



Research Article

Brahma-vihar-bhavana

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Abstract

The word “Brahma” means “Noble.” This word, if properly pronounced in Pāli, should be pronounced: “Brahma.” In Burmese, it is spoken with a vocal sound as “Brahma.” The word “vihāra” conveys the meaning of “dwelling,” “abiding,” or “living.” Hence “Brahma-vihāra” conveys the meaning of “Noble Living,” or “Living in the exercise of good-will.” When analysed, the expression “Brahma-vihāra” includes loving-kindness (mettā), compassion (karuṇā), sympathetic joy (muditā), or rejoicing in the happiness or prosperity of others, and equanimity (upekkhā), or indifference to pain and pleasure. These are the four kinds of Brahma-vihāra. In the Mahāgovinda Sutta, it is referred to as “Brahmacariya.” Therefore, Brahma-vihāra Bhāvanā means chastity or living the holy life. Therefore, this can also be called Brahmācāra Dhamma from now on. In the Abhidhamma, the Brahma-vihāra Dhamma is referred to as illimitable (appamaññā), a term meaning “infinite” or “boundless.” It is called “illimitable” because, when developing loving-kindness, it should be practised with unlimited friendliness towards all living beings.

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KEYWORDS: Mettā - loving kindness. Karuṇā - compassion, Muditā - sympathetic joy, Upekkhā - indifference to pain and pleasure, Exuberance- enthusiasm, Prosperity, Wealth, Ecstasy. Equanimity - Restrain sense organs (Dhirata). Craving- Inclined Hunger, Zeal, Desire. Clinging- Adjoining (samlagna), Neighbouring, Coherent.

INTRODUCTION

The concept of Brahmavihāra revolves around the series of four Buddhist virtues of sublime attitudes. These are maitrī (benevolence), karuṇā (compassion), muditā (empathy) and upekkhā (equanimity). The Buddhist concept of Brahmavihāra may be referred to the 'awakened state of mind'. In the Aṅguttara Nikāya, the Buddha states that those who embrace these four immeasurable sublime virtues and apply them in this life are destined for a heavenly realm in their next life. An individual, who realises these principles, after this heavenly life, attains nirvāṇa (salvation). Indian philosophy is practical and realistic in so far as it attempts to decrease human pain and suffering. They identified the reason for this suffering in ignorance about reality. Brahman is the only reality, so one must sincerely try to achieve Him and avoid all sorrow. Realising this is considered the ultimate ethico-philosophical end of life, and one must try to achieve it throughout one's life. The Brahmaviharas are four prized emotions or mind states that give us a framework to cultivate positive behaviours and minimise harmful ones. They are called the "divine abodes" because they are the mind states in which all the enlightened ones reside. They are also known as the "four immeasurables" or "four limitless ones" because they represent love and goodwill toward all sentient beings, without limit.¹

Among the four kinds of Brahmavihāra, mettā means loving-kindness, karuṇā means compassion, muditā means sympathetic joy, and upekkhā means equanimity. Of these four meanings, when translated into Burmese, only the meaning of the word "compassion" is clear and precise without mingling with any other sense. The term "love" may convey the sense of clinging attachment with passion (rāga), or sexual desire. Joy also concerns rejoicing for fulfilment of one's own desires, besides those connected with Dhamma. "Indifference" covers various mental attitudes. As such, if the meanings of the terms "mettā," "muditā," and "upekkhā" are rendered in Burmese as "love," "joy," and "indifference," it might convey different shades of meaning.² It would be more obvious if they are expressed in Pāli usage, as mettā bhāvanā, karuṇā bhāvanā, and upekkhā bhāvanā. I will use Pāli, which is clearer for this paper.

Meditation on loving-kindness (mettā bhāvanā) just means developing thoughts of loving-kindness towards others. Even if a thought occurs to wish prosperity to others, it is just a virtuous thought. What is meant by meditation on compassion (karuṇā bhāvanā) is developing compassionate feelings towards other beings. Ordinarily, if one feels compassion for others, wishing them to escape from suffering, it is a virtuous thought of compassion. Sympathetic joy (muditā) means joy or rejoicing with others in their continued happiness and prosperity. Equanimity (upekkhā) is a feeling of indifference with no concern or anxiety regarding others' happiness or sorrow, having a neutral feeling, thinking that things inevitably happen according to the law of kamma, as the consequence of wholesome or unwholesome deeds.³ Of these four kinds of Brahmavihāra, first I will deal with the development of loving-kindness.

