

Notes and Quotes for October 10, 2021 *Dharma Reflections*:

Introduction to “The Four Immeasurables”

(Note to September participants: hyperlinks to the two Yasutani Roshi articles as well as to various Buddhist translation sites are at the end of this document)

Background:

In Chapter 4 of *Approaching the Buddhist Path* (Volume 1 of the still-in-progress *The Library of Wisdom and Compassion*), authors The Dalai Lama and Thubten Chodren explore the historical development of “the two principal Buddhist traditions [that are spoken of] according to the language they came to be written in—... *Pāli* and Sanskrit.... The Buddha himself taught in some form of Prakrit.... After his parinirvana, the discourses were collated into groups and passed on orally for several centuries. The earliest written texts we have date from around the first century BCE.”

They go on to discuss *Vehicles and Paths*:

“...When our Teacher, Śākyamuni Buddha, lived in India, he turned the Dharma wheel (that is, he taught the Dharma) by giving teachings for beings of the three vehicles: the Śrāvaka, Solitary Realizer (Pratyekabuddha), and Bodhisattva vehicles. These are called *vehicles (yāna)* because they convey their respective practitioners to distinct spiritual attainments....

Each vehicle leads to its own awakening. Both the Pāli and Sanskrit traditions contain teachings on all three vehicles, although the Pāli tradition places more emphasis on the Śrāvaka Vehicle and the Sanskrit tradition on the Bodhisattva Vehicle.

Sometimes the Śrāvaka and Solitary Realizer vehicles are subsumed under the name Fundamental Vehicle.... The Bodhisattva Vehicle is further divided into two according to method: The Perfection Vehicle and the Tantric Vehicle. *These are both practiced on the basis of the Fundamental Vehicle, and the Tantric Vehicle is also practiced on the basis of the Perfection Vehicle* (emphasis added)

While the teachings on the Bodhisattva Vehicle in the Pāli and Sanskrit traditions overlap in several ways, the name “Mahāyāna” refers to the bodhisattva teachings and scriptures in the Sanskrit tradition.”

We may recognize the “Fundamental Vehicle” by its more commonly used name, Theravada (or, now thought to be a pejorative term, “Hinayana”, or “lesser vehicle”). Note in the emphasized

text (above), that the authors state the Mahāyāna is practiced “*based on*” the Theravada (or Pāli) teachings, and that the Tantric (esoteric, most commonly met with now in forms of Tibetan Buddhism) is practiced “*based on*” the Mahāyāna. So, in these “Dharma Reflections,” we are exploring the “basis,” or foundation, of our Zen path, the Mahayana (Bodhisattva Vehicle).

The Four Immeasurables, or Divine Abodes

Chapter 1 of Volume 5 of “The Library of Wisdom and Compassion,” *In Praise of Great Compassion*, is devoted to a discussion of “The Four Immeasurables, first as they apply in the Pāli Tradition (pp. 3-47), and in the last ten pages as they are practiced in the Mahayana (we will refer to this entire chapter extensively in our upcoming discussions on the four particular “abodes”).

From pp. 3-4:

“Followers of the Pāli Tradition cultivate the four brahmavihārās (divine abidings, immeasurables)—immeasurable equanimity, love, compassion, and empathic joy—toward others. In the Mahāyāna these four are expanded and built upon to become the altruistic intention of bodhicitta that seeks to attain Buddhahood in order to benefit all sentient beings....

They are called “immeasurable” or “boundless... for several reasons. First, they are directed with a mind free of prejudice or partiality toward an immeasurable number of sentient beings. In addition, they are ideally to be practiced in states of *dhyana* in which the limited intentions of the desire-realm minds have been superseded [this introduces a technical Pāli Tradition discussion on meditation]

The four immeasurables are also called “brahmavihārās” or “divine abodes,” after Brahmā, the deity who is the ruler of one of the dhyanic realms where beings’ minds are pure, smooth, and gentle. In the term “brahmavihārā,” “brahma” implies pure because these four are free from attachment, anger, and apathy.... [more on this later]

Practiced in daily life, love, compassion, empathic joy, and equanimity will make our minds and relationships with others warmer and more peaceful. Practiced in meditation [in the Pāli Tradition], these four can be used to cultivate concentration and attain the dhyanas (meditative stabilizations).”

The entry on Brahma-vihārā in *The Encyclopedia of Eastern Philosophy and Religion—Buddhism, Taoism, Zen, Hinduism* reads, in part:

“lit. “divine states of dwelling”; content of a meditation practice in which the practitioner arouses in himself four positive states of mind and radiates them out in all directions. The four *brahma-vihārās* are limitless kindness (*maitrī*) toward all beings; limitless compassion (*karuṇā*) toward those who are suffering; limitless joy (*muditā*) over the salva-

tion of others from suffering; limitless equanimity (*upekṣhā*) toward friend and foe. Arousing these states of mind allows the practitioner to overcome ill will, gloating over others' misfortune, discontent, and passion.

In Mahāyāna the *brahma-vihārās* are included among the “perfect virtues” (*paramita*). These are states of mind required by the bodhisattva in order to lead all beings to liberation....

The sutra text on this meditation practice is: “There are four immeasurables. Therein, brothers, a monk radiates with a mind filled with kindness [compassion, sympathetic joy, equanimity] firsts one direction, then a second, then a third, then a fourth, as above as well, and below, and all around; and feeling himself connected with everything everywhere, he irradiates the whole world with a mind filled with kindness [compassion, sympathetic joy, equanimity], with expansive, sublime, unconfined mind, free from malice and resentment (trans. From German edition of Nyantiloka 1972).”

