A professor of Theravada Buddhism once asked me, "Why is it assumed, at all the interfaith gatherings I attend, that God is the uniting factor among the religions? We should be concentrating on humanity rather than divinity."

When it is taken for granted that all people of faith worship a Supreme Creator and Sustainer God, Buddhists and Jains are excluded. Although Buddhists believe that there are gods living in heavens, they do not ascribe creative power to them, nor do they believe that these gods have any influence over ultimate human liberation.

Belief in God cannot, therefore, provide common ground between Buddhists and religions such as Christianity, Islam, and Judaism. But can common ground be found in what religions say about humanity or about how we can work for a humane society? I believe the answer is "yes." Buddhism speaks of four brahmaviharas, or "divine abidings," and these qualities permeate the whole of Buddhist teaching. They are metta — loving kindness; karuna — compassion; mudita — sympathetic joy; and upekkha — equanimity.

Metta is boundless loving kindness radiated to all beings — to friends and enemies, the known and the unknown, the lovely and the unlovely. It is an action-changing mental orientation. Karuna is seen where people are so sensitive to the sufferings of others that they cannot rest until they act to relieve that suffering. To a greater degree than metta, karuna involves action. Mudita is a quality which challenges me greatly. To show mudita is to show joy in the success of others, to be free from jealousy or bitterness, to celebrate happiness and achievement in others even when we are facing tragedy ourselves.

As for upekkha, equanimity, this has often been misunderstood as indifference, as apathy in the face of human pain, the very antithesis of compassion. But upekkha is really freedom from the self-centeredness which clouds understanding and destroys true discernment. People with upekkha are not pulled this way and that by emotional reactions that have more to do with the ego than with true concern for others. They can see right from wrong and can act with wisdom.
The *brahmaviharas* speak to me of the ideals that should direct our lives — the ideals that can create the kind of society any truly religious person yearns for. Such a society would be one where loving kindness and compassion triumph over greed, where the success of one person does not mean the demeaning or exploitation of others, where rulers are guided by clear principles of right and wrong rather than hunger for praise or power. These "divine abidings" give a picture of the truly good. They touch the hope of all religions and can bring unity of purpose independent of a concept of God.

So let compassion for the good of humanity be at the forefront of religious encounters. May those who come from the monotheistic traditions discover that they can share their hopes for a righteous society with their Buddhist neighbors. May Buddhists find themselves united with their Jewish, Christian, and Muslim friends in working for a world where loving kindness takes the place of greed.