

SUBLIME ABIDING PLACES FOR THE HEART

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with the Sati Center for Buddhist Studies*

THE BRAHMAVIHARAS ARE THE QUALITIES of loving-kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy, and equanimity. What is often not sufficiently emphasized is that the brahmaviharas are fundamental to the Buddha's teaching and practice. I shall begin with the chant called *The Suffusion of the Divine Abidings*. I find this chant very beautiful. It is the most frequent form in which the brahmaviharas are mentioned in the discourses of the Buddha. Here is the *Divine Abidings* chant:

I will abide pervading one quarter with a mind
imbued with loving-kindness; likewise the second,
likewise the third, likewise the fourth; so above and
below, around and everywhere; and to all as to
myself. I will abide pervading the all-encompassing
world with a mind imbued with loving-kindness;
abundant, exalted, immeasurable, without hostility,
and without ill will.

The chant continues similarly with the other three qualities:

I will abide pervading one quarter with a mind
imbued with compassion....I will abide pervading
one quarter with a mind imbued with gladness....

I will abide pervading one quarter with a mind
imbued with equanimity...

Last February I was asked to be the spiritual advisor to a Thai man who was to be executed at San Quentin, and I spent the last few days until his death with him. He touched many people and had many visitors, but in the capacity of spiritual advisor, I was the only person allowed to be with him in the last six hours of his life. So some of his friends asked me what they should be doing in those final hours to help Jay as well as themselves. I asked them to chant this *Divine Abidings* chant. That's what they did during the final hours of Jay's life, sending forth these thoughts of loving-kindness, compassion, gladness, and equanimity. They are powerful emotions to evoke at a time when one could be stuck in anger, regret, and self-pity. It is very empowering to be able to bring forth these qualities of the heart, to turn the mind away from negativity towards that which is wholesome and positive.

The Buddha's Discourses on the Brahmaviharas

The word brahmavihara is translated in many different ways—divine abidings, divine abodes, sublime attitudes. “Brahma” means great, holy, supreme, sublime, exalted, and divine. “Vihara” is a place, an abode, and also an attitude of mind. When put together, “brahmavihara” means the psychological abiding place of the spiritually developed, of those who are exemplary. In the Commentaries, the religious life, the holy life, is called *brahmacariya*. One of the explanations for this term is that the holy life is a life dedicated to developing the brahmaviharas.

These qualities of the mind and heart are qualities that the Buddha himself cultivated and abided in. In a discourse (A 1.182), the Buddha addresses a brahmin thus: “Herein brahmin, I am dependent on a certain village. Setting mindfulness in front of me, I abide suffusing one quarter of the world with a heart possessed of loving-kindness, likewise the second...” He goes through the phrases we just chanted,

...the whole world I suffuse with a heart grown great
with loving-kindness, free of enmity, and untroubled.
Likewise with a heart possessed with compassion,
possessed with sympathy and gladness, possessed with

equanimity. If I walk up and down, my walking is
sublime; my standing, my sitting is sublime. This is
what I mean when I say it is a sublime abiding place.

So even the Buddha, a completely enlightened being, still directed his attention to these four brahmaviharas.

There is a discourse (M 55) given to Jivaka, the Buddha's physician, where the Buddha addresses the duty of a monk living in dependence on a lay community: “Herein Jivaka, a religious seeker depending on alms lives in a certain village or town. He abides pervading one quarter with a mind imbued with loving-kindness, likewise the second,” and so forth. Namely, it is a duty of such a bhikkhu* to live cultivating the brahmaviharas towards the lay community.

He continues, “That bhikkhu goes into that village for alms, and what do you think? Would such a monk cultivate these for the sake of his own affliction, for the sake of another's affliction, or for both?”

Jivaka answers, “No, venerable sir.”

