

# Mindfully Facing Climate Change (3)

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*This is the third of four installments to accompany a freely available [online course](#) aimed at offering a practical approach to the challenges of climate change that is grounded in the teachings of early Buddhism.*

## Liberation of the Mind

*What is the truth of the cessation of dukkha? It is being able to bring about the eradication and cessation without remainder of that craving, so that it will not arise again. This is reckoned to be the truth of the cessation of dukkha.*

The third truth envisages nothing short of complete liberation of the mind from all craving and defilements and therewith from each of the three root poison of greed, hatred, and delusion.

Such complete liberation is the overarching concern of early Buddhist thought, the pinnacle toward which all other teachings point in one way or another. In order to do justice to this orientation, the approach to facing climate change I present here needs to be related in some way to progress to full awakening, the highest level of liberation recognized in early Buddhism. I will take up this topic in more detail at the outset of the next installment. In this installment, I focus on the divine abodes as types of liberation that are in themselves temporary in nature but which at the same time are natural conditions of the mind of one who has walked the path to full liberation.

After a preliminary survey of the four levels of awakening, I turn to passages taken up in previous installments that point to the relevance of the four divine abodes. Then I examine the simile of the saw and the question of whether the Buddha, after having reached awakening, was still subject to anger. Next, I explore communal harmony as an expression of *mettā*, the opposite of anger, followed by studying a simile on acrobats performing together as an illustration of how to protect oneself and others through *mettā* and mindfulness.

Out of the four divine abodes, compassion is particularly relevant to environmental concerns and for this reason is a central topic in the present installment. I begin by exploring compassion directed to non-human sentient beings. Based on ascertaining the basic thrust of compassion as the wish for the absence of harm, I then contrast compassion to grief and set it within the framework of the eightfold path. After that, I explore the ethical dimension of the divine abodes in general. In the final part of this installment I take up the boundless radiation of the divine abodes and illustrate their meditative experience.

## Types of Liberation

Early Buddhist thought recognizes different types of liberation. Of central importance are liberations of the definite type, attained with the four levels of awakening. According to the early discourses, these four levels involve the eradication of certain fetters and have irreversible consequences for the future.

With the first level of awakening, three out of a standard set of ten fetters have been eradicated. As a result, one becomes a stream-enterer who is sure to reach full awakening within a period not exceeding seven more lifetimes. The three fetters left behind for good are belief in the existence of a permanent self, doubt (of the fundamental type regarding the teachings), and clinging to rules and observances as in themselves leading to liberation.

With the second level of awakening a practitioner becomes a once-returner, having substantially reduced the next two fetters of greed and anger, and being certain to reach full awakening within one more lifetime.

Progress to the third level of awakening leads to becoming a non-returner, in the sense of no longer returning to be born in the world of humans and lower celestial beings. Having successfully overcome five out of the set of ten fetters, the rebirth of a non-returner can only take place in a superior heavenly realm inhabited solely by those who are completely free of any greed and anger.

The remaining five fetters to be left behind with the attainment of full awakening, the highest of the four levels of liberation recognized in early Buddhist thought, are desire for fine-material and for immaterial becoming, conceit, restlessness, and ignorance. An arahant has actualized the full liberating potential of the teachings by eradicating all ten fetters and becoming free from the prospect of future rebirth in *samsāra*.

Alongside these levels of awakening expressing the core values and orientations of early Buddhist soteriology, other liberations recognized in the early discourses are of a more temporary type. Such liberations of the mind result from the gaining of mental tranquility, when defilements have gone into abeyance for the time being. Although such experiences have considerable transformative potential, they are in themselves deemed unable to achieve the eradication of the fetters described above.

Among such temporary liberations, of particular relevance to my present exploration are the four “divine abodes” (*brahmavihāra*). In a way, these four can be considered forms of abiding in a celestial condition while still being a human on earth. Alternatively, they are also referred to as states that are “boundless” or “immeasurable” (*appamāṇa*). The mind of one who dwells in any of these four has become boundless and immeasurable.

The four boundless states or divine abodes comprise *mettā*, already discussed previously, compassion, sympathetic joy, and equanimity. Out of the whole set of four divine abodes, in the early discourses *mettā* features with particular prominence. As a basic mental disposition of kindness, well-wishing, and mutual protection, *mettā* is relevant to the whole gamut of bodily, verbal, and mental conduct, ranging from daily activities to formal meditation.

Building on the foundation laid in this way, compassion takes its place as a mental disposition of aspiring for the absence of harm and affliction. Compassion is not just *mettā* toward those in distress. Both *mettā* and compassion can be directed toward all sentient beings. It follows that the difference between them cannot be merely due to the object they take.

