

Living the divine abodes

Excerpt from *SD 38.3 Karaṇīya Metta Sutta, how to cultivate lovingkindness* by Piya Tan © 1987, rev 2012.¹

7.1.1 Living like God (Brahma)

7.1.1.1 The pre-Buddhist (and pre-Abrahamic) Indian conception of God as a supreme being is one who is unequivocally compassionate without any tinge of anger or “power” mode. This ancient conception—since it was not against the Buddha’s teaching on compassion—is accepted as “godliness” (*devatā*) by early Buddhism, internalized by us as the “**divine abodes**” (*brahma, vihāra*). This is a term for the ideal (mental) qualities of unconditional love at different levels.²

7.1.1.2 There is evidence in the Pali Nikāyas suggesting that the practice of the divine abodes is pre-Buddhist, that is, going back even before the current Indian civilization itself. This is a time before any of the Indian religions arose, perhaps in mythical time. King Sudassana and king Makhā, deva (both of whom are said to have lived before the Buddha), for example, cultivated the divine abodes and are reborn in the Brahma world (D 17; M 83).³

The practice was, however, prevalent among the other religious sects even during the Buddha’s time. Some wanderers (*paribbājaka*) are said to have the benefit of a whole exposition of the 4 divine abodes, as stated in **the Mettā Saha, gata Sutta** (S 46.54).⁴ Their practice, it is said, if properly practised, brings about union with (that is, rebirth amongst) the brahmas (*brahma, saavyatā*) (D 1:250; M 2:195, 207).

7.1.1.3 The nature of the divine abodes is distinctly buddhicised (made Buddhist) when they are tempered or upgraded with the “freedom of mind” (*ceto, vimutti*).⁵ For the wanderers and non-Buddhists in general, the practice of the divine abodes leads at best to rebirth in the brahma-world, amongst the high gods (in “heaven,” as some might say today). The *Buddhist* cultivation of “freedom of mind” through the divine abodes, however, can lead up to the state of non-returning (*anāgāmi*), that is, just a sure step before nirvana itself (A 10.208).⁶

7.1.1.4 The 4 divine abodes are mentioned in **the Saṅgīti Sutta** (D 33)⁷ and explained in its Commentary as the 4 immeasurables (*appamaññā*),⁸ “the 8 attainments (*aṭṭha samāpatti*),⁹

¹ <http://www.themindingcentre.org/dharmafarer/wp-content/uploads/38.3-Karaniya-Metta-S-khp-9-Sn-1.8-piya.pdf>

² For details, see **Brahma, vihāra**, SD 38.5.

³ **D 17**, 2.13/2:194 (SD 36.12); **M 83**, 6/2:76 (SD 60.8). On def of *brahma*, see **Brahma, vihāra**, SD 38.5 (1.1).

⁴ S 46.54/5:115-121 (SD 10.11).

⁵ *Ceto, vimutti* is sometimes tr as “freedom by concentration,” ie through destruction of the mental hindrances, and is often contrasted with *paññā, vimutti*, “freedom through wisdom (or insight).” The differences between the 2 types of freedom are given in **Mahā, nidāna S** (D 2:70 f) and **Kīṭā, giri S** (M 1:477 f).

⁶ **(Karaja, kāya) Brahma, vihāra S** (A 10.208, 2+3c+3f+4/5:300 f), SD 2.10.

⁷ D 33, 1.11(6)/3:223 f.

⁸ For a description of the 4 immeasurables with similes, see **Tevijja S** (D 13, 76-79/1:251), SD 1.8.

⁹ On **the 8 attainments** are the 4 form dhyanas (see SD 8.4 (5)) and 4 formless attainments (see SD 24.11 (5)); cf 8 liberations (*aṭṭha vimokkha*): see **Maha, parinibbāna S** (D 16.3.33 n), SD 9.

and the attainment of fruition (*phala,samāpatti*)”¹⁰ respectively (DA 3:1006).¹¹ Even before the 4 divine abodes were standardized, the term *mettā* is associated with such qualities as *upekhā, karuṇā, vimutti, and muditā* (Sn 3:39ab) (Jayawickrama, 1977: 96 & n13).

