**Definition**

*Brahmā -* the divine but transient ruler of the higher heavens in the traditional Buddhist picture of the universe, is free from hate. One who assiduously develops these four sublime states, by conduct and meditation is said to become an equal of Brahmā; he will be reborn in congenial worlds, the realms of Brahmā. Therefore, these states of mind are called God-like or Brahmā-like.

*Vihāra -* these four sublime states should become the mind’s constant dwelling places where we feel “at home”. Our minds should become thoroughly saturated by them. They should become our inseparable companions, and we should be mindful of them in all our daily activities.

**The Four Sublime Abodes**

The four sublime states of mind taught by the Buddha:

* Loving-kindness (mettā)
* Compassion (karuņā)
* Sympathetic joy (muditā)
* Equanimity (upekkhā)

They are said to be excellent or sublime because they are the right or ideal way of conduct towards living beings (sattesu sammā paţipatti).

They are the great removers of tension, the great peace-makers in social conflict, and the great healers of wounds suffered in the struggle of existence. They level social barriers, build harmonious communities, awaken slumbering magnanimity long forgotten, revive joy and hope long abandoned, and promote human brotherhood against the forces of egotism.

These four sublime states are also known as the boundless states (appamaññā) because in their perfection and their true nature, they should not be narrowed by any limitation as to the range of beings they extend to.

They should be non-exclusive and impartial, not bound by selective preferences or prejudices. A mind that has attained to that boundlessness of the Brahma-vihāras will not harbor any national, racial, religious or class hatred.

**The Four Vices and Virtues**

1) One powerful destructive vice in Man is *anger* (dosa). The virtue that subdues this evil force and to ennoble him is *loving-kindness* (mettā).

2) *Cruelty* (himsā) is another vice that is responsible for many horrors and atrocities prevalent in the world. *Compassion* (karunā) is its antidote.

3) *Jealousy* (issā) poisons one’s behavior and leads to unhealthy rivalries and dangerous competitions. The remedy is *appreciative joy* (muditā).

4) *Attachment to the pleasurable and aversion to the non-pleasurable* are the two opposite forces that upset the mental equipoise of Man. They can be eliminated by developing *equanimity* (upekkhā).

**Characteristics**

**1)** **Loving Kindness (mettā)**

* Without desire to possess, attachment and clinging.
* Without speaking and thinking of “I”, knowing that this so-called “I” is a mere delusion.

* Without selecting and excluding, knowing these will create dislike, aversion and hatred.
* Embracing all beings: small and large, far and near, be it on earth, in the water or in the air.
* Embracing impartially all sentient beings, and not only those who are useful, pleasing or amusing to us.
* Embracing all beings, be they noble-minded or low-minded, good or evil. The noble and the good are embraced because love is flowing to them spontaneously. The low-minded and evil-minded are those who most in need for love.

* Embracing all beings, knowing well that we all are fellow wayfarers through this round of existence – that we all are overcome by the same law of suffering.
* A sublime nobility of heart and intellect which knows and understands, and is ready to help.
* Is strength and gives strength.
* Not carnal love that inflicts more wounds than it cures. Be caution to develop loving kindness towards the opposite sex, as love can too easily become lust.

The Buddha exercises loving kindness equally towards his own son Rāhula, his adversary Devadatta, attendant Ânanda, his admirers and his opponents.

The Buddha states **“***Hatreds do not cease through hatreds; through love alone they cease” (Dhammapada v5)*

Loving kindness not only tends to conquer anger but also does not tolerate hateful thoughts towards others. He who has loving kindness never thinks of harming others, nor disparages or condemns others. Such a person is neither afraid of others nor does he instill fear into any.

Loving kindness should be practiced first towards oneself. He should have charged his mind and body with positive thoughts of peace and happiness than radiate first to all his near and dear ones, next, to all neutrals and lastly to those who are unfriendly to him.

**2)** **Compassion (karunā)**

* It makes the hearts of the good quiver when others are suffering and wish to remove the woes of others.
* It compels one to serve others with altruistic motives.
* He seeks opportunity to serve others expecting nothing in return, not even gratitude.
* Compassion should be extended to the poor and the needy, the sick and the helpless, the lonely and the destitute, the ignorant and the vicious, the impure and the undisciplined.

To deny the rights and privileges of mankind on account of caste, color or race is inhuman and cruel. To feast on the flesh of animals by killing or rain bombing and ruthlessly destroying millions of men, women and children is the worst form of cruelty that deluded Man.

The Buddha has great compassion towards the courtesan Ambapāli and Angulimāla the murderer. Both became his converts and underwent a complete reformation in character.

Like loving kindness, compassion should also be extended without limit towards all suffering and helpless beings.