Compassion has a complement in sympathetic joy, the intentional cultivation of rejoicing in the manifestation of wholesome qualities, being directly opposed to envy and discontent.

The cultivation of the divine abodes culminates in equanimity. Such equanimity is the very opposite of indifference. It is an inner stability that comes with an open heart, matured through previous development of the other three divine abodes.

These four attitudes are characteristic of the mind of an arahant, who by dint of having eradicated all defilements will respond to whatever happens in one of these four modes. From this perspective, progress through the four levels of awakening, described above, could be visualized as a gradual opening of the heart until, with full awakening attained, it completely embodies the divine abodes.

### **The Role of the Divine Abodes**

The relevance of the divine abodes to the topics explored in this book can be illustrated with some of the passages surveyed in earlier installments. The Chinese version of the Discourse on the World Ruler, for example, brings up *mettā* at the key turning point of its narrative. Once ethical and environmental decline have reached an all-time low and human beings randomly kill each other, those who have gone into hiding establish a foundation for a gradual improvement of ethics and consequently of the environment in the following manner:

*They speak [to one another], uttering wholesome words of mettā: “Do not harm me; I will not harm you.”*

The Pāli version does not explicitly mention *mettā* at this juncture. All versions agree, however, that the survivors of the massacre decide to refrain from killing, which implies the same principle. A description of the first precept of abstaining from killing provides an explicit relationship to the divine abodes, which takes the following form:

*I abstained from killing and have abandoned killing, discarding sword and club, having a sense of shame and fear of blame, with a mental attitude of mettā and compassion for the welfare of all [sentient beings], even insects.*

It follows that *mettā* and compassion are the key qualities which in the Discourse on the World Ruler lead to the decisive shift toward an improvement of ethics and a gradual recovery of the environment. The same qualities could play a similar role in relation to the present ecological

crisis.

The whole set of four divine abodes features in another discourse, taken up in the first installment, which presents the earth as an inspiration for cultivating mental balance. The relevant instruction is to remain balanced with whatever happens, however disagreeable it might be, based on the injunction:

*You should maintain your mind like the earth.*

The exposition proceeds by taking up the other elements and then the four divine abodes. The Pāli version provides additional specifications on the purpose of each of these four, indicating that *mettā* counters ill will, compassion cruelty, sympathetic joy discontent, and equanimity (lustful desire) and aversion.

These indications reflect the potential of the divine abodes to make a substantial contribution to progress to awakening. I will return to this aspect of the divine abodes below, in particular in relation to compassion. Suffice it for now to note that, just as progress to awakening can lead to the flowering of the divine abodes, so can a nurturing of these four sublime attitudes substantially empower the cultivation of insight aimed at awakening.

### **The Simile of the Saw**

Another instance reflecting the relevance of the divine abodes occurs in the Discourse on the Elephant's Footprint, taken up in the first installment, whose exposition leads up to the powerful simile of the saw. To recapitulate, the Discourse on the Elephant's Footprint first relates the internal to the external earth element. Then it shows how insight cultivated in this way fortifies one when experiencing abuse:

The same insight can inspire the cultivation of equanimity to such an extent that one will be able to maintain inner balance even when being physically attacked. It is at this juncture that a reference to the well-known simile of the saw occurs:

*Friends, the Blessed One has also spoken in this way: "Suppose there are bandits who come and cut your body apart, limb by limb, with the help of a sharp saw. If, when those bandits cut your body apart, limb by limb, with the help of a sharp saw, there is an alteration in your mind, or you speak bad words, you are regressing.*

*"You should have this thought: 'If there are bandits who come and cut my body apart, limb by limb, with the help of a sharp saw, because of that there will not be an alteration in my mind and I will not speak bad words. I will arouse a mind of compassion toward those who are cutting my body apart limb by limb.'*"

The original delivery of this simile occurs in the Discourse on the Simile of the Saw, where it leads on to the practice of *mettā*.

The dramatic depiction in this passage is probably best understood as referring to a situation where one is completely at the mercy of bandits, without any possibility of preventing their cruel deed. In other words, it can safely be assumed that the description is not meant to discourage one from trying one's best to avoid being cut up by bandits or undergoing any other type of abuse. The simile appears to be only intended to illustrate, with the help of a rather drastic situation, that even under the most excruciating circumstances a carrying out of the teachings of the Buddha requires not reacting with anger and abuse.

This in turn provides strong support for the suggestion made in the previous installment that an implementation of the early Buddhist teachings in the context of ecological or any other social activism leaves little scope for endorsing anger, however righteous it may appear.