The entry on brahmavihārā in *The Princeton Dictionary of Buddhism* starts off much the same way, then elaborates:

“These four factors are taken up as objects of meditation to counter the influence of specific unwholesome... states of mind: viz., loving-kindness counteracts hostility, compassion counters harmfulness, empathetic joy counters dissatisfaction or envy regarding others' achievements, and equanimity counters both the desire and hostility arising from sensuality as well as the desire to win the approval of others.”

In Chapter 1, “It's Time to Change Your Mind” of her book *Awakening the Kind Heart—How to Meditate on Compassion*, author Karen McDonald introduces her later discussions and meditations on The Four Immeasurables with:

“One of the most powerful, and beautiful, methods found in the Buddha's teachings for transforming our mind is the practice of the four immeasurable thoughts: love, compassion, sympathetic joy, and equanimity. These four attitudes are essential ingredients for our own happiness, peace of mind, and health, as well as for beneficial, satisfying relationships and interactions with others. Cultivating these thoughts diminishes our habitual attitudes of self-grasping and self-centeredness, which disturb our peace of mind and lead to problems such as hatred for enemies, envy for rivals, and clinging to family and friends....

The four immeasurable thoughts are expressed in the following prayer:

May all beings have happiness and the causes of happiness;
May all beings be free from suffering and the causes of suffering;
May all beings never be separated from the happiness that is free from suffering;
May all beings abide in equanimity, free from attachment and anger that hold some close and others distant.

This verse can easily be memorized and recited from time to time during the day to remind yourself to have positive thoughts for the people you meet.”

Here is a longer version of that prayer, from https://viewonbuddhism.org/immeasurables_love_compassion_equanimity_rejoicing.html

How wonderful it would be if all sentient beings were to abide in equanimity,
Free of hatred and attachment!
May they abide in equanimity!
I myself will cause them to abide in equanimity!
Please, guru-Buddha, grant me blessings to be able to do this.

How wonderful it would be if all sentient beings had happiness and the cause of happiness!
May they have happiness and its cause!
I shall cause them to have these!
Please, guru-Buddha, grant me blessings to be able to do this.

How wonderful it would be if all sentient beings were free of suffering and its cause!
May they be free of suffering and its cause!
I myself will free them from suffering and its cause!
Please, guru-Buddha, grant me blessings to be able to do this.

How wonderful it would be if all sentient beings were never separated from the happiness of higher rebirth and liberation!
May they never separated from the happiness of higher rebirth and liberation!
I myself will cause them never to be separated from these!
Please, guru-Buddha, grant me blessings to be able to do this.

Possible Discussion Starting Points

1. The 2nd of the Four Bodhisattvic Vows chanted at the RZC is “Endless blind passions I vow to uproot.” When alone, I (Larry) chant this as “Afflictions arise endlessly; I vow to resolve them all.” “Blind passions” is a chantable translation of the Sanskrit *kleśa* (defilements, afflictions): mental states that cloud the mind and manifest in unwholesome actions. The basic three are delusion (ignorance, dullness, blank neutrality), attraction (greed, attachment, unhealthy desire), and aversion (hatred, anger, ill-will), to which we can add jealousy and pride, and (supposedly) 84,000 other varieties.

Are you finding that zazen practice, alone, is satisfactorily “uprooting your blind

passions,” resolving the endlessly-arising afflictions? If not, what other practices have you found helpful as “antidotes” to the kleśas? Discuss how you might imagine that reflecting on The Four Immeasurables could help you clear up troublesome mental habits.

2. The Four Immeasurables can be used as objects of meditation (and goals to aspire to), but also as ways to check your own behavior and gauge “progress” in growing spiritually. Discuss.
3. In what way(s) might the practice of the Mahayana be “based upon” the principles of the Theravada tradition? Do you find that ethical conduct is emphasized enough in our training? How about qualities like loving-kindness and compassion?
4. Comparing the shorter and longer prayers (above), the longer one more essentially expresses a Mahayana stance: one of taking *personal* responsibility for the liberation of all beings. Is this problematic for you?
5. Do you ever consciously, intentionally, “radiate out” qualities like love or compassion? As infinite as space might be, do you see your love (compassion, equanimity, empathetic joy) being as extensive?
6. The teachings state that The Four Immeasurables can be developed/uncovered endlessly, but that negative defilements (adventitious qualities) cannot. Do you see why? What is it about The Four Immeasurables that makes them essential (that is, qualities that are inherent in existence itself)?
7. While *equanimity* (*upekṣhā*) is usually listed as the fourth of the “immeasurables”, in a teaching environment it is typically presented first (and we will take it up first, next month), *before* loving-kindness, compassion, or empathetic joy. Why do you suppose this is the case?

Links to sites and talks mentioned in September 2021 *Dharma Reflections* (courtesy of Chris Cook)

Here are some translators/organizations that I've found to be great resources for translations of the Chinese Canon:

- Translations by Red Pine
- BDK Tripitaka
 - <https://bdkamerica.org/tripitaka-list/>
- Translations by Rulu
 - <https://www.sutrasmantras.info/index.html>
 - <https://www.authorhouse.com/en/search?query=rulu>
- Kalavinka Press
 - http://www.kalavinka.org/kp_main_pages/books.htm
- Buddhist Text Translation Society
 - <https://www.buddhisttexts.org/>
 - http://www.cttbusa.org/buddhadharma_tableofcontents.asp.html

BDK, Rulu, and the BTTS publish most/all of their translations online for free distribution, similar to 84000.

Also, here are the links for the texts I referred to in our meeting:

<https://bigmind.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/Yasutani-Eight-Beliefs-in-Buddhism.pdf>

https://www.thezensite.com/ZenTeachings/Teishos/Why_Do_We_Recite_Sutras.html