The Four Immeasurable Qualities

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PRIOR TO WALKING ON THE PATH

Very good evening everyone. I am very happy to be here in Boston. I think this is the same church I was in a few years ago, and I remember liking it very much. I am also very grateful to the Boston dharma study group, a group of very old friends who have for many years continued to study and practice the dharma in a very secular and nonsectarian way.

To Be or Not to Be a Buddhist

> *Being a Buddhist is about the human mind and the development of our human potential and its best qualities.*

These days, I spend almost every day with people throughout the world who are practicing and studying the Buddha's teachings. They all show great interest in learning the dharma. Some are dedicated, formal Buddhist practitioners, but many are not—although it's probably easier to define who is or is not "Buddhist" in the beginning stages.

There are many different forms and traditional practices of vows, precepts, and other necessary formalities through which one may define oneself as a Buddhist. But the more you get into Buddhist studies and really try to understand what the teachings are about, hopefully the time comes when you understand that the designation of "Buddhist" does not rely on forms; it relies on truly understanding the meaning of the Buddha's teachings. As it is, however, we live in the system we've created, and many people refer to themselves as Buddhist practitioners, even those who hesitate to do so. But at a certain point, the reference to being a Buddhist may not be very relevant.

Being a Buddhist is about the human mind and the development of our human potential and best qualities. And overall, there is great appreciation for all the teachings—whether Buddhist or from other traditions—that help us understand how to develop those better human qualities and potential, and how to take support from the many methods there are. And so there is immense growth of interest in cultivating meditation, mindfulness, and awareness.

Today a prevalent term used for meditation is "contemplative science." Many say this interest is increasing. For someone like me, who spends most evenings with such people, this does seem to be so. And I think it is absolutely wonderful—because in the context of the world we have today, with the speed of change and radical changes occurring globally, socially, and economically, *of course* we all feel a sense of chaos and imbalance. For the world to continue displaying awareness and good human qualities, and to coexist with a fair amount of sanity, this push to encourage contemplation and meditation is very important.

This is not necessarily a Buddhist thing. It is anything that evokes in one's mind introspection and reflection on those human qualities through which we can locate our *intrinsic* contentment and happiness, instead of constantly pursuing external sources of happiness. So this increased interest is very good. And it is wonderful that people are coming together to making it possible, with a sense of sharing these wonderful teachings—some of which just happen to be the wonderful teachings of

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Shakyamuni Buddha. I am deeply grateful to the dharma study groups and the various other meditation centers for the continuous efforts of so many wonderful people.

Now, since my life has been more connected to the Buddhist world, let's talk some more about the Buddhist people.

The Challenge

On one hand, we have a growth of interest in the development of human potential, which is good. On the other hand, we have a group known as "Buddhist practitioners." These are people trying—with tremendous diligence, effort, and concentration—to dedicate at least part of their lives to learning the different forms through which human potential and good qualities can be developed. But how many of them take this out of the realm of intellectual appreciation and truly integrate it into their lives? This is the challenge.

For many years, my old western Buddhist friends have tried to convince me that it's possible to balance this world and their spiritual path: what we call samsara and nirvana. They usually use the image of an untainted lotus growing, pristine and pure, from muddy waters. I always joke with them about this. My take on this beautiful mental image is that, in today's times, the lotus tends to be splattered with mud—and our wonderful philosophies about the world may be just as simplistic and naïve.

Can our lofty, meaningful theories come down to earth, where they could truly and properly bring about changes for the good, with benefits that are directly accessible to ourselves and others? This, again, is the challenge.

Simplistic vs. Simplicity

Many people like the idea of meditating, developing mindfulness, and cultivating qualities such as loving kindness and compassion. The danger is that they may take a very simplistic approach —and by this, I don't mean simplicity as a good thing.

Simplistic, here, means having a naïve understanding of what loving kindness, compassion, and other altruistic human qualities are about. For example, when an eminent teacher like His Holiness the Dalai Lama bestows a teaching and meditation—and crowds of people push each other over to get in to cultivate compassion, loving kindness, and altruism.

Likewise, let's consider a simplistic view of the Four Immeasurables. Hundreds of books are available on the four profound qualities of loving kindness, compassion, joyfulness, and equanimity. There is probably nothing I could say here that you couldn't easily access on Google. Type in "compassion," and you'll get files and files of different ways to cultivate compassion and other great altruistic qualities. The problem is, if the interpretation and approach is simplistic, these good human qualities may be misunderstood.

When a simplistic approach is taken to profound qualities such as loving kindness and compassion, they can become like costumes or disguises over the same old mind. You may try to project these qualities to others. But if they aren't coming from the depths of who you are as human being, you are just superimposing loving kindness and compassion over a mind already determined not to change.

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What happens then is a distancing, or gap, between the compassion we're trying to cultivate and the other person—and over time we tend to become "religious" people. We have a strong allegiance to whatever profound philosophy we hold in high regard, but the meaning of that profound philosophy has no "legs," so to speak. It will never be able to go out and make its benefits directly accessible to oneself or to others.

It is in this context that I would like to lay out what the Four Immeasurables are. They are *not* just beautiful things to hear about on a summer evening when we have nothing to do, so we all go into a beautiful church and talk about changing the world and spreading loving kindness and compassion. Let's look, instead, at the hard work involved in cultivating these qualities that you and I hold to be truly good and of profound benefit.

Questioning the Four Immeasurables

First, I would like to ask you these questions: Do you think it's worth developing the four immeasurable qualities—because if not, then that's the end of this talk. [Laughter]

Do you feel a strong intrinsic affinity for the quality of loving kindness in your own mind—not as a Buddhist, or a religious person, or as anyone but a thinking human being?