### **The Buddha and Anger**

In view of the powerful teaching on the simile of the saw, it would be natural to expect that the Buddha himself set an example for being free of anger. As mentioned at the outset of this installment, a condition characteristic of all those who have reached full awakening, Buddhas and arahants, is complete freedom from the influence of the three root defilements.

An impression that at first sight might seem to conflict with this normative view is a famous episode involving a monastic and relative of the Buddha by the name of Devadatta, who according to the textual sources was the first in the history of Buddhism to create a schism in the monastic community.

Several monastic codes report that Devadatta openly asked the Buddha to hand over leadership of the community to him. In reply, the Buddha is on record for having refused, comparing Devadatta to spittle. The employment of such terminology could easily convey the impression that the Buddha got angry.

When examining this episode, the function of narratives in texts on monastic discipline needs to be taken into account. The overarching concern of such narratives is not the accurate reporting of historical details. Instead, they often serve a didactic purpose, where the effect of a particular story on the audience is decisive. In order to detect the influence of such concerns, comparative study can often be of considerable help.

In the present case, the relevant parts in a text on monastic discipline of a Buddhist tradition that developed independently from an early date in the history of Buddhism, the *Mahāsāṅghika Vinaya*, has no record of this episode at all. A discourse extant in Chinese, found in the *Ekottarika-āgama*, also does not report any request by Devadatta for the leadership of the monastic community. This discourse shares several other episodes in common with those texts on monastic discipline that report the Buddha comparing Devadatta to spittle.

From a comparative perspective, it seems highly probable that this particular story is a later addition to the repertoire of stories about Devadatta. Hence, the depiction of the Buddha's use of offensive language quite probably reflects the sentiments of the narrators of this episode; it is not an indicator that, according to early Buddhist thought, fully awakened ones still get angry.

The Pāli discourses recurrently depict the Buddha using the term *moghapurisa* when rebuking disciples who have misrepresented him or behaved in an obstinate manner. Occurrences of the first part of this term in a negative sense (*amogha*) convey that something is useful. On adopting this meaning, the term *moghapurisa* could be rendered as a "useless person." On this understanding, its employment need not be taken to convey that the Buddha got angry. Instead, it can simply be considered a strong form of admonishment that is often warranted by the narrative context.

In sum, the early texts do show the Buddha at times being rather stern and openly expressing censure, but this need not be taken to imply that he got angry. Instead, such descriptions are best read as depicting verbal activity that springs from a mental attitude of equanimity, grounded in a mind that is firmly established in what is wholesome.

### Communal Harmony

As the exact opposite of anger and ill will, the first divine abode of *mettā* is a central quality to ensure communal harmony. This function has several dimensions. A passage describing such communal harmony begins by depicting a basic attitude to be aroused toward others:

*I think: 'It is to my good benefit, it is a great fortune for me, namely, that I am together with such practitioners of the holy life.'*

The reference to the "holy life" here is an idiom in the early discourses to express that the protagonists of this discourse were living the life of Buddhist monastics. The basic appreciation of one's companions, described in this passage, forms a foundation that leads on to the cultivation of *mettā* in the following manner:

*I constantly practice towards these practitioners in the holy life bodily acts of mettā, overtly and covertly, equally and without discrimination. I practice [towards them] verbal acts of mettā and I practice mental acts of mettā, overtly and covertly, equally and without discrimination.*

This description shows the broad range of applicability of *mettā* in daily life, where its cultivation can encompass the bodily, verbal, and mental domain. Moreover, it can take overt forms, which are evident to others, but it can also be done in ways that are not noticed by others. The pervasive cultivation of *mettā* in all these ways then leads up to the following reflection:

*I think: 'I would now rather let go of my own ideas and follow the ideas of those friends.' Then I let go of my own ideas and follow the ideas of those friends. We never have a single discordant idea.*

On hearing this report, the Buddha concluded:

*In this way you are constantly together in harmony, at ease and without dissension, of a single mind, of a single teacher, blending like water and milk.*

The description offered in this way illustrates different dimensions of living together in communal harmony, which take off from the basic mental disposition of *mettā*. Such communal harmony provides a direct contrast to the depiction of mutual hatred and killing in the Discourse on the World Ruler.

Applied to the current situation, if these principles of communal harmony and *mettā* had become more prominent as guiding principles at some time in the past, the dire repercussions of climate change would not be happening in the first place.

### **The Acrobat Simile**

Another teaching relevant to the divine abodes and human relationships is a simile that involves two acrobats who are about to perform a feat together.

One acrobat tells the other that they should make sure to take care of each other, so that they can perform well. The other responds that this will not do. They first of all need to take care of themselves. It is in this way that they will be able to protect both themselves and the other, and at the same time perform well.