Mettā: Limitless Loving Kindness and Goodwill

What it is:

Loving Kindness(Goodwill): In essence is a heartfelt wish that all beings without exception find true happiness within, acknowledging that true happiness comes from internal causes, meaning no one's true happiness (including our own) conflicts with anyone else's nor causes harm to others. This is a pure and blameless happiness that through practice we can give rise to at will.

Understanding that this quality is at its most powerful and transformative when it is universal, we cultivate Metta even for people who bring harm to others. Realising these people's actions come from a place of deep suffering, and that wishing for them to find true happiness doesn't mean we condone their actions; it means wishing they will do the things that cause true happiness (including abstaining from causing harm). If someone is truly content, their suffering won't overflow and spill onto others. We may find ourselves wishing for these people to suffer even more; however, that won't solve anything; it would only lead to them causing additional suffering to others.

It's always helpful to remind ourselves that the world can be a much kinder and more enjoyable place for everyone if people aren't clawing for scraps of happiness in an ever-shifting external world.⁴

What it isn't:

Each of these 4 heart qualities has what are called 'near enemies' and 'far enemies'. These are qualities of the mind that interfere with developing the heart. Near enemies are qualities that could be mistaken for the quality we are trying to develop, whereas far enemies are the qualities in direct opposition to what we are trying to cultivate.

For Metta, the near enemies are: Possessive love, co-dependency, and obsessiveness: "*I will love and care for you. As long as you meet my expectations or behave in a way I find acceptable*" "*I need you; I'm only happy when I'm with you*"

While the far enemies are: Ill will, hate, and bitterness: "*you did blah blah blah so you don't deserve happiness*" "*you need to suffer a few times to learn a lesson, then maybe I will wish you well*"

Karuṇā: Limitless Compassion and Being of Service

What it is:

Compassion: Just as goodwill wishes beings to be happy and at ease, compassion wishes for beings who are suffering to be freed from their suffering and stress. Actively inspiring one to make a difference where they can, creating a sense of connection, being fully with someone in their time of need, able to appreciate what the other person is experiencing without getting swallowed up in their pain and suffering.

Through cultivation of compassion (bhāvanā), karuṇā can be developed. The loved person also will continue to remain as the most loved one; one who is neutral retains the position of one who is neutral, one who is antipathetic retains the position of one who is antipathetic, and one who is hostile retains the position of one who is hostile. In the case of a person of the

opposite sex, since angry attachment is likely to occur, one should avoid developing *karuṇā* towards him or her at the very initial stage. *Karuṇā* is felt for a person he sees suffering. The *Viśuddhimagga* describes, “The man who received capital punishment was tied with ropes and shown to the people at the junction of the road. The man in custody with death hanging over his head was generally offered delicious foods, etc., by some kind-hearted people who pitied the fate of that condemned man. The guilty man enjoyed the foods, etc., for a moment. But people who saw him did not think of him as being happy. They pitied him, knowing full well that every step he took brought him closer to death. In the same way, a person who is developing *karuṇā*, though he may see a happy spectacle, can develop *karuṇā* towards another people who is full of vice. It has been stated that he should develop it by imagining the villain may be happy now, but that misery will befall him in the near future, as he is going to descend to the lower states for his demerits after death.”⁵

We have a tendency to think we are obligated to commiserate with someone in pain, but in reality just being with them as a steady presence and hearing them out can be of more benefit. In this way, we avoid “compassion fatigue” and allow ourselves to remain clear-headed and energised, so if something can be done to help others, we can more easily see it.

Compassion is more than a mind-state; it is an action. When we encounter people suffering, we do what we can to help alleviate it. Understanding that there will always be some limitations to the help we can safely provide, we learn to navigate these situations while establishing proper boundaries. This reduces the chance of additional harm to either party. It's critical to remember that our compassion is meant to be universal, meaning it applies to us as well.

Even when we encounter situations where we can't directly make a difference, we can still cultivate this heart of compassion. Wishing all involved to be freed from their difficulties.

