



Early Buddhist Meditation, Part 1: The Immeasurables

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This is the first in a series of five explorations of the topic of “early Buddhist meditation” from the viewpoint of actual practice. Following an examination of the immeasurables in the present paper, the next contributions will take up non-dual mindfulness, the four establishments of mindfulness, and mindfulness of breathing. Based on these altogether four topics, the final contribution in the series concerns dimensions of mindfulness, in the sense of attempting to distill from these practices, and from other relevant information in the textual sources of early Buddhism, information on central functions, and characteristics of mindfulness.

The term “early Buddhism” refers to approximately the first two centuries in the development of Buddhist thought and practice, from about the time when the Buddha would have lived until the reign of the Indian emperor Asoka in the third century before the Common Era. The main sources for reconstructing this earliest period in the history of Buddhism are textual, in the form of discourses believed to have been spoken by the Buddha and his disciples and then transmitted by oral means for centuries before being written down.

At present, the final results of this long process of textual transmission are available in the Pāli discourses, as well as in parallel versions transmitted by other reciter lineages and extant in languages like Chinese, Sanskrit, and Tibetan. Based on what emerges from a study of these textual sources, practical applications can be developed, and these will be explored in the present series of articles. The name “early Buddhist meditation” here does not pretend knowledge of how the Buddha and his contemporaries actually meditated over two millennia ago, which can no longer be ascertained. Instead, the meditation practices presented here under this name are just one out of a range of different possible approaches, reflecting

the author’s personal practice and teaching experiences in combination with being based on inspirations taken from a study of the early Buddhist discourses. These texts often present perspectives that differ from later meditation traditions, thereby inviting an exploration of alternative modalities of implementing mindfulness-related practices.

Objects of the Immeasurables

The potential of exploring a different perspective is directly relevant to the case of the immeasurables, also referred to as boundless mental states or else as divine abodes, which comprise loving kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy, and equanimity. A model for their cultivation presented in later Buddhist exegesis involves phrases that are to be directed mentally toward various individuals in order to express these four sublime mental attitudes. Many practitioners find this a beneficial approach. However, for some practitioners, calling up certain individuals can result in stimulating various associations, even an excessive focus on one’s relationships with particular persons. This can combine with an overall activation of the mind’s tendency toward conceptualization due to reliance on mentally repeating phrases. At times, practitioners find that the approach based on such phrases stays confined to the intellectual level of the mind and does not really touch the heart, to the extent of even appearing somewhat artificial.

A perspective that can help solve such problems emerges on consulting descriptions of the cultivation of the immeasurables in the early Buddhist discourses. Instead of directing phrases to specific individuals, the instructions are rather to cultivate each of these four immeasurables in the form of a boundless radiation in all directions. Such boundless radiation—which in the approach adopted in later exegesis features as a highly advanced stage of practice reached only after having gained deep levels of concentration through the main practice of directing phrases to individuals—to all appearances in the early discourses seems to be the actual way of meditating from the outset.

Note Guided meditation instructions corresponding to the practices described in this article are freely available at <http://agamaresearch.dila.edu.tw/bhikkhu-analayo-meditation-instructions>.

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The presentation of such radiation mentions no individuals, not even the notion of all sentient beings, and also does not bring in particular phrases to be used. Instead, such passages just speak of arousing the respective immeasurable, abiding in it, and then pervading one direction with it, the second, third, and fourth, as well as below and above. The relevant instructions do mention several qualities of the meditative abiding, one of which is precisely being “immeasurable” (or “boundless”). This goes to show that the very term immeasurable, besides characterizing the respective mental attitude, also expresses the type of meditative abiding, which takes the form of a boundless or immeasurable mental radiation.

The quality of being immeasurable in terms of meditative abiding is no longer evident with the approach of singling out individuals as objects, which in the later commentarial scheme will only lead to dwelling in a truly immeasurable manner once a high degree of concentration has been reached. Nevertheless, the respective mental attitude is still of an immeasurable type, as the idea of directing loving kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy, and equanimity toward various individuals is precisely motivated by the wish to make sure that nobody will be excluded, in that the respective immeasurable should be free from any measure or boundary by way of excluding this or that person.

This immeasurable aspect also disappears in the course of a recent development in cognitive psychology, whereby the cultivation of compassion in particular becomes reduced and confined to being directed just toward oneself. Such self-compassion as a stand-alone practice is no longer representative of the breadth of the construct of compassion as understood in the Buddhist traditions (Anālayo & Dhammadinnā 2021). It fails to do justice to the notion of being immeasurable in both respects. This holds in terms of basic mental attitude, due to being directed only to oneself, and in terms of mode of meditative cultivation, since it involves reliance on phrases rather than a boundless abiding. This is not to deny or devalue the remarkable success that this novel approach of cultivating self-compassion has had in recent times in addressing a dire need in contemporary Westernized societies. The point is only to clarify the difference between this approach and traditional Buddhist ways of cultivating compassion or the other immeasurables. It would be interesting if future research were to compare self-compassion with the early Buddhist approach, in the form of a boundless radiation of the same quality.