A Chinese version of this discourse draws out the implication of this simile in the following way:

*[How does protecting oneself protect others]? Becoming familiar with one's own mind, cultivating it, protecting it accordingly, and attaining realization; this is called 'protecting oneself protects others.'*

*How does protecting others protect oneself? By the gift of fearlessness, the gift of non-violation, the gift of harmlessness, by having a mind of mettā and empathy for others; this is called 'protecting others protects oneself.'*

*For this reason, monastics, you should train yourself like this: 'Protecting myself, I will cultivate the four establishments of mindfulness; protecting others, I will also cultivate the four establishments of mindfulness.'*

In order to be able to perform well, first the two acrobats need to make sure that they are each centered themselves. Based on having in such a way protected their own balance, they will be able to protect each other.

It is noteworthy that the key element here is mindfulness. The arousal of mindfulness builds the foundation for being able to protect oneself through cultivation of the mind and protect others in the form of being compassionate toward them, avoiding any harm.

Self-protection through mindfulness is what enables recognition of the presence of greed, hatred, and delusion, be it within or without. In the absence of such recognition, the three root defilements will have free rein to wreak havoc in the mind, hiding under the various pretenses and excuses that can serve to disguise their true nature. Mindfulness enables seeing through these disguises.

In this way, established mindfulness can counteract an innate unwillingness to admit to oneself that one is greedy, angry, or confused. To the degree to which mindfulness becomes a continuous self-protection, to that same degree it also protects others from the repercussions of any action influenced by the three root defilements.

Based on having established mindfulness, *mettā* and compassion naturally fall into place. Their very cultivation, by dint of taking place in one's own mind, will have immediate beneficial effects within and at the same time contribute to protecting oneself. A mind that dwells in *mettā* and compassion is far removed from intentions of harm, from getting irritated and annoyed, whereby others are protected.

### **Compassion for Sentient Beings**

The notion of affording protection resonates in particular with compassion. Such compassion can be illustrated with the help of an episode reported in the Pāli *Vinaya*. The relevant section reports that a monastic had released an animal that had been caught in a hunter's trap.

Afterwards the monastic became worried, wondering if by acting in this way he might have

violated the precept against theft. When he related what he had done to the Buddha, the latter inquired after the monastic's motivation. When the monastic clarified that he had acted out of compassion, the Buddha concluded that for this reason it did not involve a breach of the monastic code.

The *Vinaya* continues with cases where the same action is not motivated by compassion but with a mind intent on theft, in which case the Buddha ruled that it constituted an offence. This is no minor matter, since theft of something valuable counts among the most serious breaches in monastic law, resulting in irreversible loss of one's status as a fully ordained monastic.

The fact that the motivation of compassion for the suffering animal makes the crucial difference is telling. It shows the importance accorded in this particular monastic text to compassion for animals.

Compassionate concern for other sentient beings and the wish to avoid that harm befalls them is a recurrent feature in the early texts. An example is the Buddha's instruction to a lay supporter that leftover food should be discarded in such a way that it does not result in pollution that could harm sentient beings. The same circumspect behavior occurs as part of the description of the harmonious cohabitation of a group of monastics, already taken up above. The monastic who took his meal last would clean their communal eating area in the following way:

*If there were leftovers, he would pour them out on to a clear piece of ground or into water that contained no sentient beings.*

Such passages reflect a need, relevant to both laity and monastics, to avoid pollution, which as an expression of compassion could be applied to the current ecological situation.

### **Compassion as Non-Harm**

In the early discourses in general, compassion stands for the absence of cruelty and harming. This finds explicit expression in a discourse which identifies what unwholesome mental condition directly opposes compassion. The passage proceeds in this way:

*Suppose a monastic says: "I practice liberation [of the mind] by compassion and cruelty arises in my mind." Another monastic [should] tell him: "Do not make this statement, do not slander the Tathāgata; the Tathāgata does not make such a statement. That cruelty still arises in those who with dedication apply themselves to the cultivation of liberation [of the mind] by compassion, that is impossible."*

The term Tathāgata here refers to the Buddha. The passage shows that compassion is the very opposite of cruelty and harming.

Compassion as the aspiration for the absence of harm, which is of course of considerable relevance for environmental concerns, can be illustrated with the help of another passage. The passage occurs in a description of how to avoid resentment toward someone who behaves in thoroughly unwholesome ways. The recommendation is that one should try to find something good in this badly-behaving person and pay attention to that. However, if nothing good at all can be found, then such a person provides an excellent opportunity for the cultivation of compassion.

This is the appropriate response here, in that the unwholesome conduct of others is no excuse for getting angry. The passage supports the observation made earlier that, from an early Buddhist perspective, anger is not an appropriate response. This holds even when another is behaving in ways that are entirely irresponsible and reprehensible.