What it isn't:

Near Enemy: Pity stemming from a subtle sense of superiority or arrogance, used to inflate our sense of self-importance.

Thinking things along the lines of “*oh, you poor thing, let me grant you my compassion from atop my pedestal*” “*how kind of me to help the less fortunate, everyone should know I'm such a good person*”

We aren't practising compassion so that everyone sees us as a saint. Instead, we practice compassion because we understand what it is like to suffer, and we don't want anyone to have to go through that.

Far enemy: Cruelty stemming from self-righteousness, wishing for someone to pay for the wrongs they have committed: “*Someone needs to give you a taste of your own medicine*”

Muditā: Limitless Joy and Vicarious Gratitude

What it is:

Empathetic Joy (Vicarious Gratitude): Delights in all beings' good fortunes and good qualities, wishing for them to continue and increase, inspiring us to help those striving to make a positive difference in their lives by supporting them in whatever way we can, be it just voicing our support, lending an ear, or sharing how we have overcome similar challenges in the past when appropriate.

Gratitude also applies to those who are better off than us, even those we dislike or are envious of. Realising that no one should be benefited from anyone being deprived of the good things in their life. If you can't appreciate the good fortune of others, it also makes it challenging to feel secure in your own good fortune.

We begin to realise that we have the potential within ourselves to let all beings' good fortune be appreciated as if it were our own. This shift in our perspective can completely change our relationship with others. We become less likely to constantly operate from our own self-interests because we have found joy in the act of helping others find joy.⁶

What it isn't:

Near Enemy: Excitability & Exuberance. These qualities are anxiety & attachment in disguise.

One way to distinguish joy from exuberance is to notice how we react when the stimulus ends or is taken away, seeing if it causes discomfort. *Muditā* is joy without attachment, so there shouldn't be a sense of loss when the stimulus ceases.

To identify excitement, simply notice if it is building tension in the body. Heartfelt joy actually puts the body at ease. However, when there is an element of expectation or attachment, part of the mind is always waiting for the other shoe to drop, which generates tension.

Maybe thinking things like “*this is awesome, I hope it never ends*”

Far Enemy: Resentment & envy “*they don't even appreciate what they have, they don't deserve it, I do*”

Upekkhā: Limitless Equanimity and Finding Balance

What it is:

Equanimity: a balanced state of mind governed by wisdom and acceptance; it acts as the check and balance for compassion and joy. Discerning when and where we can make a difference and where we can't, working towards the former and abandoning the latter. Realising that there's no benefit to being weighed down by things we can't change and instead conserving our energy for areas we can.

Upekkhā literally means to be standing on a mountaintop “looking over”; it is a quality of stepping back and taking in the whole picture. Remaining balanced and not getting sucked into situations, freeing ourselves from discrimination, prejudice, and clinging to our views.

Equanimity reminds us to keep a broad perspective. When our focus becomes too narrow, we can end up neglecting our own well-being by becoming overly invested in the affairs of someone else to the point where it is suffocating for them. This

quality of being able to take a step back and reassess can prevent entire worlds of suffering from coming into being.⁷

What it isn't:

Near Enemy: Indifference & Detachment *"everything is empty so nothing matters"* *"everything is subject to change so why bother trying to make a difference"* *"my problems are not worth resolving because there is no self"*

Far Enemy: Craving & Aversion. *"I want/need..."* *"I don't want/can't deal with..."*

Preparing the Heart through Forgiveness Meditation

Forgiveness meditation is a way of opening up to the possibilities of true healing and love for oneself and others. Forgiveness meditation is a soft, gentle way of learning how to lovingly accept whatever arises and to leave it as it is, without trying to control it with thoughts.

For many people, forgiveness meditation is often the prerequisite condition for the practice of these four heart qualities or Sublime Attitudes. Some people who have unprocessed grief or trauma may need to gently work through it to give rise to truly limitless goodwill, compassion, gratitude, and equanimity. Otherwise, the practice of the Brahma-Vihāras will feel forced or robotic, and we may find it nearly impossible to give rise to the sensation of goodwill.