Is loving kindness a quality that you would want to receive from others? Is it an expression of something you'd like to *give* to others?

Likewise, how do you feel about compassion? Do you see it as just a theory, an object of curiosity, or some kind of experiment? Or, do you feel an intrinsic closeness and affection for the quality of compassion as something you'd like to receive and give—if to no one else than your loved ones?

Similarly, do you feel it's worth cultivating the quality called joyfulness? There is nothing deep or mysterious here; it's just about being joyful. Do you appreciate being happy? Do you appreciate having a good laugh? Is this something you would enjoy and like others to enjoy or share?

Then ask yourself about the fourth quality, equanimity. Would you like to be peaceful? Would you like to get a good night's sleep, or just stay out of trouble? Would you like to just be quiet and still and intrinsically harmonious—and to experience that harmony outside of yourself?

Ask yourself about your own relationship to these words: loving kindness, compassion, joyfulness, and equanimity. Are they are worth exploring, worth listening to and contemplating? Is it worth learning about the benefits of producing these qualities within yourself? Your answers to these questions will determine the journey you will take. If this is not a destination you are really interested in, that will always impact your actual movement on the path of practice.

It is essential to spend time looking into yourself and trying to understand the benefits and worthiness of the qualities called the Four Immeasurables. This also applies to meditation, and to diving into the cultivation of mindfulness. It is very popular today to say, "Oh, it is good to meditate and develop mindfulness." Well, it is good—but it may not necessarily be something you've thought out very well.

I'm always a bit skeptical when people talk about the increasing interest in Buddhism, and the numbers of people appreciating the dharma and turning to meditation. It's like the first week of a

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romance. When you first fall in love with someone—even if that person has purple hair and all kinds of what we call "extraordinary embellishments"—there's just the feeling of love. You don't see the blemishes; you only see the good things.

So, yes, meditation and being calm and peaceful and loving and generating compassion and doing good for others and being more aware—these are all very good! But in the initial romantic stage, you may be looking through rose-tinted glasses. After that, you will see the hard work involved, hard work that will be done by nobody but you. This is why interest in Buddhism increases at first and then dips—and this dip is steep, because hard work will never make Buddhism very popular.

Moreover, Buddhism is the only philosophy that doesn't have anyone but oneself to blame for what's wrong. Nor is there anyone but oneself responsible for producing what is good. To be put on the spot like this is not always seen as favorable by the human mind.

Our cultures, social upbringing, and the design of our world condition us to hold some person or people or circumstance responsible for our situation. We have politicians to blame; we have God and the prophets, religious masters, and original sin to blame. We have many things to blame, including karma. It is very difficult to come to the point where you see that blame is not actually logical; that everything depends on you, yourself.

When we speak about this, it doesn't sound difficult. But when you're put on that spot, it is. When you come to that crucial point of individual responsibility, it becomes very difficult to begin to walk on the path. The only way to counteract this is to take time, *prior* to walking on the path, to really think about whether or not what you are trying to cultivate is worth it. Is it is beneficial? Do you really understand the value and meaning of what you are undertaking?

Cultivating the Four Immeasurables

It is essential to see that you cannot just impose loving kindness, compassion, joy, and equanimity on yourself or others when you wish. You cannot just wake up and say, "Today's a nice day. I'm going to be fully loving and kind to others." Or, "I'm going to go out and see who needs my joyfulness and compassion." Or, "I'm going to be one with equanimity." That is not the approach.

Instead of seeing the Four Immeasurables as expressed emotions, you could see them as the source of your own basic sanity and awareness. As the Buddha, himself, said in the sutra teachings:

> *Anyone who is unable to join one's mind with these four causes, or sources,*
> *of human sanity will be constantly bound by the confusion of cyclic existence.*

Here the Buddha talks about cultivating loving kindness, compassion, joy, and equanimity as four "causes, or sources of human sanity." Without these qualities the human mind is constantly trapped in the cyclic existence called *samsara*—one simple definition of which is "an unending game of hope and fear." Cultivating the Four Immeasurables keeps the mind sane.

Five Necessary Qualities of Mind

The great masters of Tibetan Buddhism, particularly Longchenpa, describe how the Four Immeasurables originate in five qualities of your own mind. In fact, you cannot even talk about kindness, compassion, joyfulness, or equanimity without cultivating these five characteristics as their source:

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1. A fundamental attitude as vast as space
2. A mind as constant as the depths of the ocean
3. Seeing all occurrences, inner and outer, as mist floating in the sky
4. A compassionate attitude as even as the rays of the sun
5. Sensing negativities to be like specks of dust in your eye.

In other words, it is very simplistic to speak about being lovingly kind and compassionate to others, without developing within oneself the basic foundation of these five qualities.

To support this understanding of "simplistic," here's an image to hold onto. There is a huge enemy army with thousands of forces, well equipped with all the modern gadgets, guns, missiles, and so on. And I send you into war against this army, by yourself, armed only with a potato peeler. Oh, it's a very good potato peeler, really effective for peeling many potatoes—but there you stand, in front of an army of thousands equipped modern weapons.

This is the image I'd ask you to hold when you think you have a good weapon against the powerful forces of hope and fear and neurotic habits. What you have is a potato peeler, with the best potato-peeler characteristics. You cannot be very confident about winning this battle because your weapon, while good in itself, cannot withstand the forces against you.

Holding on to naïve interpretations of any kind is like holding on to that potato peeler. It may be a good thought: loving kindness is a very good thought; and His Holiness the Dalai Lama speaks about compassion, so let's all go and be compassionate. But the lifespan of these nice ideas is, at most, a week. After that, we face that powerful enemy of the self's neurotic patterns and habits, hopes and fears.