Immeasurable Attitudes

A key requirement for the cultivation of the immeasurables is a clear understanding of what type of mental attitude each of these stands for, what each of them means in practical terms (Anālayo 2015). The first in the set of four is “loving kindness,” or perhaps better “benevolence.” The underlying

Indic term *maitrī* or *mettā* relates to the notion of being a “friend” (*mitra/mitta*), and this already conveys a central dimension of this first immeasurable: being and acting as a friend to whoever the practitioner may encounter. This attitude of kindness or well-wishing/benevolence features as the foundational one in the set of four immeasurables.

The early discourses regularly relate such loving kindness to the three doors of action—bodily, verbal, and mental—in that this same basic attitude can find expression in physical acts, in ways of communicating, and of course in what happens in the mind. In the case of any of these alternatives, the first immeasurable stands in direct opposition to anger and ill will. This holds to the extent that practitioners who have fully developed this sublime mental attitude can rest assured that they will no longer be overwhelmed by anger or ill will.

Compassion in turn is the direct opposite of the intention to harm and hurt. An image in the early discourses illustrating the basic attitude of this immeasurable describes seeing someone sick and in need of help by the side of a road, which naturally stimulates the wish that this person may receive the needed assistance. This wish, as what will then motivate taking whatever action possible to provide such assistance, has its focal point in an alleviation of the sick person’s predicament rather than just focusing on this person’s actual suffering. In fact, the cultivation of compassion can become a source of joy, which would hardly be possible if it involved taking on oneself the pain of others (Anālayo 2017).

The third immeasurable of sympathetic joy is the very opposite of discontent and envy. With this immeasurable, a wholesome type of joy comes to the forefront of attention as a quality already relevant in an implicit manner to the previously mentioned two, loving kindness and compassion. Such foregrounding of joy can be taken to convey the key insight that, rather than trying to maximize sense gratification or power-driven strategies to gain control, contentment is a more reliable source of happiness. This manifests internally in a lack of discontent, which has its external counterpart in a lack of envy and jealousy in relation to others. Needless to say, sympathetic joy covers both of these dimensions, the internal or oneself just as much as the external or others.

The final of the four immeasurables is equanimity, which in a way rounds out the other three. Whereas these three are more proactive and joyful, equanimity stands for an open-hearted stepping back and allowing others to proceed in the way they wish, rather than imposing one’s own preferences in the belief that this is better for them. This is not a form of indifference, which in fact features in later exegetical literature as the near enemy to equanimity, in the sense of superficially appearing similar, “near,” but in reality being the opposite, an “enemy.” Besides being poles apart from indifference, equanimity stands in direct opposition to desire and aversion.

An image that can be helpful for visualizing the interrelationship between these four immeasurables, although not found among the early discourses, involves sunlight. The rays of the sun are by nature not limited or restricted and thereby partake of the immeasurable nature of these four mental attitudes. Sunshine also involves a radiation in all directions similar to the way the early discourses describe the actual practice of the immeasurables.

Supposing we are in a location where such sunshine is experienced as agreeable rather than as oppressive, as is the case for some hot countries, then the first immeasurable could be compared to the sun at midday in a cloudless sky, shining in all directions. The sun shines equally on what is high and low, clean and dirty, beautiful and ugly; it does not make distinctions and does not even require any reciprocation in order to continue shining. This exemplifies the basic attitude of being a friend to anyone, of cultivating an attitude of loving kindness or benevolence that also does not expect being reciprocated and approaches all equally with kindness and without harboring preferences.

Continuing with the same image of the sun in a cloudless sky, the second immeasurable of compassion can find illustration in the sun approaching sunset. Darkness is palpably close by, yet the sun shines all the more brilliantly, beautifully coloring the sky. In the same way, compassion shines even more brilliantly when facing the darkness in the world. Sympathetic joy in turn can be compared to the sun at dawn, slowly rising in the sky in the early morning, while birds are singing, and the air is fresh. In a comparable manner, the third immeasurable can be delightfully refreshing and a powerful source of joy.

Illustrating the shift from the first three to the fourth immeasurable of equanimity involves a distinct but related image, which is that of the full moon, again in a cloudless sky. The full moon reflects the sunlight, yet, unlike the sun, it does not shine itself. The immeasurable nature of being in the midst of the sky and radiating in all directions remains the same, but with a shift from a more active involvement, by way of the sun shining its rays, to a more passive attitude, the moon reflecting the rays of the sun. Equanimity similarly involves a shift from more active involvement to a more passive attitude that at the same time still fully reflects the rays of sunshine of the other three immeasurables.

Immeasurable Meditative Abidings

The employment of the imagery of sunlight shining at different times of the day and being reflected during a full-moon night exemplifies an approach that can be particularly helpful for introducing a cultivation of the immeasurables in a contemporary setting often dominated by excessive reliance on rational thinking, at times even leading to differing degrees of dissociation from actual embodied reality. The basic challenge is to make each immeasurable become such an actual embodied

reality, rather than a mere conceptual reflection that risks not really effecting an inner transformation at the emotional level.