The cultivation of compassion then finds the following illustration:

*It is like a person who is on an extended journey along a long road. Becoming sick halfway, he suffers extremely and is exhausted. He is alone and without a companion. The village behind is far away and he has not yet reached the village ahead. Suppose a person comes and, standing to one side, sees that this traveler, who is on an extended journey along a long road, has become sick halfway, suffers extremely, and is exhausted. He is alone and without a companion. The village behind is far away and he has not yet reached the village ahead.*

*[The second person thinks:] "If he were to get an attendant, emerge from being in the far away wilderness and reach a village or town, and were to be given excellent medicine and be*

*fed with nourishing and delicious food, be well cared for, then in this way this person's sickness would certainly subside."*

*That is, that person has extremely compassionate, sympathetic, and kind thoughts in the mind towards this sick person.*

The above version and its Pāli parallel do not proceed beyond depicting the mental attitude in response to seeing the sick traveler. This is unsurprising, as the episode is meant to illustrate the appropriate attitude toward someone thoroughly bad and thereby counter potential resentment; it is not meant to describe a course of action to be taken. Had the story been employed in a different context, it would quite probably have continued by showing the compassionate person doing whatever possible to ensure that the sick traveler indeed receives the type of assistance needed.

This suggestion finds confirmation in the description of the monastic who released an animal caught in a trap. These two cases are in fact fairly similar, insofar as both involve chancing across another who is suffering. The main difference is that in the previous case the one who suffers is an animal rather than a human being.

In the above description, compassion finds expression in the witnessing person's wish for the sick person to be in some way relieved from misfortune. In other words, although the vision of the ailing traveler's distress forms the starting point, compassion takes as its main object the positive idea of the sick person being helped and finding relief. The task is not to keep dwelling on the actual suffering, imagining in detail how it must feel to be sick and helpless in this way. Instead of dwelling on the pain of the other, the cultivation of compassion takes as its object the potential alleviation of the pain.

### **Compassion without Grief**

As the sincere aspiration for the absence of harm, compassion extends to all sentient beings and thereby naturally also includes oneself. Moreover, as just mentioned, the actual cultivation of compassion proceeds from the empathic apperception of suffering to the aspirational vision of the other being free from affliction. This puts into perspective a tendency found in some later Buddhist traditions to conceive of compassion as an act of taking upon oneself the pain and suffering of others.

Research in cognitive psychology has shown that the cultivation of empathy, in the sense of taking upon oneself the pain of others, activates different brain areas and has divergent effects on the body compared to compassion. Focusing on the stress in another individual relates to elevated cortisol levels, but compassion rather leads to lower levels of cortisol reactivity. This supports the relevance of drawing a clear distinction between compassion as such and the experience of pain on behalf of others.

Theravāda exegesis takes a comparable position, which finds its expression in the notion of "near enemies" to each of the four divine abodes. The idea is that certain unwholesome states can be mistaken for being the desired wholesome quality. In the case of compassion, the near enemy is worldly grief.

In the face of the catastrophic repercussions of climate change and the vast scale of suffering, avoiding this near enemy is easier said than done. Here, it can be particularly helpful to rely on mindfulness. Just as mindfulness enables being with physical pain without either switching off or else resisting, similarly mindfulness can ease the mental pain of facing the horror of what human beings are doing to themselves and other sentient beings on this planet. Relying on mindfulness as the main tool ensures that any grief or sadness that has manifested is not just being suppressed. Instead, it is witnessed but not acted out.

In terms of a cultivation of the divine abodes, mindfulness signals when it is time to shift from compassion to equanimity. For the cultivation of equanimity, some of the passages surveyed earlier can be relied on.

The Discourse on the Elephant's Footprint establishes a relationship between the earth element inside of one's body and the external earth, in order to drive home the truth that both are impermanent. Awareness of impermanence can serve as a powerful tool to cultivate equanimity, based on the realization that whatever one experiences

*is of an impermanent nature, of a nature to cease, of a nature to decline, and of a nature to change.*

Insight into impermanence can in turn lead to a growing appreciation of the empty nature of all phenomena. This finds expression in the same Discourse on the Elephant's Footprint in the indication that one who practices in this manner

*does not have this thought: "This is me; this is mine; I belong to it." How could one have such a thought?*

In this way, based on being alerted to the need for equanimity through mindful monitoring, practice can be adjusted by relying on the above reflections in order to handle the arising of grief skillfully.