The self has tremendous momentum and power gained through constant usage. And its familiarity is so strong that—even with your wish to be loving, kind, and compassionate—you can't always withstand the forces of habitual neuroses.

How does one come out of the naïveness of just imagining these good qualities? As the great master, Longchenpa says, it becomes necessary to not to see loving kindness, compassion, joy, or equanimity as four distinct qualities separate from you, which you then impose upon yourself. Instead—if your attitude is as vast as space—you can see that loving kindness, compassion, joy, and equanimity are what you *are*.

1st—A Fundamental Attitude as Vast as Space

The analogy of space stands for an attitude that is vast, as opposed to a linear perspective where everything begins and ends with you—and is all about you in the middle. When your perspective becomes as vast as space, it can accommodate everything: the pure and the impure, the right and not right, things of your own doing and not of your own doing.

Space accommodates all perfections and imperfections. Likewise, the basis of loving kindness, compassion, equanimity, and joy arises when you can rest within an attitude that accommodates others as they are. Your cultivation of kindness is without demands and expectations; it is especially without strategies or plans for applying that loving kindness and compassion.

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So, to cultivate the four immeasurable qualities, first work on your own attitude. With a vaster perspective, the mind resembles space. And just as space is able to hold everything gently, freely, and without demands, your attitude towards others—your friends, family, community, or the whole world itself—is accommodating and without demands based on your own expectations.

What is that attitude, other than loving kindness? What is it, other than compassion? There is no need to go out and be compassionate; you *are* compassion. There is no need to remember to apply loving kindness; loving kindness is who you are. You are naturally a loving person because your attitude is much more accepting and accommodating of others.

2nd—A Mind as Constant as the Depths of the Ocean

Now think about cultivating the second quality, constancy. The nature of your mind is as constant as the depths of the ocean. The ocean depths are never deterred by the waves on the surface. In the same way, your good moods and bad moods, good experiences and bad experiences, your nice days and bad days do not influence the potential for patience and kindness held in the vast perspective of your mind.

Having understood the first quality, an attitude as vast as space, to be a good thing, you now strengthen it. With strengthened awareness and the determination to be gentle in your approach to others, you do not allow that all-accommodating attitude to be overwhelmed by the occurrences of everyday life. This cultivates constancy like the depths of the ocean, and a sense of dependability. You can trust yourself to be a source of love and kindness that others can depend on.

A common problem for many of us is that this constancy doesn't develop. I think Mahayana Buddhist students, especially, try very hard to develop compassion, loving kindness, and so on. Your intention is excellent—but your constancy is not always excellent. When your various moods or life experiences occur, self-absorption may overpower the determination to practice loving kindness and compassion. And at a crucial point, forgetfulness allows habitual patterns to overwhelm your intention.

It is essential, therefore, to cultivate and then strengthen this depths-of-the-ocean constancy within yourself. Then—because it's one thing to *say* the mind must be constant as the ocean—the way to make it so is by cultivating the third quality.

3rd—Seeing All Occurrences as Mist

The third quality is the insight that sees all phenomena—your inner thoughts, feelings, and emotions, as well as external phenomena in the world—as mists that arise, manifest, and dissolve. This is the insight, or wisdom, aspect that knows the nature of things as they occur.

Keep thoroughly in mind that one of the most powerful characteristics of *all* phenomena is transformation, or change. It is the impermanent nature of things to arise, manifest, and cease. Where there is something good, it changes; where there is something bad that also changes. With this clear understanding, know that whatever occurs in the field of your mind's thoughts and emotions will also change. Problems may not dramatically disappear. But this definitely loosens the tightness with which you hold them to be unchanging and permanent—which is what makes moods, emotions, and external experiences so overwhelmingly powerful.

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Instead, the mind can view them as mist. Yes, they *do* momentarily appear but they change—just as thousands of experiences and feelings have changed. Knowing this enhances one's abiding in constancy, which enhances the vastness of one's attitude.

Having developed a vast attitude as constant as the depths of the ocean, with the ability to see mind's various inner emotions and external experiences as transitory as mist, then cultivate the fourth quality.

4th—Compassion as Even as Rays of the Sun

The fourth quality is an approach towards others that is genuinely gentle and as even as the rays of the sun. The sun—whether or not it is recognized, appreciated, or even seen—is accessible to whoever might benefit from it. In the same way, determine to be constantly gentle and giving to others, without a strategy, without a plan, and without ambition. Your approach is based simply on how to best benefit others. Then you're beginning to embark on the path of cultivating the Four Immeasurables—supported by the most important fifth quality.

5th—Sensing Negativities as Specks of Dust in the Eye

One can never become a kind, compassionate person while ignoring the negativities in one's own attitude and personality. Anger, confusion, self-absorption, strong desire and attachments, self-clinging, and particularly jealousy and pride—these should be treated like specks of dust or dirt in your eye. When something gets in your eye, you can't tolerate it; you do everything you can to remove it. Be just as consciously aware that negativity destroys your relationship with your intrinsic absolute goodness, which is the basis of your sane relationships with others.

These five fundamental attitudes support and complement each other. To work with the Buddhist concept of compassion, begin by strengthening them. This lays the foundation for the four immeasurable qualities of loving kindness, compassion, joy, and equanimity.

Two Approaches to the Four Immeasurables

The Four Immeasurables are not called immeasurable because of their size, but because their one fundamental quality is unconditional. *Unconditional* loving kindness is what makes loving kindness immeasurable. Unconditional compassion makes compassion immeasurable. *Unconditional* joy makes joy immeasurable. And unconditional equanimity makes equanimity immeasurable. In the classical texts, the cultivation of these immeasurable qualities is mainly classified in two ways.