Someone cultivating these qualities of the brahmaviharas becomes sensitive to the suffering they create for themselves and for others. They are qualities that develop the heart. By cultivating and abiding in them, one leans towards that which would bring happiness to others and to oneself. This is a fundamental truth. As your heart becomes sensitive and open, you realize that suffering is painful and do not want to abide in it.

In another discourse (A 5.294), the Buddha again points to the development of the heart and to the fact that these wholesome qualities create a fullness of the heart. He says, “Monks, those noble disciples, thus freed from covetousness, freed from malevolence, not bewildered, but self-possessed and concentrated, with hearts possessed of amity [also translated as loving-kindness, friendliness, and so on] abide radiating one quarter and then the second, the third and the fourth with loving-kindness, pervading the whole world with a heart immeasurable, grown great, and boundless, free from enmity and untroubled.” After going through the rest of the brahmaviharas, the Buddha says that they come to know that “[f]ormerly this heart of mine was confined, it was not made to grow, but now my heart is boundless, well made to grow.

*A bhikkhu is a Buddhist monk. Literally, it indicates one who lives on alms.

Moreover my heart was limited to a certain range, but now it is not confined, it stays not in that range.” “Well made to grow” is translated from the Pali word with the same root as *bhavana*, meaning meditation or mental development. It means therefore that these qualities enable the development of the mind.

Also as a result of this practice, feelings and thoughts that formerly were limited and constricted become boundless. The results permeate all aspects of one’s life. Similarly, when one does something in a small-minded way, the results are limited. That’s the way it works.

The Buddha ends the discourse thus: “The heart’s release by loving-kindness is conducive to non-returning for the monk with insight but who has not yet penetrated to the truth.” The stages of enlightenment are stream-entry, once-returner, non-returner, and arahant.* Here the Buddha says that even for those who are still practicing and training, the cultivation of the brahmaviharas is conducive to attaining higher levels of the Path.

The Brahmaviharas: Their Nature and Characteristics

As one continues to practice and study Buddhism, it is very useful to familiarize oneself with some of the Pali terms. For example, when working with computers, you have to learn some technical terms to deal with certain concepts or operations, or when studying music, you learn the related technical terms. With Buddhism, there is a range of technical terms in Pali for the qualities of the heart that are helpful to know.

Metta, for instance, is often translated in English as “loving-kindness.” Although two words are used, they still don’t quite get it right, so other words are used, such as amity or friendliness, in an effort to convey its meaning. *Metta* is characterized as being connected to happiness or welfare. Its function is to generate welfare or well being. It is manifested as the removal of annoyance. Its proximate cause is seeing the lovable-ness of beings, or the good qualities and that which is pleasing in others.

* The first stage of enlightenment, “Stream-entry,” results in a return to the human realm no more than seven times, and one is guaranteed not to be born as an animal, as a ghost, or in hell; the second stage, “Once-return,” leads to no more than one more birth as a human; the third stage, “Non-return,” entails rebirth only in the high heavenly realms; and the fourth stage is that of enlightenment, Arahantship, which results in no more birth in any state of being.

Metta succeeds when it causes ill will to subside and fails when it brings about affection. Using the word *metta* is more useful as it does not have the connotations of affection and attachment that the word loving-kindness has. *Metta* is a selfless wishing of happiness and well being for others.

The brahmaviharas have so-called near and far enemies—obstructions to their correct development. The near enemy of *metta* is greed or attachment, since happiness and well being could become coveted. That leads to pain and sorrow and could even turn into a defilement if not correctly understood. When we experience something pleasing, we tend to want it, but to really practice *metta* is to wish for the well being of others and not to try to possess them. The same goes for cultivating *metta* towards oneself, to try not to cling to feelings of joy and well being generated by the practice of meditation. So the near enemy to *metta* is when the heart moves too close to something and then it shifts from being loving-kindness to greed and grasping.