In addition to monitoring such shifting of mental attitudes, the cultivation of mindfulness itself has freedom from sadness as its aim. This comes up right away in the introductory part of the Discourse on the World Ruler, according to which mindful self-reliance involves the following:

*removing greed and sadness in the world.*

The same topic features also in a statement on the purpose of cultivating the establishments of mindfulness. The four establishments of mindfulness present a meditative path that has, among its aims, the following:

*for the purification of sentient beings, for causing the transcendence of worry and sorrow, for extinguishing affliction and pain.*

In this way, the texts clearly see mindfulness as having the potential to enable transcending sorrow and grief.

### **Compassion in the Eightfold Path**

Besides serving to counter the near enemy of compassion, mindfulness stands in a close relationship to the cultivation of compassion and *mettā*. This can be seen through a closer look at the eightfold path.

The second factor of this path, right intention, can take the form of the absence of ill will and of cruelty. These have their positive counterparts in *mettā* and compassion. From this viewpoint, *mettā* and compassion can be related in particular to the second factor of the eightfold path.

The eight factors of this path relate to each other in two complementary ways. The first of these two ways is sequential, in that each factor builds on the preceding ones:

*Right view gives rise to right intention, right intention gives rise to right speech, right speech gives rise to right action, right action gives rise to right livelihood, right livelihood gives rise to right effort, right effort gives rise to right mindfulness, and right mindfulness gives rise to right concentration.*

From the viewpoint of *mettā* and compassion, this would imply that their cultivation lays a foundation for the seventh path factor of right mindfulness.

The discourse that forms the source of the above quotation also presents a collaborative perspective, where right view, right effort, and right mindfulness serve to establish other path factors. Here right view is responsible for discerning whether a particular path factor is of the right or wrong type. Right effort steps in to sustain the former and eliminate the latter, while right mindfulness supervises. It is through a collaboration of these three path factors that a path factor like right intention can become established. In this way a dynamic collaboration of the path factors emerges, where right view continuously sets the proper course and right mindfulness with equal continuity monitors what is taking place. In short, mindfulness is relevant before, during, and after the cultivation of the divine abodes.

### **The Ethical Dimension of the Divine Abodes**

In the context of the eightfold path, right intention reveals the relevance of *mettā* and compassion for ethical conduct. A complementary perspective on such relevance emerges also in the Discourse on Intention, which sets the divine abodes in opposition to the ten unwholesome courses of action. The discourse introduces these ten in this way:

*Herein, there are three [types] of intentionally performed bodily deeds that are unwholesome, that result in the experience of dukkha and that have dukkha as their fruit;*

*there are four [types] of verbal deeds and three [types] of mental deeds that are unwholesome, that result in the experience of dukkha and that have dukkha as their fruit.*

By way of recapitulation, unwholesome bodily deeds comprise killing, stealing, and sexual misconduct; the four verbal deeds are false speech, malicious speech, harsh speech, and gossiping; and the three courses of action belonging to the mental realm comprise greedy desires, ill will, and wrong view.

After having expounded in detail these ten unwholesome courses of action, the Discourse on Intention continues like this:

*A learned noble disciple leaves behind unwholesome bodily deeds and cultivates wholesome bodily deeds, leaves behind unwholesome verbal and mental deeds and cultivates wholesome verbal and mental deeds.*

*Being endowed with diligence and virtue in this way, having accomplished purity of bodily deeds and accomplished purity of verbal and mental deeds, being free from ill will and free from contention, discarding sloth-and-torpor, being without restlessness or conceit, removing doubt and overcoming arrogance, [the learned noble disciple] is with right mindfulness and right knowing, without bewilderment.*

*That [learned noble disciple] dwells accomplishing pervasion of one direction with a mind imbued with mettā, and in the same way the second, third, and fourth directions, the four intermediate [directions], above and below, completely and everywhere.*

*Being without mental shackles, without resentment, without ill will, and without contention, with a mind imbued with mettā that is supremely vast and great, boundless and well cultivated, [the learned noble disciple] dwells accomplishing pervasion of the entire world.*

The above description corresponds to the standard way in which the early discourses describe the meditative cultivation the divine abodes. I will return to the significance of this description in the next section of this installment.

From the viewpoint of ethics, it is significant that this passage highlights the need for a firm foundation in moral conduct in order to be able to cultivate meditation successfully. This reflects a general pattern in early Buddhist thought, where the building of an ethical foundation occupies a central position.

At the same time, the relationship of ethics to the divine abodes is a reciprocal one and not confined to the former building the foundation for the latter.