The Four Immeasurables for the Benefit of Sentient Beings

The first approach cultivates the Four Immeasurables with sentient beings as their object. Your objective for practicing loving kindness, for example, is sentient beings. Likewise, you have compassion for sentient beings. You take joy in their happiness. And you rest in equanimity without sentient beings serving as your basis for discrimination and bias.

When the Four Immeasurables are cultivated with sentient beings as their objective, they are called "limited" Four Immeasurables. The methods for developing these qualities are relative, provisional, or conventional. In simple words, they are for ordinary practitioners.

The Four Immeasurables "Just Because"

The second approach—which is much more suited to their unconditional nature—is to cultivate the Four Immeasurables *just because*. Now this is not just some puzzled state of mind. For Buddhists, it

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means cultivating the Four Immeasurables with *dharmata* as the objective. If you're not used to Buddhist terminology, it means you have no particular reason to develop the Four Immeasurables. You do it simply because you can and you should—because these are your *intrinsic* qualities.

Take the quality of joyfulness. Do you need some profound reason to be joyful? Do you need be told that if you are joyful, the Buddha will take you to the Buddha fields? No. But the stubborn human mind—which stupidly takes great pride in calling itself wise—is conditioned to not let it be simple. Simple in the good way means *just as it is*.

Likewise, the quality of loving kindness is simply who you are. You don't need a reason to manifest your natural state. You can develop loving kindness just because. You can be compassionate just because—not for some profound reason or because the Buddha or the dharma pushes you into it. You do it because you are able to do it. Why not be joyful just because?

You can remain in equanimity just because—or would you rather run around being biased and partial, clumsily making judgments and having opinions, when there's no need for you to interfere in others' lives? It's your choice.

From the perspective of the Buddhist teachings, the reason you *can* actually generate unconditional loving kindness, compassion, joy, and equanimity is because these are your natural qualities.

This is the authentic approach to the Four Immeasurables. The confidence that recognizes this and allows you to bravely *be* this—for no other reason than it's your basic nature—is the absolute, or ultimate, approach to the Four Immeasurables, as correctly understood.

But as much as you may like this idea, you're not going to do it. You will not be easily persuaded to being nothing but kind, without something to obtain at the end of the line—even something as elusive as nirvana, or enlightenment. Because someone on a high seat says the fruition of generating loving kindness, compassion, joyfulness, and equanimity is enlightenment, for that reason, alone, most of us have become Buddhists.

I, myself, became a nun and a Buddhist practitioner in search of what we call enlightenment. But the fact is, I have no idea what that is. Somebody somewhere told me it's a good thing, and that seemed sufficient—and so far, the wisdom and kindness of the great masters has been playing along.

Working with Form and Complexity

> *To be so distanced from your own intrinsic potential and ability to cultivate it—that is actually remarkable. You begin to see the stupidity of not recognizing what you are capable of, and the consequences of that…. Looking at the consequences, you see that going back doesn't make any sense.*

There are three stages of any development: not doing anything, doing something, then doing it right—and if you can't do it right, doing something is better than doing nothing at all. Thus we search for this nirvana, which we can barely even spell.

And if, in fact, you're moving from being grumpy, unloving, and *not* compassionate to having even a little fabricated kindness because, in the end, you'll get to nirvana, that's good. If in the search for

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enlightenment, you become a little bit less biased and more intrinsically at peace, that's also good. That fabrication can continue in the hope that, at some point, it will strike you to ask, "By the way, what's this enlightenment all about?" And that then—supported by your own introspection and reflections—you will say, "I don't really need a reason to be what I am capable of being as a human being."

To not have recognized that quality, *that* is a cause of sadness. To be so distanced from your own intrinsic potential and ability to cultivate it—that is actually remarkable. You begin to see the stupidity of not recognizing what you are capable of, and the consequences of that. You see how hesitancy, suspicion, aggression animosity, unkindness, selfishness, and self-absorption are taken to the point where, these days, you can't even trust another's love. Looking at the consequences, you see that going back doesn't make any sense.

What you *can* do is simply work with your own inner qualities. They are yours, and it makes sense to personify and embody these qualities. It is with that hope that you engage in so-called relative, or fabricated, loving kindness, compassion, joyfulness, and equanimity.

What I mean to point out here is that, yes, in Buddhism there are many deliberate forms. And all these form-oriented things can look very pretentious: pretentiously sitting in meditation; pretentiously being joyful, lovingly kind, or compassionate. On the other hand, there is wisdom in even fabricating these qualities, which is far superior to simply ignoring them.

For practitioners, the forms are necessary reminders that both the fabricated and the truly natural qualities are entirely dependent on your perspective. Whether your approach is without an incentive, just because, or with an incentive—no matter how invisible or elusive—both can be the driving force for continuing on the path. This is what determines formally engaging in Buddhist meditation versus being a natural Buddhist.

When we study the Four Immeasurables, these are the two streams it takes. There is the development of the Four Immeasurables with sentient beings as the objective. And there is the approach of having dharmata, "just as it is," as the objective.

At a certain point, as I've said, even the designations of Buddhist or Buddhism are not relevant. They're mere labels, mere designations. If you need them, use them; if you don't need them, you're actually better off without. But as simple and good as this approach may be, you may not be able to "just be" without a reason. If you do need a reason, then you can cultivate the Four Immeasurables the Buddhistic way—which brings in philosophy, teachings, commentaries, and things to meditate upon, things to think about, things to reject and to cultivate.

Ultimately you do not need a philosophy or systematic approach to develop loving kindness, compassion, joy, and equanimity. These are your own intrinsic qualities and you are capable of cultivating them. The choice is yours—but don't take the shortcut just because it's simple and short. Shortcuts can be extremely difficult for people conditioned to complexity, such as our selves.