**3)** **Sympathetic / Appreciative Joy (muditā)**

* It is the desire to see others rejoicing and share their success, happiness and prosperity.
* It tends to destroy jealousy and envy. Envy arises over the good fortune of others; it resents those who achieve position, prestige, power and success.
* It is different from interested joy where you rejoice with an unwholesome and selfish motive. One should be careful not to fall into joyful attachment to and satisfaction with worldly things.

It is quite easy to rejoice over the success of one’s near and dear ones, but rather difficult to do over the success of those whom you have some dislike, especially your competitive rival.

It demands great personal effort and strong will-power than loving kindness and compassion

Therefore, appreciative joy gives a good emotional attitude towards those who are doing well or better than us.

**4)** **Equanimity (upekkhā)**

* Is a perfect, unshakable balance mind and rooted in insight. Realize that others are owners of their activities and thus their future circumstances will reflect the ethical aspect of their current activities.
* To discern rightly, view justly or look impartially, without attachment or aversion.
* Has to be based on vigilant presence of mind, not on indifferent dullness.

Loss and gain, success and failure, praise and blame, pain and happiness are the eight vicissitudes of worldly conditions that affect all humanity. In such a fast moving and materialistic working environment, we are subjected to unjust criticism and abuses.

Most people are perturbed when affected by such favorable or unfavorable states. One is elated when praised, depressed when blamed.

True equanimity, however, should be able to meet all these severe tests and to regenerate its strength from sources within. It will possess this power of resistance and self-renewal only if it is rooted in insight.

The Buddha says “**he is wise, who, amidst such vicissitudes of life, stands unmoved like a firm rock, exercising perfect equanimity”**

By putting ourselves in the shoes of others and seeing that we are still bounded by our defilements, this would help us to be more forgiving.

**The Inter-Relations of the Four Sublime States**

**Loving kindness**

* Unbounded love guards the compassion against turning into partiality, prevents it from making discrimination by selecting and excluding.
* Love imparts to equanimity its selflessness, its boundless nature and even its fervor. For fervor, transformed and controlled, is part of perfect equanimity, strengthening its power of keen penetration and wise restraint.

**Compassion**

* Prevents loving kindness and sympathetic joy from forgetting that, while both are enjoying or giving temporary and limited happiness, there still exist at that time most dreadful states of suffering in the world. It reminds them that their happiness coexists with measureless misery.
* Does not allow loving kindness and sympathetic joy to shut themselves up against the wide world by confining themselves to a narrow sector of it.
* Guards equanimity from falling into a cold indifference, and keep it from indolent or selfish isolation.

**Sympathetic Joy**

* Holds compassion back from becoming overwhelmed by the sight of the world’s suffering, from being absorbed by it to the exclusion of everything else.
* Relieves the tension of mind, soothes the painful burning of the compassionate heart.
* It keeps compassion away from melancholic brooding without purpose, from a futile sentimentality that merely weakens and consumes the strength of mind and heart.
* Gives equanimity the mild serenity that softens its stern appearance.

**Equanimity**

* Equanimity rooted in insight is the guiding and restraining power for the other three sublime states. It points out to them the direction they have to take, and sees to it that this direction is followed.
* Guards loving kindness and compassion from being dissipated in vain quests and from going astray in the labyrinths of uncontrolled emotion.
* Being a vigilant self-controlled, does not allow sympathetic joy to rest content with humble results, forgetting the real aims we have to strive for.
* Gives loving kindness an even, unchanging firmness and loyalty. It endows it with the great virtue of patience.
* Furnishes compassion with an even, unwavering courage and fearlessness, enabling it to face the awesome abyss of misery and despair.

**Conclusion**

Loving kindness embraces all beings, compassion embraces sufferers, appreciative joy embraces the prosperous, and equanimity embraces the good and the bad, the loved and the unloved, the pleasant and the unpleasant.

All four virtues are equally important and should be practiced according to one’s inclination and temperament.

In practice, all four cannot be done at the same time. We have to begin with loving kindness. Whether or not we progress to the other three elements depends on how we are progressing with loving kindness practice. The other three are specialized advancement of loving kindness.

However, equanimity which means “even-mindedness”, rooted in insight, may be said to be the crown and culmination of the other three sublime states. The first three, if unconnected with equanimity and insight, may dwindle away due to the lack of stabilizing factor. Isolated virtues, if unsupported by other qualities which give them either the needed firmness or pliancy, often deteriorate into their own characteristic defects.

Although each virtue is different with its own unique characteristics, they have good attitudes and strike blameless, favorable and balanced relationships with others and a healthy social interaction.

Therefore, they form the foundation of individual and social peace, and bring social betterment out of natural sympathy and concern for fellow beings.

The problems of the world can never be solved completely. But when all beings practice with sincerity, it helps one to be less greedy, angry and deluded. They can bring much peace and happiness in the troubled world that the society lacks.

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