

The Brahmaviharas Are Not a Complete Practice

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There's a sutta where the Buddha talks about one of his previous lifetimes, when he was a king. He ruled until he saw his first grey hair. Then he handed the kingdom over to his son, went off, and lived in the forest.

He spent the whole rest of his life devoted to practicing the brahmaviharas, developing thoughts of unlimited goodwill for himself and all beings, unlimited compassion, unlimited empathetic joy, and unlimited equanimity. But then, as he commented at the end of the story, that practice didn't lead to awakening. It didn't lead to dispassion. It simply led to a really nice rebirth as a Brahma.

There's another passage in the canon where Ven. Sariputta's going to teach one of his old students who's on his deathbed. The old student is a brahman. Sariputta figures that brahmans want to go to the Brahma world, so he teaches him the brahmaviharas. The man dies and is reborn in a Brahma world. Sariputta goes back and tells the Buddha what happened. The Buddha says, "You know, you could have taken him further. Rebirth in a Brahma world is an inferior place." Of course, it's superior to being a human being, but it's still inferior to the goal, which is total awakening.

The point of both of these passages is that the brahmaviharas are not a complete path. They can't take you to awakening on their own. Now, they do have a function in the practice. When the Buddha taught breath meditation to his son, he first taught him a series of preliminary practices to get the mind ready, and one of them was the brahmaviharas. After all, as you're here meditating, you should be doing it based on goodwill: goodwill for yourself and goodwill for other beings.

Goodwill is not love. There's another word for love in Pali. That's *pema*. Goodwill is *metta*. *Metta* is a wish for happiness. The reason we're practicing is because we want a genuine happiness, a happiness also that doesn't harm anybody. We want the happiness to spread around.

So you want to get that attitude firmly in place—that you really do want to be happy—because you're going to be dealing with lots of different committee members in your mind, and some of them are self-destructive. Some of them will try to sabotage what you're trying to do. You have to keep reminding yourself: You do really want to be happy. You don't want to be miserable just to show other people that they mistreated you. You want to take your life in your hands

and say, “I can make something good out of this.” And you do that by training the mind.

So goodwill is a preliminary practice for getting the mind into concentration focused on the breath. But there are also passages where the Buddha talks about it as a topic of concentration in and of itself. He doesn’t say how you do it. You just simply develop the thought, “May all these beings look after themselves with ease,” an interesting way of expressing goodwill. He’s not having you say, “I’m going to be there to help you.” He says, “May you be there to look after yourself” or “May you be able to help yourself.” Because when you think about it, that’s what beings all want, deep down inside: to have the ability within themselves to look after themselves, to be happy and independent.

And here again, you want to use this as a motivation for your practice. But you can’t just tell yourself that you have no ill will for anybody in the world. Actively look to see where you do have ill will for somebody, where you want to see them suffer, and then stop and think about it: What would you gain from their suffering? What would you gain from your own suffering? Very little. There’s a peculiar pleasure sometimes that comes from suffering or seeing somebody else suffer. But it’s not good for you in the long term. It’s like foods that have a taste that you may like for a little while, but then they get sickening.

So think about what goodwill means. In light of the principle of karma, it means that you’re going to act in ways that lead to true happiness and that other people will act in ways that lead to true happiness. If you could get the whole world to do that, the world would be a much better place. But a lot of people don’t know the ways to true happiness. Or sometimes they may know, but they don’t care. And so what you’re saying is, “May you know, and may you care, and may you be willing and able to act on those causes for true happiness.” Wish this for yourself. Wish this for others. What’s difficult about that?

A lot of times, we don’t like the idea of goodwill because we think it means, “May you be happy just as you are.” But that’s not what it’s saying. Goodwill may require that you change your actions or that other people change their actions in a good direction, which is all to the good. Some people find that they can get the mind into concentration when they think in this way.

As for other people—as in the instructions to Rahula, the Buddha’s son—once you spread thoughts of goodwill in all directions, then you focus on the breath. We’re here both to gain the sense of well-being that comes from the concentration and to use that concentration to give rise to more mindfulness, more alertness, and more discernment. That’s the part that’s missing in the brahmaviharas: the discernment.

The breath meditation actually helps in that direction because when the Buddha gives instructions, he starts out by having you notice your long breathing, notice your short breathing, and then try to breathe in a way that you're sensitive to the whole body.