What the Four Immeasurables Are Not

Since complexity is what we are fond of, let's spend more time on the complexity of the four immeasurable qualities. One way to better understand the Four Immeasurables is to look at what they are *not*.

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According to the teachings of Longchenpa, the study of loving kindness, compassion, joy, and equanimity can be divided into characteristic "opposing factors," along with the various attitudes associated with them. These opposing factors and attitudes impede the development of our nature's good qualities. Loving kindness, for example, could be better understood by asking what characteristic opposes loving kindness.

What Opposes Loving Kindness?

The characteristic factors opposing loving kindness are the negative mental habits we retain, along with an actual fondness for these states. The texts refer to being *happy* about being stingy, and to the many logical reasons we find for being selfish, stubborn, or impatient. We all say things like: If I weren't impatient, people would treat me like a doormat. If I weren't stingy, who else would think about me when I'm old? If I didn't get upset about things, how would people know not to take advantage of me?

We find good reasons for being territorial, stubborn, irritated, anxious, fearful, or hopeful. We equate harboring these negative states with being sensible, with protecting and thinking about ourselves. But this buildup of negative mental habits destroys the good quality of loving kindness.

If our stinginess, irritation, stubbornness, and other negative mental states were let go of, their removal would give rise to nothing but loving kindness. In fact, there is no independent thought or emotion called "loving kindness." Loving kindness is simply the absence of these negative mental habits.

The *attitude* associated with these mental habits is called "exclusivity of the self." In order to maintain a separate self, the self's issues, needs, and protection become our most important criteria. This attitude has absolute difficulty with the generation of loving kindness.

Loving kindness is simply the destruction of the exclusivity of the self and its mental habits.

What Opposes Compassion?

In the same light, the characteristic opposing compassion is the inability to break free from the habitual patterns of the five root "poisons": habits of anger, ignorance, desire, pride, and jealousy.

Now, what is the difference between the mental habits opposing loving kindness and the habitual patterns opposing compassion? Mental habits are more about mind's aspirations and thoughts; while habitual patterns are the actions we habitually engage in—unable to break free. If you're an angry person, it's habitually being angry. If you're unable to overcome desire, it's the abject habit of desiring—with all its needs, attachments, and passions that dominate any sanity or awareness of the needs of others. The inability to break free from habitual patterns completely opposes what we call compassion.

If you want to know how to become a more compassionate person, the answer is simple. Stop being angry. Loosen up with your desire. I'm not saying give it up completely; that might be optimistic, but loosen up all those desirous expectations. Be more mentally attentive to the needs of those around you, and a little less jealous. Then you could go through the day without carrying your ego and pride with you. Letting go of habitual patterns and actions is the generation of compassion.

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Just as the attitude opposing loving kindness is the cherishing of a separate self, the attitude opposing compassion is indifference to others. A good way to see whether or not you're compassionate is to simply check your attitude for indifference to the needs and happiness of others. Where there is strong indifference, there's a lack of compassion. Where there is compassion, there is not that tsunami-like momentum of indifference.

What Opposes Joy?

The characteristic that opposes the generation of joy is described in a very interesting Tibetan phrase. Loosely translated, it is a state of mind that dwells in its own unhappiness to such a degree that it cannot be sympathetic towards others. It's good to think of this phrase when we ask what it means to be joyless or for joy to be impeded.

An unhappy state of mind is not necessarily because of the misfortunes that have befallen you. If there is some reason that you're unhappy—a loved one has died, you're bankrupt, you've lost your job or your health—it is reasonable to be unhappy. That's fine. We're not talking about a reasonably unhappy state of mind. We're talking about a state of mind that is unhappy because it's so full of self.

You create this unhappy, pessimistic state of mind yourself out of your discontent and dissatisfaction. You have a good family, but you don't appreciate that. You have friends, but you don't appreciate that. You have learning and many abilities, and yet you don't appreciate that.

A depressed Buddhist is a phenomenon I've never understood.

There are people you just can't give any good news to, because nothing "works." You meet such people every day, and you wonder why they're suffering so—because to have a human body and life is tremendous good news, isn't it? Talk to someone without arms or legs about the joys of having limbs. But here you have a depressed Buddhist; I'm using this example because a depressed Buddhist is a phenomenon I've never understood. (Laughter) Yes, there are problems. You may have no money; you've lost your partner; you're behind in your mortgage payment, and so on. But compare that with a four-year-old dying of cancer, or a mother who can't provide food for her children. Yet there you sit in meditation, feeling utterly sorry for yourself.

At a certain point, the human mind becomes so self-absorbed that it creates its own unhappiness. When your own pleasures and pains dictate how you look at life and the world, you are not seeing the world clearly, as it is. This is the linear approach of a mind full of self. Such a self-absorbed, unhappy state of mind can never develop sympathetic understanding of others.

The attitude of this self-absorbed mind that opposes joyfulness is cynicism. You develop a cynical and critical outlook on everything, including yourself and others. And with this cynical approach to life, you will never be able to understand or appreciate the generation of joy.

In the absence of these two things—self-absorption that can't see beyond the linear projections of self-interest, and a cynical outlook on life—one is by nature able to develop joy.

What Opposes Equanimity?

In the same light, the opposite of equanimity is the occurrence of some imbalance in your life. These are the imbalances that occur when the aggression towards something or the passion for something

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are very strong. The texts refer to a passion that makes you "hungry" with craving and the aggression of ever-increasing levels of expectation.

When your expectations are very strong, tremendous aggression and its rejecting aspect are never far behind. The whole focus of your life becomes driven by whether or not your expectations are being met—and if and when they are met, becoming very territorial about that.

