breaking ritual), and during marriage, house-warming and *upanayana* (brahminical thread ritual) marking passage into adulthood. It is also used for pouring the “dedication water” (*dakḥhiṇ’odaka*) during marriage and dedication of merits.

⁷ On cultivating the divine abodes *directionally*, see SD 38.5 (2.1.3.2).

the conch metaphor is the immeasurable or boundless pervasion in all directions by the sound of the conch. The same pervasive nature of the mental radiation of the 4 divine abodes are thus made in an “immeasurable” or “boundless” manner in the 6 quarters (east, south, west, north, below and above). The key characteristic of the mental radiation of lovingkindness and the other 3 divine abodes is their immeasurability and boundlessness.

4.1.2.3 The (Majjhima) Dhānañjāni Sutta (M 97) has the “divine abode” pericope (on lovingkindness, compassion, gladness and equanimity), but without the conch-blower parable. The Sutta relates how the elder Sāriputta attends to the brahmin Dhānañjāni on his deathbed, one who clearly has not received the teaching on the divine abodes before. The Sutta also tells us that this brahmin has at an earlier time been engaging in immoral conduct.

Clearly then the brahmin is not a meditator but, compassionately guided by an arhat (Sāriputta), he is able to meditate to reach sufficient mental focus so that, upon dying (and despite his terminal pains), is reborn in a brahma heaven. The practice of the divine abodes literally brings the brahmin Dhānañjāni to the divine abiding (*brahma, vihāra*) of the brahmas (high gods).

Given that according to **the (Majjhima) Dhānañjāni Sutta** (M 97) the brahmin is able to cultivate the brahmavihāras sufficiently well to be reborn as a brahma, it follows that he must have been able to successfully execute Sāriputta’s instructions on radiating the abodes, despite his dying state and lack of meditative expertise. From all this, we may rightly conclude that it is possible to benefit from the practice of the immeasurables by radiating lovingkindness and the other divine abodes without the need of attaining dhyana, as in Dhānañjāni’s case.

4.1.2.4 From the parable of the conch-blower [4.1.2.2] and the account of Dhānañjāni’s rebirth [4.1.2.3], it is clear that the stock passage on the divine abodes [4.1.2.1] does not mention any *subject* of such radiation, that is, no one is mentioned as the “recipient” to whom the positive emotion is directed. Rather, the emphasis is on *the personal experience* of the boundless radiation itself.

The boundless radiation of the positive emotion takes the intentions and feelings of lovingkindness and the other divine abodes as both its *object and content*. The attention is not in any external person, being or state (or their internalized images) but in the subtler experience of the immeasurable state (*appamāna*) itself, that is, the intention rooted in lovingkindness, compassion, gladness or equanimity itself. One’s heart or mind is then said to be “boundless” or “immeasurable” (*appamāṇa*).⁸

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⁸ See Dhammadinna, “Semantics of wholesomeness: purification of intention and the soteriological function of the immeasurables (*appamāṇas*) in early Buddhist thought,” in (ed) K-p Chuang, *Buddhist Meditative Traditions: their origin and development*, Taiwan: Dharma Drum Publishing Corp, 2014:90.