For the purpose of achieving this, the overall recommendation in the approach presented here is to keep the use of phrases to a minimum, just to the extent necessary to call up the respective immeasurable. Such evocation can alternatively take place by relying just on the name of the immeasurable, be it in Pāli/Sanskrit or in the practitioner's native or preferred language, or by calling up some mental image. This need not be the above example of sunlight, but can also be a puppy or kitten, for example, or a flower. Whatever helps to arouse the respective immeasurable can be used briefly in order to then abide, sooner rather than later, in the actual mental condition, without need for further active measures. This involves a shift from doing an immeasurable to being it, in the sense of allowing the whole body and mind to dwell in a condition of being suffused by the respective sublime attitude.

The natural pleasantness of such a meditative abiding makes it easy to remain in a collected condition of the mind rather than succumb to distractions. Nevertheless, sooner or later distractions will manifest, which can best be faced with an attitude that is in line with the immeasurables, rather than generating a sense of failure: being kind and compassionate, perhaps even slightly amused, and remaining balanced. It is simply in the nature of the mind to get distracted, wherefore it is not surprising when this happens, and there is no need to berate oneself. Often enough it will be possible to return to abiding in an immeasurable condition by simply letting go of the narrowness of the mind that manifests when a distraction occurs. At other times, it may be preferable to return to *doing* an immeasurable, in the sense of actively generating the respective sublime attitude, in order to give the mind something to do until it is again ready to settle in the condition of just *being* the immeasurable. If distractions are persistent, they can in turn become the object of an immeasurable attitude, such as having a disposition of kindness toward the very condition of being distracted.

Based on having successfully navigated the progression from doing to being, the next step is to open up in all directions. Rather than requiring effort to implement an active radiation, such a form of practice is better approached as a natural opening up that allows the respective immeasurable to shine however far it wishes to shine. The task is not to reach toward a certain spatial point in the far away distance, but much rather to open the mind in all directions. A simile to illustrate the appropriate procedure involves a candle (or another source of light) that is surrounded on all sides by a curtain; this simile is also not found in the early discourses. In order to enable the light to shine in all directions, there is no need to manipulate the candle itself. Instead, all that is required is a gentle, soft withdrawing of the curtain. This can conveniently begin in the front direction, and from there to the other three directions by way of a gradual

opening up. Once all four directions are open, the same procedure can also be applied above and below.

As a result of this gradual opening, eventually the practitioner will be able to abide with a truly immeasurable state of mind in both senses, namely in terms of the immeasurable attitude of the mind as well as in terms of being open in all directions in a way subjectively experienced as spatially immeasurable. Since the starting point of such spatially immeasurable meditative abiding has been an embodiment of the respective sublime attitude, there is no need to direct this specifically to oneself. The very form of practice ensures that oneself is included from the outset, but it achieves this without introducing a specific focus on oneself.

In general terms, due to the basic orientation of the immeasurables as pro-social attitudes, their boundless radiation in all direction is implicitly directed toward all sentient beings. Nevertheless, the meditative abiding does not take up any concrete object as such, and even the notion of “all sentient beings” is not explicitly mentioned in the instructions given in the early discourses. Such immeasurable meditation thus proceeds without relying on a specific, circumscribed reference point on which to focus. Instead, it requires above all a well-established and open form of mindfulness to ensure continuity in the immeasurable abiding.

The Immeasurables and Mindfulness

The way of meditatively abiding in the immeasurables described above has much in common with the cultivation of mindfulness (Anālayo 2019b). This holds particularly for the case of mindfulness of the body, in the way described in the early Buddhist discourses. Besides at times standing for analytical contemplations of the nature of the body from various perspectives, a central nuance of mindfulness of the body takes the form of a fully embodied mode of being in the present. Its cultivation can conveniently rely on the sense of proprioception as a dimension already present in ordinary experience. This dimension can become more conscious through the simple act of being mindful of it.

The resulting rooting of mindfulness in the body as a whole provides a powerful anchor for maintaining continuity of mindfulness in daily activities. The whole body is a sufficiently large support that is not as easily lost as a more limited and subtle support, such as the felt sense of the breath, for example. Whereas the latter requires an act of concentrating, which can then potentially interfere with the attention needed for whatever task is at hand, being aware of the presence of the whole body more easily combines with daily activities of various types. The form of mindfulness cultivated in this way is of a predominantly open type, ready to receive input from any of the sense doors without getting carried away. The early discourses explicitly

qualify such mindfulness of the body as being “immeasurable,” thereby using the same term that otherwise refers to the four sublime mental attitudes discussed in this paper.

This is not to take the position that mindfulness and the immeasurables are identical and can just be equated with each other, which would be going too far. The point is rather that they have much in common. With later traditions, this is less evident, due to a gradual shift away from their respective immeasurable nature in favor of introducing an increasing degree of focus—by way of individuals as objects and reflective modes of contemplation in the case of the four immeasurables and by way of an emphasis on a more narrow focus on specific objects instead of a broadly open type of receptivity in the case of mindfulness (Anālayo 2019a). In their early Buddhist manifestation, however, the cultivation of each of these can enhance and support the other, and the actual experience of the boundless radiation of the four immeasurables resembles the openly receptive mental condition that can be cultivated through mindfulness.

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