This much can be seen from the ensuing exposition in the Discourse on Intention:

*[The Buddha said]: "That [learned noble disciple] reflects like this: 'Formerly my mind was narrow and not well cultivated; now my mind has become boundless and well cultivated.'*

*"When the mind of the learned noble disciple has in this way become boundless and well cultivated, if because of [associating with] bad friends one formerly dwelt in negligence and performed unwholesome deeds, those [deeds] cannot lead one along, cannot defile one, and will no longer follow one.*

*"Suppose there is a small boy or girl who since birth has been able to dwell in the liberation of the mind through mettā. Later on, would they still perform unwholesome deeds by body, speech or mind?"*

*The monastics answered: "Certainly not, Blessed One."*

*[The Buddha said]: "Why is that? They do not perform bad deeds themselves, [so] how could [results of] bad deeds arise? Therefore, a man or a woman, at home or gone forth, should constantly make an effort to cultivate liberation of the mind through mettā."*

This description, similarly applied to the remaining three divine abodes, reveals the other side of the relationship between ethics and the divine abodes. The one side is the support moral conduct provides for the cultivation of the divine abodes; the other side is the impact of their cultivation on ethics in turn.

One who truly cultivates mettā and the other divine abodes becomes increasingly unable to act in unwholesome ways. This is the case to such an extent that, had one begun such cultivation from childhood onwards, one would no longer act in unwholesome ways. For this

reason, everyone should constantly make an effort to cultivate these beneficial mental states.

### The Radiation of the Divine Abodes

The early discourses regularly describe the meditative cultivation of the divine abodes as a radiation in all directions, similar to the passage translated above. The unlimited nature of this radiation, free from any obstructions, finds reflection in their qualification as “boundless” or “immeasurable” states.

Later exegetical tradition considers such radiation to be invariably descriptive of absorption attainment. This does not seem to hold for the early discourses, where a radiation of the divine abodes can take place even at levels well below absorption.

One instructive episode concerns a brahmin who is taught, apparently for the first time in his life, the meditative cultivation of the divine abodes while on his deathbed. Previously, this brahmin had been engaging in immoral conduct. The way the discourse describes him does not give the impression that he was a meditator, let alone someone with the meditative expertise required for the attainment of absorption. After being in grave pain until the time of his death, according to the discourse’s report he was reborn in a celestial realm, the so-called Brahma world.

Such a rebirth fits the case of someone who has successfully cultivated the divine abodes, which implies that the brahmin had indeed been able to make good use of the instructions on their radiation he had just received. It follows that descriptions of such radiation appear to be indeed about how to cultivate the divine abodes and not only about full absorption attainment.

In later Buddhist traditions, however, the approach to meditation on the divine abodes tends to focus on individual persons as objects, and the radiation requires first developing this person-oriented approach. For the case of *metta*, for example, Pali exegesis recommends that meditative cultivation should start by taking first oneself as the object, then someone dear, then someone neutral, and finally a hostile person.

A person-oriented approach to the cultivation of the divine abodes is also found in other Buddhist traditions, although at times recommended in particular for those unable to practice the radiation due to the presence of some defilement in the mind.

In the early discourses, the meditative radiation of the divine abodes finds the following illustration:

*It is just as if, in an area where nobody has ever heard it, a person skilled at blowing a conch mounts a high hill at midnight to blow a conch with utmost effort and a wonderful sound comes out of it that pervades the four directions.*

In the ancient Indian setting, blowing a conch was regularly used for religious ceremonies and also served as a means of communication over longer distances. It was even employed in warfare for such purposes, as its penetrative sound stands a good chance of being heard over the din of a battlefield. The blowing of a conch requires skill and is not achieved merely through effort. The lips need to be puckered appropriately to create the vibratory effect that will then result in the conch producing sound. Once this has been achieved, the resultant sound is both penetrative and beautiful. Presumably, the combination of pervasiveness in all directions and beauty made conch blowing an apt illustration for the radiation practice.

The boundlessness of the resultant experience of the divine abodes also aligns with mindfulness, which can lead to a similarly broadly open, and even boundless, state of mind. This becomes evident in some depictions of mindfulness of the body. Such descriptions appear to involve a rooting of mindfulness in the presence of the body while at the same time remaining openly receptive to whatever may happen at any of the bodily sense doors. Mindfulness practice undertaken in this way results in an “immeasurable” or “boundless” condition of the mind, thereby being qualified with the same term that serves as a designation for the divine abodes.

### The Experience of the Divine Abodes

In what follows, I intend to round off the exploration in this installment by illustrating the distinct quality of each divine abode, on the understanding that this is based on my own ideas and not something found explicitly in the early discourses. My illustration is based on the example of the sun, on the assumption that one is in a cool and stable climate where sunshine is experienced as something pleasant and agreeable, instead of being oppressive.