With the constant imbalance brought about by passion and aggression comes a third factor: confusion. The more you increase passion and aggression, the more it boomerangs back on you. This makes you even hungrier and more aggressive, which keeps turning against you. And—not knowing what's turning against you—your confusion is sustained. When your life is imbalanced by the extreme indulgences of passion, aggression, and confusion, equanimity is lost. These three factors are the opposite of equanimity, along with an attitude of bias.

A biased attitude is never far behind the impulses of passion, aggression, and confusion. You become very partial to whatever serves your expectations, and very biased against whatever comes between you and your expectations. These biases are fueled by aggression.

When studying the development of the four immeasurable qualities, it is particularly important to study these subtle factors that oppose the cultivation of who you actually are as a human being.

The Four Immeasurables as Who You Are

In some way we could say the Four Immeasurables are not "qualities," they are who you are. You *are* a loving person. You are a compassionate person. You're a joyful person, with the potential for absolute natural equanimity. But instead of delving into and exploring the intrinsic qualities of your basic nature, you may succumb to their opposing factors. Preoccupation with a separate self, with its indifference, cynicism, and bias will then distance you from your natural qualities. And then you have to study something called Buddhism to understand what they are, which is very ironic.

It's actually like a slap on the cheek to come to the point of having to relegate yourself to some religion, philosophy, or meditation, or to have to lock yourself up in a cave for years before being able to say: Oh, yeah, I could be more loving. I could be more compassionate. I think joy is something I could easily do, and I could tap into that natural resource of inner peace.

So give some thought to all this complexity we try to build into life. It may be entertaining. It may give us something to speak about on a Friday night. Beyond that, it just makes things more complicated and distant. And unfortunately the biggest loser in this is your own sanity and natural potential. Thinking about it in this way, cultivate the Four Immeasurables.

THE PATH OF PRACTICE

For those of you who are fond of complexity, the simpleness we've just spoken of may not be sufficient. You may want to be told how to meditate or cultivate the Four Immeasurables. So the teachings basically say: OK, having defined the Four Immeasurables and their characteristics, this is how to cultivate them. Here things become a little more complex—beginning with loving kindness.

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Loving Kindness: the First Immeasurable Quality

Loving kindness cannot ever be practiced without practicing the "seven stages of gradual understanding."

The Seven Stages of Gradual Understanding

These seven qualities are said to be indispensable for anyone who would like to cultivate loving kindness towards others:

1. Knowing all sentient beings to have been one's mother
2. Reflecting on their kindness
3. Reflecting, with gratitude, on how to repay all the kindness you've received
4. Having a gentle approach towards others, as the first expression of repaying kindness
5. Having a compassionate, sympathetic attitude that strengthens your gentle approach in relating to sentient beings
6. Going beyond what you think are your own limitations to generate greater warmth, sympathy, and concentration on their needs. And, ultimately,
7. Having an ever-present, constant, pure attitude.

First, you begin by regarding all sentient beings as your mother. This has to be taken literally. Now truthfully speaking, throughout my Buddhist life, which is to say since birth, I've struggled with this. In my own experience, it's very theoretical. You think to yourself, *all* of them? There's a certain amount of disbelief—and for those who only believe in one life, it probably seems astronomical. But even for someone like myself, who does believe in countless lifetimes of life after death, this Tibetan mind still asks, *all* of them? Even the ones you don't like and the ones you never think about? You look at a caterpillar and wonder, "Have you been my mother?"

So my question to you is, when the teachings say to regard all sentient beings as your mothers, how do you view this? Do you do it? If you don't spend enough time with this thought, you will never understand the closeness of our relationships and interdependency.

Second, reflect on the kindness of others. The point here is not about life, death, or lifetimes of reincarnation. If you believe in this, fine; if you don't believe it, that's also fine. But do take very literally this question: How could you ever generate love for another, with a patronizing do-gooder attitude? Or with the attitude of someone who's always "giving"—not thinking that your giving of love might be a minimal expression of gratitude for all you've received?

The point here is to understand interdependence. A very easy approach is to think about who you are today. Everything you've become and achieved as a comprehending individual have come about through the collective kindness of countless individuals who brought you into being. You would not have had an education without others giving it to you. Your learning, understanding, skills, and your birth, itself, would have never occurred without the contributions of others. But does the human mind think about this?

If you do not take time to think of yourself as a gathering of the kindnesses of others, you may begin to associate the development of your own kindness with doing "favors" for others.

To reverse that attitude, it's essential to not be in a hurry to practice kindness and compassion. First, take time to understand gratitude. Reflect on your interconnectedness with all sentient beings to the

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point where you can say: At least 100 individuals contributed to producing this glass of water in front of me, so I can drink it when I need it. To actually observe this is the gateway to loving kindness.

Instead of practicing kindness or doing any kind of meditation, *think* about kindness. Not a cursory thought like, "Yes, they've all been very kind to me; in what ways, I don't really know, but they must have been." Take time to actually go through all the kindnesses you've received one by one.

Thirdly, a sense of urgency about repaying that kindness will diminish any play of arrogance in your own expression of kindness. Whatever gesture you make to project kindness and compassion is the very least you can do in appreciation for the thousands of gifts you've received from others. Being humble in your approach to the practice of loving kindness is the first step towards unconditional rather than limited kindness.

It is only after reflecting on these three–seeing sentient beings as your mother, thinking about their kindness, and wanting to repay that kindness—that warmth will develop in your attitude. This warmth, evoked in the Sanskrit term *maitri*, is the main characteristic and next stage of loving kindness.

The fourth stage is maitri, which means cultivating "friendship." If you don't develop friendship with others, you'll never be able to develop loving kindness, altruism, and compassion. Friendship describes a warm and gentle approach to others—with momentum given to it by the fifth quality, a sympathetic attitude.