The far enemy of *metta* is anger. Bearing anger, ill will, or aversion is, of course, inimical to loving-kindness, but it is far enough away to recognize such feelings. Being more insidious, the near enemies are more dangerous. When you are angry, you try to deal with it or try to remove it, but when you are delighting in something, your mind tends not to be clear enough to see that you have come too close to the object. In terms of cultivating loving-kindness, you have to know and be aware of these aspects that are related to and define the quality of *metta*, and to use them as boundaries to work within.

Karuna is the quality of compassion. It is characterized by the wish to help alleviate suffering in others. Its function resides in the inability to tolerate suffering, so it motivates the desire to help when others suffer. Compassion does not allow complacency in the face of suffering. One is moved into action. Compassion manifests as non-cruelty, and its proximate cause is seeing the pain and helplessness in those disadvantaged or overtaken by some misfortune. Then the heart responds with the wish to help.

The far enemy is cruelty, and compassion succeeds when it makes such feelings subside. The word cruelty sounds very strong, but the wish to harm, to hurt, to be cruel can come out in many ways. One could be

quite cruel in one's speech without in fact beating up someone. Making a cutting comment or put-down is being cruel. When there is compassion, the tendency to lash out subsides.

Compassion fails when it causes sorrow. When faced with suffering, if one is overwhelmed by grief or heaviness of heart, then that is not being compassionate. The quality of compassion is then tainted and not functioning properly. When the heart is drawn towards boundlessness, it is not dragged down by suffering. Instead, it is uplifted. It is important to recognize that. The heart could be weighed down by sorrow and grief in response to a tragic event or situation, and one could think that that is being compassionate. But that is not compassion, even though the etymology of the word (in English) is "to suffer with." That is not the way the Buddha defined compassion. If one's mind is affected by grief, then one is not able to respond in a clear and open-hearted manner. It is important to recognize that. This is why sorrow and grief are characterized as the near enemy of compassion. Both responses can spring from seeing suffering in others, but grief has a depressive effect, while compassion has a positive and uplifting quality.

Mudita is translated as gladness in the *Divine Abidings* chant, but the term commonly used is sympathetic joy. *Mudita* is characterized as a gladdening at others' success, a delighting in the success, the goodness, and the well being of others. Its function is being unenvious, not being jealous of the good fortune of others. Most of us, I think, find loving-kindness and compassion beneficial and good to practice. When it comes to sympathetic joy, we do not think too much about it and tend to dismiss it as either abstruse or unreal. When you start watching your mind however, you see the pettiness over and over again. The unwillingness to rejoice when someone does something good is seen in the snappy remark or the clever little synopsis of a person or situation, which are a part of daily life in our interrelations with people but which tend to be based in negativity or cynicism. Such responses do not come from a place of gladness but very much from a sense of self. One attempts to lift oneself up by putting down someone else.

By cultivating *mudita*, the sense of self is undermined. There is a letting go of the attachment or fixation to self. This enables us to delight in the well being and good fortune of those around us. A great deal of

joy is generated when one is able to tap into this quality. *Mudita* is manifested as non-aversion, and its proximate cause is seeing the success of others. It succeeds when it causes a sense of coolness of the heart, an acceptance. It fails when it causes merriment, a frivolous delighting in things that agitate the mind, which is not a pure-hearted delight.

Equanimity in Pali is called *upekkha*. It is characterized as that quality which brings about a sense of neutrality or an evenness of heart towards all beings. Its function is in maintaining a steadiness of mind and not allowing differences—whether physical, intellectual, spiritual, or whatever—to detract or influence our perception of those with whom we come in contact. Its proximate cause is understanding the nature of karma—recognition that our actions bear results which affect us and, in effect, that we create our own future world or experiences.