They are also called the “4 immeasurables” (*ap-pamāṇa = a,parimāṇa; Skt apramāṇa*), because here we need to “break the barrier”¹² of limited and neurotic application in order to truly effect them. The importance of the *brahma,vihāra* in Buddhist practice is attested by their many epithets: the divine abodes, the immeasurables or boundless states, the abidings of the great ones, the qualities of a great person, the virtues of a true leader, the social emotions, the positive emotions, the qualities of a true professional, and so on.

7.1.2 Lovingkindness as the basis for wisdom

7.1.2.1 The greatest spiritual significance of the divine abodes is in its use as the cultivation of unconditional love and joy as *the basis for experiencing non-self*. This is, of course, most effective when any of the abodes is cultivated to the level of dhyana.¹³ However, even without dhyana, but with some level of focused practice, we can enjoy the profound bliss of lovingkindness. In our daily lives, we should at least make every effort to keep our hearts imbued with lovingkindness, no matter what.

With such a practice, one thing we are certain to notice is that it is not always easy to sustain lovingkindness in this way. In difficult and troubled times, when we least expect it, we might find ourselves allowing anger or hate to have the better of us when we are painfully affected by the badness, foolishness or weakness of others. We become like a lion with a splinter stuck in our paw, roaring in pain and anguish, but with no Androcles to remove the splinter.¹⁴ As humans, we are ourselves Androcles, unless we choose to go on lionising ourselves.

7.1.2.2 When we review such moments, we will discover that we are “not ourselves,” that is, we would not under “normal circumstances,” react in such a negative way. Our negative habitual tendencies (the “old self” or past karmic habits) have overtaken us.

However, if we cultivate lovingkindness well enough, we would be able to quickly overcome, even prevent, such reactions to negative situations. The fact remains that we are clearly aware of the unwholesomeness of such negative situations, and even wish to get away from them. These situations are not “places” we could move or keep away from, but they are mental states we need to overcome within ourselves.

7.1.2.3 One important way to know that we are heading in a self-healing direction is that we are more naturally able to direct our lovingkindness to those very people who are hurting or harming us. In fact, we might even feel a great compassion in our hearts that these people

¹⁰ *Phala* means “fruition, result,” which denotes, according to Abhidhamma, those moments of supramundane consciousness which flash forth immediately after the moment of path-consciousness (the moment of attaining sainthood), and which, until the attainment of the next higher path, may with the practice of insight, recur countless times. In such a situation, it is called “fruition attainment” (*phala,samāpatti*) (sv BDict): see Vism 23.6-15/699-702.

¹¹ D 1:250 f 3:223 f, M 1:38 297 276 195 207 3:146, S 4:296, A 5:299 344.

¹² Vism 9:40; cf Khp 248.

¹³ See *Brahma,vihāra*, SD 38.5 (7.4 & 8.3).

¹⁴ On the fable, see <http://classiclitt.about.com/library/bl-etexts/aesop/bl-aesop-androcles.htm>. See also <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Androcles>.

are incapable of behaving otherwise because they have their own issues or are spiritually weak themselves. Hence, all the more we need to invoke and sustain a healing ambience for them through our lovingkindness.

7.1.2.4 On some higher level, we would come to realize that it is the idea of some kind of abiding “self” (“*this* is what I am,” “he or they are like *that*,” etc), that is causing all the hurt and hate. Lovingkindness allows us to see, even feel, as others would: it helps us to empathize with others. At some point in such a sustained practice, we might just catch a profound glimpse of what non-self is or is like. If not, we would surely have greater wisdom in understanding the nature of human feelings. [7.3.2]

Even on an unawakened level, lovingkindness when regularly and properly developed, harmonizes our head and heart, balancing wisdom with compassion. Lovingkindness, in other words, brings about mental focus, giving us a calm heart, which in turn clears our mind so that it is capable of penetrating vision into true reality and liberating wisdom. In this sense, lovingkindness is the basis for beauty and truth.¹⁵

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¹⁵ See **Right livelihood**, SD 37.8 (6.1.2.7).