



The meditations on love

*Just as a mother would protect her only child at the risk of her own life, even so,
let him cultivate a boundless heart towards all beings.*

The Buddha, *Metta Sutta*

You might think that merely focusing on an object like a candle or a picture is a dry and abstract type of meditation, but there are many other methods, and one of the most popular is the *brahma viharas* or 'divine abidings.' There are four types: meditation on loving kindness, on compassion, on joy and on equanimity. The point of these practices is to help us develop the capacity to love others. We do want to love other people and be kind to them, but all too often our love is blocked in some way and we don't know how to love fully. Maybe we are afraid of getting hurt; maybe we have been traumatised by a past experience of failure or abuse. These meditations aim to help us re-connect with the love deep inside of us and to have confidence in ourselves, so that we are then better able to love others. They enable us to pass from virtuous aspirations to the reality of action, and to extend our love genuinely, equally and impartially to all beings, without prejudice or boundaries of any kind.

- **Loving kindness** or *metta* is the genuine wish that everyone should be happy. The meditation begins with remembering the feeling of having been loved. This love does not necessarily have to have come from your parents or partner; you might have felt most love from your grandparents or a pet, for example. Whatever your experience of the love and kindness of others, however small and however fleeting, you remember that and recognise that you are lovable. Once this is well established you extend that loving feeling progressively, in ever increasing circles, first to those who are dear to you, then to people you feel neutral or indifferent towards, and finally to those you have problems with. Lastly your love embraces all beings in the universe. With each phase of the practice you repeat the following phrase to yourself again and again: "May I/you be happy, may I/you be well."
- **Compassion** or *karuna* is the genuine wish to free all beings from suffering. The meditation focuses on individuals or groups with specific types of suffering. You wholeheartedly put yourself in the other's shoes and generate the resolution to do everything in your power to help them.
- **Joy** or *mudita* is sincere rejoicing at the happiness of others. It counteracts jealousy. The meditation involves thinking of the happiness of particular individuals and generating sympathetic joy, beginning with situations that come easily and culminating in those you find difficult.
- **Equanimity** or *upekkha* means the loving of all beings equally. This counteracts prejudice and discrimination, likes and dislikes. We extend our love to family and friends, and then systematically extend our love in exactly the same way to others for whom we usually have less sympathy. Equanimity also includes developing even-mindedness throughout the ups and downs of life. There is no virtue in being dragged down or depressed by the misfortunes of others or ourselves.



Each one of these meditations develops positive qualities which act as an antidote to particular negative emotions:

- Loving kindness is the antidote to aggression
- Compassion is the antidote to cruelty
- Joy is the antidote to envy and jealousy
- Equanimity is the antidote to prejudice and resentment.

The 'divine abidings' are so called because they are said to develop the mental qualities of the higher gods, the *brahmas*, and they are also known as immeasurable as they give us a 'big heart.' They are considered very important practices because Buddhism in general lays so much emphasis on having a kind, loving and compassionate attitude. As the Buddha says: "The way is not in the sky; the way is in the heart."ⁱ

From *Discovering Buddhism* by Dominique Side



Windows into Buddhism is licenced under a Creative Commons 4.0 international licence.

ⁱ *Dhammapada* 254.