Another factor to recognize regarding karma is that we are not able to take on the results of other's actions and deeds. Equanimity is therefore understanding how the basic laws of nature work, the recognition that our lives are governed by the way we conduct our lives. Where the suffering of others is concerned, we recognize that by making ourselves suffer, we do not decrease or take away the suffering of others. We can work to alleviate another's suffering or delight in another's good fortune, but there is a point where one has to exercise equanimity, being aware of one's own well being. To try to take on someone else's life and carry it around is not equanimity. Equanimity is not taking on more than what is actually necessary or beneficial.

Equanimity succeeds when it is aware of the movement of the mind—the wanting and not wanting, approval and disapproval—and one is able to establish an evenness of mind, a clarity that sees things for what they are. Equanimity fails when it causes indifference, not caring. Indifference could arise due to a lack of attention or clarity, or to being unwilling to deal with a situation because too much effort is required. Indifference is the near enemy of equanimity. True equanimity does not hinder compassion or action, but rather enhances it by developing the discernment that knows how and when to engage. The far enemy is aversion and greed: the liking and disliking, approving and disapproving that occurs within our minds. Equanimity is the quality not shaken by the movement of the worldly dhammas or the ways of the world.

A Foundation for One's Practice

Cultivating the brahmaviharas means bringing these qualities (metta, karuna, mudita, and upekkha) into consciousness. It is like exercising muscles that have not been used. As you develop these qualities, you have to consider whether your mind is getting clearer or more confused. The correct practice of the brahmaviharas always leads to increased clarity and joy. That is the nature of these qualities of mind.

The whole point of the Buddha's teachings is to cultivate mental qualities in order to gain happiness of mind. And the brahmaviharas—a prime source for creating happiness—can thus lay the foundation for the entire practice. Most of the terms the Buddha uses regarding the developing of practice are those that describe states of well being. We see this in a sequence he sets out to illustrate the development of the mind.

Anavajjasukha is the state of mind resulting from abiding by the moral precepts—the happiness of blamelessness or harmlessness, the happiness of non-remorse.

Abhyasekhasukha is the happiness that ensues from training in sense restraint—the composure one finds when one is not bent on gratification or excitement of the senses.

Pamojja means the delight that results from being free of the five hindrances that hinder meditation (sensual desire, ill will, sleepiness or drowsiness, restlessness, and skeptical doubt). Pamojja also refers to the happiness that meditative states of tranquility can bring—an unalloyed kind of happiness. It also includes the delight that arises from skilful reflection on the true nature of things. Pamojja leads to *piti* (joy). Piti leads to *passadhi* (the state of tranquility). When there is tranquility, *sukha* (happiness) arises, and because of *sukha*, *samadhi* arises. Samadhi is the firm meditative state of mind. The Buddha says in many discourses that the happy mind is easily concentrated.

We see that happiness brings about samadhi, whereas usually we approach it the other way round. We often think, “If only I could get my meditation together, then I would be happy,” whereas it should be: “How do I gain true happiness so that my heart could be at ease?” It is a very important truth that the Buddha points to in this sequence of shades of happiness culminating in samadhi.

The result of samadhi is summed up in the recurring phrase “seeing things as they truly are.” This is a description of a mental state where the mind steps back from the sense of self. This state prepares the mind to be truly still and unshakeable. When that happens, the mind moves into *nibbida*. Sometimes this word is translated as boredom or disgust or revulsion, but that does not really get it. It means a cooling of the heart and turning away from things, leading to *vimutti* (freedom). Happiness plays a great role in the development of the whole sequence, and the brahmaviharas, which generate happiness, can serve as a powerful foundation for one's practice.

Similarly, the Four Noble Truths, while often characterized as a means to investigate suffering, also result in the cultivation of happiness. The qualities of happiness and joy are necessary for mental development. This is seen in many aspects of the Buddha's teaching. The Buddha very explicitly uses the Four Noble Truths as a tool. Over and over again he says, “I teach only two things, suffering and the cessation of suffering.” Some could say this is a miserable teaching, dwelling on suffering. But when you investigate the teaching, you see why the Buddha sets it out like that. Suffering is a very tangible quality. We can investigate it. It is something that we know and do not want. The whole range of sentient existence is subject to suffering, and the wish to escape from it is universal.