Here, *mettā* would be like the sun at midday in a cloudless sky, equally illuminating everyone and providing warmth in all directions. Just as the sun shines on what is high and low, clean and dirty, so *mettā* shines on all without making distinctions.

The sun keeps shining, regardless of how its rays are received. It does not shine more if people move out into the open to be warmed by its rays, nor does it shine less because people move back indoors. Similarly, *mettā* does not depend on reciprocation. Its rays of kindness shine on others out of an inner strength that pervades all bodily activities, words, and thoughts, without expecting anything in return. From the center of one's being, *mettā* shines its rays on anyone encountered, just as from the midst of the sky the sun shines in all directions.

Compassion could be compared to the sun just before sunset. Darkness is close by, almost palpably close, yet the sun keeps shining. In fact, it shines all the more brilliantly, beautifully coloring the sky at sunset. Similarly, when face to face with suffering and affliction, the mental attitude of compassion shines even more brilliantly, undeterred by all the darkness found in the world.

Continuing with the sun imagery, sympathetic joy could be compared to early morning sunrise. The birds are singing merrily, the air is fresh, and the surroundings are illuminated by the rising sun and appear as if pervaded by joyful delight. At times the rays of the sun touch a dewdrop on a flower or tree and break into a myriad of colors. In the same way, the manifestation of wholesome qualities can become the source of joyful rejoicings within oneself.

The fourth of the divine abodes, equanimity, could then be likened to the full moon on a cloudless night. Just as the sun and the moon are both up in the vast sky, in the same way the four divine abodes share with each other the boundless nature of a mind that has become limitless like the sky. The moon is not itself a source of sunlight, unlike the sun. At the same time, however, the moon does reflect the light of the sun, just as equanimity reflects within itself the positive disposition of the other three divine abodes.

## Summary

Early Buddhist thought recognizes the divine abodes as temporary states of liberation alongside the irreversible liberation attained with the stages of awakening.

The divine abodes, as one type of such temporary liberations, have a close relationship with ethical conduct. Their cultivation can in several ways support facing the challenges of climate change, which holds in particular for compassion as the wish for the absence of harm.

Throughout, mindfulness serves as a key quality, which in various ways relates to the cultivation of divine abodes like *mettā* and compassion. Practiced in conjunction, mindfulness and the divine abodes provide the fertile ground for growth in the type of inner balance and resiliency that the current environmental crisis requires.

## Meditation

The presence of the wholesome joy of being in the present moment provides an ideal foundation for the arousing of compassion or the other divine abodes. Such arousing can be undertaken based on employing either a particular phrase that expresses the sentiment of the relevant divine abode or else by using a mental image or picture. In the case of compassion, the sentiment would be the wish for non-harm, and an image could be anything else that arouses within oneself the mental attitude of compassion. Any image that fulfills this purpose can serve as the starting point.

In case one decides to start with mental reflections in the form of phrases, then these are best kept short and concise right from the outset. Both reflections and mental images can be skillful means to arouse compassion; once they have fulfilled this task, however, they can be left behind. Such tools are supports meant to lead on to a stage of practice where they are no longer needed.

Once they seem no longer necessary, a shift can take place from *doing* compassion to simply *being* compassion, by way of allowing one's whole body and mind to be suffused with compassion.

After having dwelled for some time in this experience, the compassion can be allowed to radiate in the different directions. Such radiation can begin by pervading the front, then the

right, the back, and the left; this is similar to the earlier practice of contemplating the external earth element. Having in this way established pervasion of the four directions the radiation of compassion can also extend upwards and then downwards.

The practice of the radiation could be compared to a source of light that is surrounded by a curtain on all sides. To allow the light to shine in all directions, one slowly and gently pulls away the curtain. No need to push or exert force in any way. It does not matter how far the light of compassion is able to shine right now. The task is only one of removing any boundary, of allowing the mind to become naturally boundless. With continued practice, at times the inner light will shine with increasing strength and its illumination will spread far and wide. However short or far it may spread, a temporary liberation of the mind is reached as soon as the radiation has become boundless in all directions.

With the radiation established in all directions, one simply remains in the spaciousness of the mental liberation by compassion, without paying further attention to individual directions. In terms of the light simile, the curtains having been gently pulled away, now the light just keeps shining in all directions. A soft awareness of the body in the sitting posture and of the continuity of breathing can serve as stabilizers of the mind. For the same purpose, it can be helpful to use the times of inhalations for attending to the felt sense of compassion and the times of exhalations to being more aware of the spaciousness of the mind.

Within such spaciousness of the mind, any defilement has no chance to remain. As soon as a distraction is noticed, one just allows the mind to return to its condition of spaciousness and the mental narrowness that accompanies a defilement evaporates on its own.

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