Now, you may have to work up to whole-body awareness section by section. Start with one area of the body. Get to know how the breath feels there. Then make it comfortable; that's the next step, what the Buddha calls "calming bodily fabrication," as you breathe in and as you breathe out. What this means is that you calm the breath. But before the breath can grow calm, first you have to nourish yourself well with breath energy. Breathe in such a way that the energy fills the whole body, and then allow it to calm down. Then you begin to notice.

Why does the Buddha use the word "fabrication" there? Well, fabrication is the key to getting insight: to see how you put your experience together. It's as if your past kamma gives you the raw material and then, from that raw material, you shape things with your breath and with the way you talk to yourself. The breath is called bodily fabrication. The way you talk to yourself—technically it's directed thought and evaluation: That's called verbal fabrication. And then there's mental fabrication: feelings and perceptions.

These are the activities by which we put things together in the present moment. And the way the Buddha teaches breath meditation is to get you sensitive to the fact that you're putting these things together. First, you develop good bodily fabrications and mental fabrications, and then you calm them down. And the instructions for breath meditation themselves are a kind of verbal fabrication, in which you tell yourself what to do.

So you're developing tranquility and insight in tandem. In being sensitive to the calming, you're getting the mind to settle down and be tranquil. Being sensitive to the fabrication is giving you a basis for insight. What kind of job are you doing as you put your experience together? You want to do a good job. Talk to yourself about the breath. Ask yourself: What kind of breath would be comfortable? What kind of breath would not be comfortable? How can you breathe in ways that feel satisfying? And what would be satisfying right now? What does the body *need* right now? When the breath feels satisfying, how do you keep it satisfying? And how do you spread it around?

As the Buddha says in his instructions for getting the mind into deeper concentration, you want to take any sense of ease or fullness or refreshment and let it fill the whole body. Let the whole body get saturated with it. How do you do that? Ajaan Lee gives some pointers. He says to think of the breath energy flowing through the blood vessels, flowing through the nerves, out to the pores of the skin,

so that as you breathe in, you're suffused by breath. And it's a good perception to hold in mind. That would be a mental fabrication. Then you've got that feeling of well-being, saturating the body.

All the different kinds of fabrication are right here, and as we meditate, we're learning how to do them well. Then we realize we're fabricating our experience not only as we meditate, but also as we go through the day. We're talking to ourselves. We're holding certain perceptions in mind. We're breathing in certain ways. Sometimes we put these things together well and sometimes not.

You want to take this sensitivity to fabrications and start using it in other areas of life as well to get past a lot of your unskillful mental states and unskillful emotions. It's a useful analysis for dealing with addiction. You could hold in mind the perception that your mind is not just one mind; it's like a committee. Sometimes the committee's like the Chicago city council. It's got lots of politics. Lots of deals are being made in the back rooms. But the fact that an idea has appeared to the committee doesn't mean that you have to go along with the whole committee.

If the committee's putting things together in a certain way, you can ask yourself, "Well, how am I breathing? What's the conversation inside? What are the perceptions they're holding?" If that particular mental state or physical state is not heading in a good direction, take it apart. Put something better together, using those kinds of fabrication.

And it's important that you get the breath on your side, because one way that an unskillful mind state takes over is that it seizes your breath. Anger comes in or fear comes in, and you're going to start breathing in uncomfortable ways. Then you feel you've got to get it out of your system. All too often, we do very unskillful things to get these things out of our systems. Then we're stuck with the kamma. So what you've got to do is to seize the breath back. Tell yourself that "No matter what's going on in the mind, I can still breathe calmly. I can still breathe in a way that feels like it's filling the body with a good energy." That puts you more in a position of strength, where you can look more calmly at the way the mind is putting things together and see what strange perceptions have taken over.

So this kind of analysis here helps get you past a lot of unskillful things. And you learn it by doing the breath meditation with an eye to seeing how you put things together with your breath, your internal conversation, your perceptions, and feelings. That's something you can't learn from the brahmaviharas. You can apply that analysis to the brahmaviharas. But the brahmaviharas on their own—just sitting there, wishing thoughts of goodwill or whatever—are not going to accomplish that task, which is why they're not a complete practice.

The brahmaviharas are useful in some ways, but a lot more is needed to really get the mind under control and to find a happiness that's more than just a fabricated happiness. You want to find something that's unfabricated inside, and you're going to achieve that first by understanding these processes of fabrication. If you don't understand them, you can't get past them.

So we practice because we have goodwill—for ourselves and for other beings—but goodwill is just a start. It can take us only so far. We also have to learn how to understand what's going on in the mind, and that can take us a lot farther.