Here are four phrases for use in forgiveness meditation:

- **I forgive myself: for not understanding**
- **I forgive myself: for making mistakes**
- **I forgive myself: for any pain I have caused myself or others**
- **I forgive myself: for not handling things differently.**

We start by picking whichever phrase we identify with most strongly and use it as an anchor, first beginning by forgiving yourself for a while, then forgiving another person, then visualising them forgiving you in return. Focus on the phrase rather than getting caught up in any particular story of guilt or resentment, and simply noticing the sensation of forgiveness in the body and mind. This process can be emotionally taxing. Therefore, it's important to adopt a gentle approach to dealing with any distractions that come up. This will ensure we aren't piling on even more tension. When we notice we've become distracted, we drop our interaction with the distraction, relax our shoulders and forehead, calm our breathing, mentally restate the phrase, then turn our attention back to the sensation of forgiveness. In this practice, it's important to be very honest with ourselves about what we are currently capable of, being careful not to push our limits and acknowledging that healing happens gradually. There is no need to head straight to our deepest shame and resentments. Start with baby steps, learn and become comfortable with the technique before increasing the depth. Over time, as we soften any resentment we may have, it becomes easier to genuinely give rise to and maintain the Sublime Attitudes. So, I can say, these four heart practices, when developed and cultivated, can radically change your life. They are useful tools for expanding the mind through the

heart. They remind us that if we solely focus on ourselves, concerned with only our suffering, our enjoyment, our needs, we lose perspective. Our world shrinks, and the mind begins to narrow; as the mind narrows, our suffering broadens. So by learning to make our hearts limitless, we broaden our minds, reduce our suffering, and spread joy and compassion to all those we encounter.⁸

The Brahmavihāras are natural human capacities; they may be underdeveloped and unavailable when they are most needed. So that they can be available at all times, specific practices, especially meditation practices, are useful for developing each of them. One of the principles of doing Brahmavihāras meditation is that it's best to start by summoning each of the Brahmavihāras toward someone who easily evokes the associated attitude, intentions, and feelings. Rather than trying to artificially make ourselves feel love, we can begin these practices by recognising how we already experience the different aspects of love. Even if it's only toward an endearing puppy, once we recognise any of these four qualities of love within ourselves, the meditation practice is to focus on staying present with this attitude, so we can get to know it better, feel it in the body and mind, and allow it to grow. A big part of meditating on one of the Brahmavihāras is developing the ability to stay focused on it without being distracted by anything else. It is learning to dwell in love. When we develop a stable focus on this love, we again let it grow so it fills our body and mind. Then the next step in the practice is to progressively do the same for people who are decreasingly easy to love. Eventually, we practice cultivating love for those who are difficult—e.g., people with whom we have conflict or people who are hostile. As it can be challenging to cultivate love for those we have difficulty loving, the meditation practice can help us systematically and gradually discover and develop our capacity to love. This is not an easy task, but by undertaking it we can discover the healing and wisdom that makes universal love possible.⁹ Through regular practice, it is possible to have unlimited love, that is, love which is not withheld from anyone.

Meditating on the Brahmavihāras

While the Brahmavihāras are natural human capacities, they may be underdeveloped and unavailable when they are most needed. So that they can be available at all times, specific practices, especially meditation practices, are useful for developing each of them. One of the principles of doing Brahmavihāra meditation is that it's best to start by summoning each of the Brahmavihāras toward someone who easily evokes the associated attitude, intentions, and feelings. Rather than trying to artificially make ourselves feel love, we can begin these practices by recognising how we already experience the different aspects of love. Even if it's only toward an endearing puppy, once we recognise any of these four qualities of love within ourselves, the meditation practice is to then, focus on staying present with this attitude so we can get to know it better, feel it in the body and mind, and allow it to grow. A big part of meditating on one of the Brahmavihāras is developing

the ability to stay focused on it without being distracted by anything else. It is learning to dwell in love.

Once we're able to have a stable, undistracted loving focus toward an easy person, the next step is to think about or imagine someone who is somewhat easy to love but not quite as easy as the first person. When we have developed a stable focus on this love, we again let it grow so it fills our body and mind. Then the next step in the practice is to progressively do the same for people who are decreasingly easy to love. Eventually, we practice cultivating love for those who are difficult, for example, people with whom we have conflict or people who are hostile.

