

Vanessa Zusei Goddard

*The Four Immeasurables: A Science of Compassion*

Week One: "Loving-Kindness: Wishing Happiness for Others"

May 2, 2020



Hello, I'm Zusei Goddard, and welcome to this Tricycle Dharma Talk series on "The Four Immeasurables: A Science of Compassion." I would like to explore this early teaching of the four immeasurables—lovingkindness, compassion, sympathetic joy, and equanimity—and look at them in a few different ways. One, as a science of compassion; as a practice of heartfulness; as an ethic, of reciprocity; and going beyond that, an ethic of unity. We will explore each of these aspects as we go along.

Before I go into it, let me tell you just a little bit about myself and my background. I have been studying in the Zen tradition for the last 25 years or so. I lived at Zen Mountain Monastery in upstate New York for about 23 years, 14 of those years as a monastic. So I was ordained, and I then returned to lay life and continued to live close to the monastery. I followed this schedule and continued working alongside the monastics, the residents. In 2018 I received dharma transmission from Shugen Roshi, Abbot of Zen Mountain Monastery and the head of the Mountains and Rivers Order. Since then, I decided to step out of that monastic training and come into true lay life. I'm now based in New York City, where I dedicate my time to writing and teaching. But really, the heart of it was that I wanted to bring the monastery into the world, and the practice of the four immeasurables is very much a part of that. So I'm excited to share this teaching with you.

Let me lay the framework by speaking of the four immeasurables in two different ways. There's a contemporary Tibetan teacher, Khandro Rinpoche, who said that you can practice the four immeasurables for the sake of beings—so for the sake of your own enlightenment, for the sake of serving others—but she says doing so is cultivating the limited four immeasurables. This seems like a contradiction in terms: how can they be immeasurable and limited? But her point is that as long as you practice them, for the sake of something, even if that something is serving another, they become limited. Another way of thinking about them and of cultivating these four immeasurables is to see them as dharmatta or suchness, as the very nature of who we are as



human beings. In other words, we can practice lovingkindness, compassion, joy at another's happiness and equanimity, because we are already loving and kind, we are already compassion itself. Seen in this way, then they are truly immeasurable. To me, this is a very interesting dynamic because, on one hand, there is cultivation, this practice, there is effort, otherwise we wouldn't even be speaking about them. On the other hand, they are very much our intrinsic nature. They are the very fabric of who we are. And both are true simultaneously.

I think a perfect example of this is the story of an elderly man who lived near a very busy highway. Every morning, he would go out on his porch, and he would wave at the passing cars and say, "Good morning. I hope you're having a good day." And then every afternoon, he would come out on his porch again and wave at the passing cars and say, "Good evening. I hope you have a safe ride home." He did this day after day after day, until one day a reporter heard about what he was doing and decided to interview him. So the reporter went to see the elderly man and he said, "But sir, these drivers can't hear you. Why are you doing this?" And the man said, "I'm not thinking about what they're hearing or not hearing. I'm not even thinking whether they can hear me or not. Every morning, I go out, and I wish them a good day. Every evening, I go out, and I wish them a good evening. That's all." I practice them because I can, because they are who I am.

The four immeasurables are variously known as the abodes of Brahma, the four divine abidings, the heavenly abodes, or the *brahma-vihara*. They are both called sublime and excellent. They are sublime because they're the most direct, the most effective, the most loving way of relating to ourselves and relating to one another. They are excellent because in their manifestation, they are limitless. That is exactly what makes them immeasurable and is what we will be exploring throughout this series.



They appear in a number of the early sutras. One of them is that the *Tevijja Sutta* (*Sutra of the Threefold Knowledges*) in which the Buddha describes both the qualities themselves: lovingkindness, compassion, sympathetic joy—which, as I said, it's joy at another's happiness, joy at another's well being—and then equanimity. He says that they are the most direct way to attaining union with Brahma—in a word, liberation. As the Buddha's teaching a young Brahman, he says to him, "Vasettha, by this liberation of the heart, through lovingkindness, through compassion, through sympathetic joy and equanimity, a practitioner leaves nothing untouched in the whole world, nothing unaffected. This Vasettha, is the way to union with Brahma." So he's essentially saying that through our cultivation and expression of this lovingkindness, of this wish for another's well being, we are leaving nothing unaffected in the world. There is nothing that we leave untouched, no one that we leave out in this expression of the four immeasurables.

Fundamentally, what we all want is to be happy. We sometimes go about procuring that happiness in very unskillful ways. Sometimes it's difficult to see that another human being wants and is being driven by is the wish for happiness, but really at the heart of all of our actions, is the desire to be fundamentally happy, to be fundamentally at ease with ourselves, and with the world that we live in. So the challenge that we face as human beings, is how do we be happy *together*? How do I act so that my happiness doesn't impede yours? This is where the science of compassion comes in.