The fifth stage, a sympathetic attitude, strengthens your gentle approach to sentient beings. There is compassion, or sympathy, for others' needs, and a mind that wishes them happiness and the causes of happiness. Let that warmth and sympathy grow, unlimited by what you think are your own limitations.

The sixth stage is the quality of going beyond what you think of as your limitations. The biggest impediment to unconditional, or immeasurable, loving kindness is letting such thoughts impede your potential. It's saying to yourself: I'm not able to do very much; I don't have the time, I don't have the resources, I don't have the skills. You come up with all kinds of impediments that limit your ability to have genuine loving kindness for others.

To cultivate loving kindness, don't let yourself be impeded by limitations. Do a little bit more each day: if one hour today, two hours tomorrow. If you're only extending your kindness to family, extend to an extended family. If you're extending it to your community, then extend it to other communities. If you're being tolerant today, be more tolerant tomorrow. Whatever you do, let there be growth. Going beyond your sense of limitations is the sixth stage of development.

Doing all this with an ever-present pure attitude is the seventh stage. What this means, very simply, is being without ambition and expectations. There is no ambition in your expression of kindness and no expectation of anything in return—not even recognition for your gratitude. Your kindness is without strategy. You are able to be truly and simply just nothing but kind, because it's the least you can do in return for everything you've received. Your mind is alert to the needs of others, and you push yourself to go beyond your limitations as best you can. Such would be cultivation of the first immeasurable quality, loving kindness.

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Compassion: the Second Immeasurable Quality

Compassion is a lengthy topic. But in brief, there are nine things you might need for compassion.

Nine Things Needed for Compassion

> *The nine qualities—being delightful, courageous, pleasant, disciplined, joyful, stern, utterly kind, beyond hesitation, and unbiased—are called the "nine expressions" of life. In eastern traditions, the nine expressions are used in various forms of art, music, and particularly in dance. In the context of compassion, the nine qualities could be seen as expressions of one's life.*

What does it mean to be compassionate? The first thing is simply being delightful, which means being gentle. You can't say, "I'm going to be compassionate towards all sentient beings," and have a ferocious demeanor. There must be gentleness in your physical and verbal actions, gentleness in your attitude towards everyone—and genuine delight in being of help. That would be the first thing needed for compassion.

Secondly, you have to be courageous. You must have the courage to go beyond your hesitations, your insecurities, your expectations, and your personal self-cherishing ambitions. Even at the cost of these, if there is something you can do to alleviate the suffering and causes of suffering of sentient beings, you must have the courage to do it. That would be the generation of compassion.

The third characteristic is to be pleasant. Being a "pleasant person" implies being very accessible to others. You are aware of who you are as a person, therefore you can cultivate within yourself that gateway of openness, or accessibility, to others.

Then, someone who is delightful, courageous, pleasant and accessible must also be disciplined.

The fourth quality is being disciplined—not just for a day or a week, but consistently disciplined in your diligence and effort, and determined in your motivation of compassion for all sentient beings. This is the fourth quality.

The fifth characteristic is joyfulness. We've talked about how joyfulness constantly removes attention from oneself and puts it on the happiness of others. Happiness is not seen or weighed as something *you* experience or contribute to. You are just as happy for the happiness of others—which may not have anything to do with you or your contribution. You simply wish for others to be happy and always removed from suffering.

The sixth characteristic is said to be stern: "stern and firm." If your sternness is truly for the good of others, you can be strict in saying "No." Sternness is the opposite of idiot compassion. Sometimes in our rush to be compassionate, we let the wisdom of discrimination take a break. So don't do that. Use your own wisdom to find whatever the greater good may be for the individual—and if their greater good can be achieved by saying "no" or by not being kind, then don't hesitate. This kind of sternness is one of the qualities of compassion.

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The seventh quality refers to being nothing but utterly kind. This is much deeper than sternness. Being utterly kind is making sure that there is not even one *iota* of personal ambition, hidden agenda, or self-fulfillment in your expression of compassion. To achieve that is to develop utter kindness.

The eighth quality is being "beyond hesitation." The cultivation of compassion has to be carefully thought out. Then when the habitual patterns of self-cherishing, expectations, or self-protection arise, your courage can propel you beyond hesitation. This is the eighth characteristic of compassion.

The ninth necessary quality of compassion is to be utterly and truly unbiased. You don't have more compassion for those you get along with, and less compassion for those who oppose you or don't meet your expectations. Or the other way around: you don't have more compassion for difficult people and situations, and less compassion for those near to you. That's when many people go to faraway, third world countries to be compassionate, rather than being compassionate at home. This ninth quality means being thoroughly unbiased in your approach.

The nine qualities—being delightful, courageous, pleasant, disciplined, joyful, stern, utterly kind, beyond hesitation, and unbiased—are called the "nine expressions" of life. In eastern traditions, the nine expressions are used in various forms of art, music, and particularly in dance. In the context of compassion, the nine qualities could be seen as expressions of one's life.

Whatever you experience in your life—happy moments, sad moments, moments by yourself or with others, moments when things go your way and when they don't—everything is channeled into this: May others be free from suffering and the causes of suffering. This is a heart that is cultivating compassion. Compassion must be cultivated in this way—and likewise, joyfulness.

Joyfulness: the Third Immeasurable Quality

> *One of the greatest factors in practicing joyfulness is to find your own happiness in the happiness of others—particularly in those moments of happiness that have nothing to do with you.*

Joyfulness is the antidote to a belief that many of us unconsciously fall into. Many of you trying to practice compassion and loving kindness take upon yourself the tremendous pressure of thinking everyone else's happiness depends on you. Joyfulness has a larger perspective; it knows that beings can also find their happiness without you.