Because it can be challenging to cultivate love for those we have difficulty loving, the meditation practice can help us systematically and gradually discover and develop our capacity to love. This is not an easy task, but by undertaking it we can discover the healing and wisdom that makes universal love possible.

Through regular practice, it is possible to have unlimited love—that is, love which is not withheld from anyone. In deep meditation practice with the Brahmavihāras, the experience of mettā, karuṇā, muditā, and upekkhā can become, as described by the Buddha, “extensive, expanded, limitless, and free from hatred or ill-will.” When they radiate outward in all directions of the compass without limit, the four Brahmavihāras are called the “Four Immeasurables.” It is phenomenally transformative to be absorbed in the radiance of any of these four.

The Brahmavihāras in Daily Life

Outside of meditation, the Brahmavihāras also grow as we begin to recognise and cultivate them in our ordinary life. If one of them appears, it might be possible to stay aware of it rather than becoming preoccupied and forgetful of love's presence. If we have a regular familiarity with what it's like to love, we may be able to evoke any of the Brahmavihāras when it is appropriate. The Brahmavihāras can also become a guide for our actions as we seek to discover the wise and loving thing to do in every situation. Developing the Brahmavihāras in our social life provides a double benefit. We benefit from the inner goodness they bring us, and those who are the recipients of our love benefit as well. Thus we can say, May All Beings Be at Peace, May All Beings Be Free from Suffering.

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² Sayādaw, Mahāsi, *Brahmavihāra Dhamma*, Translated by U Min Swe (Min Kyaw Thu), New Edition Edited by Bhikkhu Pesala, the Socialist Republic of the Union of Burma, 2013, Page No. 2.

³ Sayādaw, Mahāsi, *Brahmavihāra Dhamma*, Translated by U Min Swe (Min Kyaw Thu), New Edition Edited by Bhikkhu Pesala, the Socialist Republic of the Union of Burma, 2013, Page No. 2.

⁴ Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu, an American Buddhist Monk and scholar, touches on this often: “You realise that the happiness you're looking for now as you meditate is not in competition with anybody at all. Nobody's struggling to get to see your breath. You're not fighting with anyone else as you're trying to get the mind to settle down. It's all internal. You're not harming anyone, and you can take joy in that fact... In other words, you're not constantly looking for the newest flashy object or trying to listen to the latest tunes that are attractive. You realise that your true happiness comes from within. You don't have to keep searching outside, because the more you're searching outside, the more you're going to get into conflict with other people... You're increasing your ability to find happiness in a way that doesn't get into any conflict, that doesn't require laying any claim. You don't have to push anybody out of the way or away from something they've already laid claim to.”

⁵ Sarkar, Bijay Kumar, "Buddhists Concept of Brahma-Vihar: An Analysis of Morals", RESEARCH REVIEW International Journal of Multidisciplinary, Volume-04, ISSN: 2455-3085 (Online), Issue-01, 2019, Page No – 186.

⁶ When talking about Muditā, His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama often says: "If I am only happy for myself, many fewer chances for happiness. If I am happy when good things happen to other people, billions more chances to be happy!"

⁷ To quote the great Zen Master Thich Nhat Hanh: "True equanimity is neither cold nor indifferent. If you have more than one child, they are all your children. Upekkhā does not mean that you don't love. You love in a way that all your children receive your love, without discrimination. It is "the wisdom of equality," the ability to see everyone as equal; we shed all discrimination and prejudice, and remove all boundaries between ourselves and others."

⁸ His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama sums this up nicely: "If we think only of ourselves, forget about other people, then our minds occupy a very small area. Inside that small area, even a tiny problem appears very big. But the moment you develop a sense of concern for others, you realise that, just like ourselves, they also want happiness; they also want satisfaction. When you have this sense of concern, your mind automatically widens. At this point, your own problems, even big problems, will not be so significant. The result? Big increase in peace of mind. So, if you think only of yourself, only your own happiness, the result is actually less happiness. You get more anxiety, more fear."

⁹ Sarkar, Bijay Kumar, "Buddhists Concept of Brahma-Vihar: An Analysis of Morals", RESEARCH REVIEW International Journal of Multidisciplinary, Volume-04, ISSN: 2455-3085 (Online), Issue-01, 2019, Page No – 188.

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