Louis Massignon, a scholar of Islam once said, that in a religious historian's study of a culture, of a time and a place, they should not just engage in an intellectual study but that they should expand their view of the time and culture that they're studying—the political, social, economic ambiance of the time,—to such an extent that they can then *feel* what the people that they're studying felt at that time. He said this is a science of compassion. This is how we make place for another in our minds. I feel this is very much what the four immeasurables ask us to do, *challenge* and *encourage* us to do: to make place for another in our minds. We do this through



the repetition of certain phrases that give voice to that wish. "May I be filled with happiness and know the root of happiness. May you be free of suffering and know the root of suffering. May all beings be filled with joy and another's happiness. May they live in peace, free from desire and aversion." There are different versions, different translations of the four immeasurables. But they all express this very basic wish for happiness, which encompasses the practice of lovingkindness, freedom from suffering, which is compassion that generation and expression of joy, and another's well being, and equanimity, maintaining a mind that is balanced, that is free from bias and aversion, greed and hatred, as some translations say.

The interesting thing about the practice of the immeasurables is that as we practice them, they become these ever-expanding circles of lovingkindness and well being, but we always start with ourselves. When I first heard this, I thought it was a little odd, because I thought, "Here I am in a tradition that is centered on selflessness. So why am I starting with me first?" Practitioners often say they feel uncomfortable wishing these qualities for themselves. Some of them say they don't feel they are worth wishing these qualities to this themselves first.

But interestingly Buddhagosa, who was a fifth-century Indian monk, and author of the *Visuddhimagga*, or *Path of Purification*, said that we cultivate them, starting with ourselves first, as an example, that by wishing these qualities to ourselves, we are generating the desire to wish them for others as well. After wishing them for ourselves, we move out to those we know and love because it's easy, or it's easier. It's not easy to do it all the time. It's not easy to do it unconditionally. But it's a little bit easier than to do it for people we don't know. But that is the next practice. So victims of war, of a natural disaster, members of Congress, that they may have the wherewithal to run our country with wisdom.

Lastly, we offer them the four immeasurables to people that we have difficulty with, perhaps even people who may have heard us. Of course, this is the most challenging practice. This is how



the four immeasurables keep extending the limits we have created for ourselves. They keep pushing them outward, encouraging us to live into the reality that we truly are. And yet we don't need to be particularly heroic or even spiritually advanced to cultivate the four immeasurables. There is a story that when Mahatma Gandhi was asked what he would do if he saw a pilot flying over his ashram with the intention to bomb the ashram, and Gandhi replied, "I would pray for the pilot." I think most of us would feel stretched by such a practice. But as I said before, because they are who we are, these four immeasurables, we really practice them as we are in where we are. And that is why we always start right where we are, and then slowly extend out. Practicing generating, extending, and growing those sublime qualities.

The first of the four immeasurables is lovingkindness, that's maitri, or metta. One of the definitions of lovingkindness is "an active interest in another." When I am wishing happiness for you, when I am wishing lovingkindness to you, I am saying I am actively interested in you. And not only am I interested, I care about you, and I care about you because you and I have the same nature. I care about you because you are; I care about you because I am. There's a teacher who said, "To think of the self as independent and fixed is misappropriation of public property." I really like that. To think that I am an individual is a misappropriation of really what is public, what is unified. It is to draw a boundary where there is no boundary to begin with. Another way to think about lovingkindness is as the absence of fear, because when we think of those times when lovingkindness is not our first impulse (or perhaps the second or the third) usually fear is present. Fear that what is mine will be taken away from me: whether that is my health, my wealth, my happiness, my property. We'll see how the immeasurables begin to break down those boundaries. They're saying there is no such thing as "yours" and "mine," that we use those conventions to live in the world that we live in, but that there is a point at which they stop working.

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So to summarize, today we looked at the four immeasurables as a science of compassion as a spiritual tool that teaches us and encourages us to make place for another in our minds. And then we looked at the first of these four immeasurables lovingkindness as the absence of exclusivity, which is really that breaking down of the idea of a separate, exclusive self and also as the absence of fear as a desire to meet another without holding back without that separation that we normally place between ourselves and the world.

So to summarize, today we looked at the four immeasurables as a science of compassion, as a spiritual tool that teaches us and encourages us to make place for another in our minds. And then we looked at the first of these four immeasurables—lovingkindness—as the absence of exclusivity, which is really that breaking down of the idea of a separate, exclusive self. It is also the absence of fear, a desire to meet another without holding back, without that separation that we normally place between ourselves and the world.

In the next segment, we will look at the second of the four immeasurables: compassion, or *karuna*. I'd like to look at compassion—and really at the four immeasurables together—as an ethic of reciprocity. In some religious traditions it is understood as the golden rule: “What I do unto you, I do unto others.” We will also talk about the practice of heartfulness. So, I hope you can join me next week, and we'll see you next time.