One of the greatest factors in practicing joyfulness is to find your own happiness in the happiness of others—particularly in those moments of happiness that have nothing to do with you. Let's say a woman looks very beautiful, but you weren't the one who did her makeup; you would still be very happy about her beauty. If someone else achieves some great success without any contribution from you, you could still find happiness in their achievement.

One of the Most Difficult Practices

Now as simple as this seems, give it some thought. This is one of the most difficult practices. At a certain point spiritual people, in particular, develop unnecessary tension thinking that happiness has to meet with their approval. You are happy when *you* can do something to eradicate someone's suffering. But if that happens without your contribution, you might feel jealous or insecure—worse

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yet, you might not any feelings about it. This sense of indifference towards others' happiness can give birth to cynicism.

This is why many learned and spiritually inclined people are the unhappiest people. Their learnedness makes them very critical about what's right and wrong; how things should and shouldn't be done; what's true nature or not; what's provisional or definitive—and what about the three things to do, four things to abandon, and five things to cultivate?

Exercising your discriminating mind with such immense concentration can backfire and create a critical attitude towards life. You may be very clever about seeing the rights and wrongs, but no longer see the goodness in others—and your continued interference in everything becomes a source of unhappiness and agitation. This is what is we call an "unhappy state of mind." Such a mind is unable to be sympathetic to others because it's so full of itself.

To practice joyfulness is to be constantly observant of everything that is good, and nice, and correct, and accomplished in others. Then associate your happiness, not with your own accomplishments, but with theirs—particularly those accomplishments that have nothing to do with you. If you find two people greatly in love, be very happy for them. If you meet someone who's very learned, be happy for that learnedness. If somebody is beautiful, be happy for that beauty. If someone meditates better than you or seems to be a better human being, be happy for that person.

As a Buddhist, if you're trying to meditate and two people are talking loudly outside your room, be happy they have something to talk about. If a cell phone rings, instead of being irritated that your generation of loving kindness towards all mother-like sentient beings has been disrupted, be happy that someone has remembered this person and is giving a call. Changing your perspective on the meaning of loving kindness and compassion is very necessary.

When joyfulness arises from an attitude of basic contentment, loving kindness and compassion are never far behind. But take joyfulness out of that mind—and all the loving kindness and compassion you're trying to breathe out to sentient beings, all the slogans, techniques, and meditations are just fun exercises. They will give you some sense of having done something. But will they actually transform and transcend your mind? That's very doubtful. Therefore take joy in the accomplishment of others.

Now, none of these qualities of loving kindness, compassion, and joy is better than the other. But I've always thought, and many learned great masters have taught, that joyfulness may be the most pivotal quality of all—and all three must be founded upon equanimity.

Equanimity: the Fourth Immeasurable Quality

Equanimity begins with not discriminating or being biased towards those you love, get along with easily, or who are agreeable to you. It means not distancing yourself from those you *don't* get along with, who are different than you—or even worse, have hurt you in some way. As long as there is any discrimination and bias, no good quality can be generated sincerely and absolutely purely. It is very important not to develop discrimination or bias.

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Equanimity and the Nature of Mind

So far, the objective of our developing the Four Immeasurables has been sentient beings. This object-oriented approach is called the "relative approach." It is always good to develop and practice in this way—certainly better than not doing anything at all. But the actual study and practice of the Four Immeasurables goes beyond this.

Earlier we talked about generating the Four Immeasurables without a reference, "just because." The only reference or objective is just because these qualities are the natural state of your own mind. Philosophically speaking, the objective is *dharmata,* your mind's basic nature. The Four Immeasurables are taught knowing that your nature is nothing but kind, nothing but compassionate, and nothing but joyful.

From this point of view, the practice of the Four Immeasurables does not progress from loving kindness to compassion to joyfulness and equanimity. It begins with equanimity. The first thing you practice is resting your mind closer and closer to its innate nature. Mind then recognizes its nature to be none other than the flow of loving kindness, compassion, and joy.

The Four Immeasurables: A Meditative Approach

In the Buddhist teachings, the Four Immeasurables are often taught in these two ways. The primary object of the mahayana approach is sentient beings. Through this gradual process, one comes to the point of realizing equanimity as your own nature, and the fabricated Four Immeasurables as being completely natural.

> *When you talk about doing meditation and developing mindfulness, awareness, and so on, keep this in mind. What you have undertaken is the very essential approach of knowing your basic nature—and through that, being able to illuminate the qualities of kindness and compassion.*

The second approach is the essential philosophical approach of the mahayana madhyamika techniques and, in particular, the methods of vajrayana. This approach predominantly introduces the nature of one's mind. Knowing one's own nature to be none other than kindness, compassion, and equanimity, itself, there is no reason to study, classify, or have a philosophy of the Four Immeasurables. This is called the "meditative approach."

So when you talk about doing meditation and developing mindfulness, awareness, and so on, keep this in mind. What you have undertaken is the very essential approach of knowing your basic nature—and through that, being able to illuminate the qualities of kindness and compassion.

> *You can study Buddhism and then get the point; or,*
> *you can get the point and then study Buddhism.*

Whether you do it this way or the progressive way, that choice is entirely up to you. This is what brings about the diverse approaches to the study of Buddhism. You can study Buddhism and then get the point; or you can get the point and then study Buddhism. It doesn't really matter how you get there, as long as you get there. With just this one topic, the Four Immeasurables, you can see there are different approaches—each of which is left entirely open to people and their inclinations.

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According to your own inclination, aptitude, and what makes sense to you, all these different routes can be undertaken. Ultimately, they all gather into a single essence. You have this natural ability. If you recognize it, it's called dharma; if you don't recognize it, it's simply called ignorance. Thinking about it like this, please practice the Four Immeasurables—in the complicated way or the simple way. That's entirely up to you, so long as you do it.

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