

Resources for the Four Limitless Qualities

An excellent source for the practice of the Four Limitless Qualities or Four Immeasurables is *The Places That Scare You* by Pema Chödrön. The Four Limitless Qualities is a major topic of that book, and it starts at Chapter 6 and extends through much of the book. Chapter 6 is very brief and is copied here.

The Four Limitless Qualities is an important training method of Mahayana Buddhism. The training is on transforming conflicted emotions (kleshas in Sanskrit) into loving kindness, compassion, joy and equanimity. It is a *dharma* practice, which means that it is done with the intention of benefiting all sentient beings rather than to gain a competitive advantage for oneself.

It is important at the start to understand what the conflicted emotions are because we are generally unaware of how much they dominate our ordinary mental process until we start to examine them. A standard list of the kleshas would include anger, attachment, greed, envy, pride and stupidity. Since we all have plenty of all of these, it is useful not to focus on just one of them such as anger. We cycle through all of them, and one just leads to the next. For example, when our pride is offended we may get angry, and if we dislike our own anger, we may seek escape in passion or attachment. Every klesha, when observed accurately, turns out to be a story about “me” and something which I perceive as “not me”, and we have lots of stories about “me”.

It is also important to realize that fear is not a klesha. Fear has a wakeful quality, and brings us to the edge of awareness. How we handle fear is important. The Bodhisattva is said to be one who transcends fear. The Heart Sutra says, “Since there is no obscuration of mind, there is no fear.” Similarly, the Shambhala tradition teaches that the warrior of Shambhala is fearless not because she does not encounter fear, but because she enters into and experiences it fully, and is not stopped by it. Take note of the title of Pema’s book.

The Four Limitless Qualities is never practiced by avoiding our kleshas, or trying to convince ourselves that we can control them. Pema writes,

It might feel like stretching into make-believe to say, “May this person who is driving me crazy enjoy happiness and be free from suffering.” Probably what we genuinely feel is anger. This practice is like a workout that stretches the heart beyond its current capabilities. We can expect to encounter resistance.

Another excellent source of instruction for the Four Immeasurables is *Mind at Ease: Self-Liberation through Mahamudra Meditation* by Traleg Kyabgon, Rinpoche. Chapter six is devoted to this practice, but what comes before chapter six sets the context for the practitioner. There is no essential difference in the practice between these two teachers. However, reading or listening to more than one teacher is often helpful.