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To get the mind to stay in concentration, you need an object that you like, and this will be a very personal, individual matter. Some people like the breath. Some people find that the mind can settle down really well when thinking of the different parts of the body. Some like to repeat a word like *buddho* or *dhammo* or *sangho*, and some like the *brahma-vihāras*. So it's really up to you which object you like to stay with, realizing that simple concentration is not going to do all the work for the mind. But for the work to get done, you do need an object that you like.

You can take the breath and make it a nice breath, a breath that's comfortable, a breath that's satisfying. You can contemplate the parts of the body in a way that gets really fascinating. Thinking about what you've got in what the Buddha calls "this sack here" can sometimes really transfix the mind. You find that you stay focused there very easily.

And a lot of people like the *brahma-vihāras*. It feels good to be sitting here thinking, "May all beings be happy" or to think of anyone who's suffering and send compassion: "May that person be free from suffering." You see people who are happy or doing things that are good, you're happy for them. Those are pleasant things to think about, and you feel good about yourself thinking them.

But you have to realize the *brahma-vihāras* are not entirely pleasant, especially the first three, because after all they're involved in wishes. May all beings be happy. May all those who are suffering be free from their suffering. May all those who are happy or doing good things, may they continue to be happy. May, may, may. But you look at the world. Not everybody is happy. A lot of people are suffering or doing things that are going to cause suffering both for other people now and for themselves on into the future. And there are some people who are happy and yet are abusing their happiness.

So the *brahma-vihāras* can hurt. When you look frankly at the world, you realize that if you really wish for people to be happy – if it's a sincere wish and not just a little happy, happy, happy thought you put in the mind – you find that looking at the world gets painful. You wonder: Why can't we just get along? You look around at people, and for some

reason they keep on finding ways of not getting along. You'd think it should be easy for people to learn how to cooperate, to treat one another with respect, and yet they don't. And as the Buddha pointed out, it's going to get worse, this human world of ours, before it gets better.

This is why equanimity is the most refined of all the brahma-vihāras. It's not a wish; it's a statement of fact. All beings are the owners of their actions, heir to their actions. Whatever they do, for good or for evil, to that will they fall heir. Period. It's a chastening thought, but one that you can hold on to and not suffer nearly so much. Ajaan Fuang commented that *mettā* needs *upekkhā* or equanimity if it's not going to turn into a source of suffering.

This is why the brahma-vihāras come in a set. *Mettā* keeps *upekkhā* from becoming cold and heartless. You go through the first three before you get to the fourth one. The equanimity is where you can go when you look at the world and realize, "They're hunting people down and they're making it legal. People in power are ripping off the rest of the society, and it's legal." And you want to wonder, what's wrong with this human race?

So you have to step back a little bit further and say, "Well, it's karma." And where are you going to find the way out, and how are you going to show people the way out? You have to find the way out through your own actions. Because the important part of developing the brahma-vihāras is that you really are sincere in your wish. It's not just an idle wish that you switch on when you want to feel good, and then switch off as you go through the rest of your life. One of the reasons we practice the brahma-vihāras is so they can become the motivation for our actions even in the face of difficulty, even in the face of difficult people. As the Buddha said, you try to protect your goodwill as a mother would protect her child.

That passage is often mistranslated. People will say you should love the world as a mother would love her child – but that's not the case. Love is actually not one of the brahma-vihāras. The Pali word for love, *pema*, is something the Buddha has strong reservations about. As he points out, there's love that's the result of love, and there's also hatred that's the result of love. In other words, you love someone and someone else comes and harms that person; it's hard not to hate the second person. There's also love that comes from hatred. If you don't like x and someone else doesn't like x, you suddenly find yourself liking the other

person who doesn't like x. So it's all pretty arbitrary. Love is not something you can make universal. You might try, but you keep stumbling.

The same with gratitude. When I was in Canada last month, someone asked, "I've always wondered why gratitude wasn't listed as the fifth brahma-vihāra." Well, that's because gratitude can't be universal. It's something special. It's for people who have gone out of their way to be kind to you. We need a special word for that – a special word for our appreciation of the trouble they went through. We can have appreciation for all kinds of things. But there should be a special word, a special feeling, for the particular people who've gone out of their way to help you, such as your parents, your teachers, anyone who's made the choice. We have the special word because we want to give special respect to that choice and because that inspires us to make the difficult choices to help other people, too. You realize that helping you has sometimes been hard for the other person. It involved some hardships, some difficulties, and yet the person was willing to make that choice and take them on. When you learn how to be grateful for how special that is, it makes it easier for you to go out of your way for other people.

So gratitude and love are not brahma-vihāras; goodwill, wishing for happiness, is. But as I said, it's not a totally painless attitude. You need to have equanimity to undergird it for the times that you'd like to see people happy but they're not, and you can't do anything to make them happy. Or you see people doing something that's going to cause trouble for other people or for themselves, and you can't stop them. There's a lot of that in the world. So as you're developing the brahma-vihāras, you've got to make them complete. Otherwise, if they don't become a source of obvious suffering, they become a source of denial. You're in a little bubble of mettā and it's not connected with the world at all. That's not the kind of concentration that can be really useful for discernment.

The Buddha does talk about using the brahma-vihāras as a basis for the seven factors for awakening. After all, the brahma-vihāras are a form of mindfulness. But then, to move into the other factors of awakening requires that you analyze things. When is it skillful and when is it not skillful to hold to mettā? When is it more skillful to hold to upekkhā, equanimity? And how do you make sure that your actions are based on mettā for others? When thoughts of greed come into the mind, when thoughts of lust come into the mind, and you think, "Well, that's okay.

It's just my mind; I can think whatever I want," you have to realize that these things, as they get repeated, become the basis for action. What kind of actions will these lead to, especially for those of us who are here practicing, dependent on the generosity of others? Is this what you want to use their generosity for? You have to ask yourself this when thoughts like that come in the mind.

Then there are the times when you can disguise your lust or anger as forms of mettā, thinking that by engaging other people with your lust, or expressing your anger over their behavior, you'll be doing them an act of kindness. That kind of thinking can be very convincing, but also very deceptive and harmful. This is why we have to teach our discernment to be heedful and wary. If you think you can trust your quote-unquote "innate" compassion, you're setting yourself up for a fall—and you'll hurt others in the process.

You have to learn how to bring discernment to your practice of the brahma-vihāras so that you can turn them into right concentration – the kind of concentration that's useful for gaining insight – especially when you want to make them sincere. Sincere mettā is painful. That pain is why you need the equanimity in order to counteract mettā, to give you a place where the mind really can settle down in a way that feels solid, secure, with a strong sense of well-being, and it's clear enough so that it can use the concentration as a basis for insight.

So remember that the brahma-vihāras have a warning slapped on them: Use with Care. But if you heed the warnings, you find they can take you far.