Many positive qualities are brought into being and are involved when one is engaged in cultivating the boundless qualities of the brahmaviharas. They lead to a sense of ease, security, and fearlessness. The Pali word for fearlessness is *abhaya*. In Thai, it also has the connotation of forgiveness. Developing the brahmaviharas engenders forgiveness, particularly in the practice of loving-kindness and compassion. To open one's heart to these qualities, one needs to be forgiving. The holding of past grievances—the constant refrain of “he did this; she did that; I did this; I can't forgive myself”—is swept away. There is no room in the divine abodes for holding grudges and enmity towards oneself or others.

Generosity, or *dana*, is another natural result of the desire to promote happiness and alleviate suffering. Three kinds of *dana* are mentioned: the giving of material things such as food or money, the giving of Dhamma, and the giving of forgiveness or fearlessness. Often we do not pay much

attention to the little things, such as our perceptions of ourselves and others. We have to learn to really forgive so as to open our hearts to these boundless qualities.

For instance, during that experience I had with Jay Siripongs, I asked him if there was still anybody he had not forgiven. This was during the last six hours leading up to the execution. We had spent the previous four and one-half hours or so talking, chanting, meditating, laughing, and generally having a buoyant time. Jay paused for a while and quietly said, “I don’t think I’ve quite forgiven myself.” That’s not just him. All of us are in that position. So it is very important to bring up into consciousness areas where we have not forgiven ourselves and where we have thus created limitations and constraints for ourselves.

Practicing the Brahmaviharas

As we have seen, the brahmaviharas are a means of uplifting the mind, for brightening and bringing it joy. However, if the practice causes confusion, then something is wrong in the practice. You have to review it and look for the reason. This is where investigation comes in.

The “near enemies” and “far enemies” are terms to aid you when reviewing your practice. They are guidelines to reflect back on the mind. The Buddha instructs us to examine our minds to see the real nature of the qualities and feelings. For instance, is it loving-kindness or affection? This questioning is fundamental in the Buddha’s teaching. It can be so skilful and useful to keep using the reflective capacity of the mind to penetrate and understand how the mind works. He gives us the basis for investigation—the Four Noble Truths are one skilful investigative tool.

Whichever practice one is cultivating (developing mindfulness, the brahmaviharas, or any other meditation), ask, “Is there suffering or freedom from suffering that results from my practice? How does it work for me?” That is always the bottom line in the Buddha’s teaching. “Am I happier, or am I experiencing suffering? Is my mind clearer or more confused? Is it peaceful or agitated?” These are the guidelines.

All of these qualities (the brahmaviharas, dana, and so forth) are thus important tools of investigation in reflecting and understanding what remains to be done in the task of purifying the mind. This teaching of the brahmaviharas was something the Buddha taught everyone, regardless of societal divisions. In the Buddha’s time, caste was an important

factor in Indian society. Pointing out the universality of these qualities to a brahmin who had come to argue with him, the Buddha asks, “What do you think, brahmin? Is only a brahmin capable of developing loving-kindness without hostility and ill will? Can a merchant or worker not be able to do so?”

“No, Master Gotama, a merchant, nobleman, brahmin, or worker is capable of developing loving-kindness, without hostility and without ill will.” (M 93) This practice is accessible to anyone, regardless of gender, age, position in society, or status as ordained or not.

The success of this practice depends on how you direct your mind, how you experience and engage with the world, on your ability to assess the benefit or the lack of benefit of this practice and then make use of it for yourself. Don’t wait for these qualities to develop on their own. You have to investigate your practice, recognize the results that you experience, and then take whatever remedial measures are necessary. This practice empowers us to change and develop ourselves. I would encourage you all to take these brahmaviharas and experiment with, learn from, and delight in them.