

The Brahmaviharas on the Path

November 13, 2008

The Buddha often used images of gradual practice, a gradual change to illustrate the path of practice. There's one passage where he says it's like a stairway. You go from one step to the next, to the next, without jumping up a whole set of stairs. There's another passage where he talks about the floor of the ocean gradually getting deeper and deeper, till it finally hits a precipice.

In other passages, he talks about developing virtue and then, once you've got your virtue, you develop mindfulness and contentment; and from mindfulness and contentment, you work on the hindrances, develop concentration, and finally develop discernment—which makes it sound like you have to perfect one step before you can get to the next.

But you have to remember that the point in the practice where virtue is perfected is when all eight factors of the noble path come together. One of the results of the first stage of awakening is that you've completed all the work you have to do in terms of virtue, but you still have work to do in terms of concentration and discernment.

That doesn't mean, however, you didn't work on concentration and discernment to get there. You needed them both. After all, they're there in the path, which means you can't wait until your virtue is perfect before you work on meditation. All three parts of the training help one another along.

So you don't have to wait until your virtue is perfect, or you've got loads and loads of merit, before you start meditating. You start it right now. And you'll notice as you work on the meditation that the more virtuous you are—the more you can exercise restraint in the course of the day, the more you can be generous and develop other good qualities throughout the day—the easier it will be to meditate. The fact that you're meditating, strengthening your mindfulness and concentration, makes it easier to develop those good qualities throughout the day. It's like washing your hands: Your left hand washes your right hand, and your right hand washes your left hand. That way they both get clean.

So as you're sitting here, don't worry about how much you have or haven't completed the other factors of the path. Focus on the ones you're working on right now. At the same time, when you're going through the rest of the day when you're not sitting with your eyes closed, when you're engaged with other activities, don't worry about sitting with your eyes closed. Just keep asking yourself, "What's the skillful thing to do now?" Try to bring some sense of ease with the breath into all your other activities. It'll make it easier to do the skillful thing and step back from unskillful mind states that pop up, where you get upset, where you get flustered, angry, whatever. You'll develop more resistance to those mind states.

It's in this way that all the elements of the practice help one another along, and the whole day can be devoted to the practice of developing the mind.

There's a passage where the Buddha says that a stingy person cannot attain the noble attainments, can't even attain jhana. But he also says that the quality of your generosity will grow as your meditation advances. In other words,

generosity helps your meditation, your meditation makes it easier to be generous in ways that grow more and more large hearted. This is particularly true when you're working on developing the brahmaviharas.

Ajaan Lee describes that the brahmaviharas as food for your precepts. And that's how the Buddha presents them as well. There's a passage where he talks about reflecting on the fact that you've made mistakes in the past. You've broken the precepts, harmed other people. The proper attitude to have toward that, he says, is to realize that you can't go back and undo the mistake, and sitting there stewing about it is not going to help, either. So you resolve that you're not going to repeat the mistake. You're going to exercise restraint in the future.

Then, to strengthen that resolve, you develop the brahmaviharas: unlimited goodwill, compassion, empathetic joy, and equanimity. This helps to ensure that you're going to stick with that resolve to exercise restraint, because if you really feel goodwill for other people, you're not going to harm them. If you feel goodwill for them, then when you see them suffering, you want to help. That's compassion. If you see that they're already happy, you want them to continue being happy. That's empathetic joy. If you realize that there's nothing you can do to help them or the situation that you yourself are encountering, then the kindest thing is to develop equanimity toward the things you can't change, which frees you to focus on the things you can. So goodwill underlies all four of the brahmaviharas. It's the essential one. It helps you maintain your precepts. It helps develop concentration.

The Buddha also talks about the levels of jhana you can attain by developing goodwill and the other brahmaviharas. And if you do it right, it's also an exercise in discernment. You can't just sit there beaming out nice thoughts and think that that's going to take care of the problem. If, when you get up from meditation, you see that somebody has done something outrageous, then if you haven't really thought the matter through your immediate reaction will be to get upset again.

Here it's important to understand that goodwill doesn't mean that you're going to like people. You simply don't want them to meet with harm. You want them to meet with true happiness. You've got to learn how to develop that attitude in a proper way. That means both understanding the principle of karma, and also understanding how you fabricate feelings in the mind so that they really are genuine. This is where the brahmavihara practice leads to discernment.

Part of the discernment also lies in the exercise of equanimity, realizing when it's appropriate to develop equanimity as an act of kindness to yourself and to others as opposed to when you focus more directly on the other brahmaviharas. But you also have to understand what it means to wish for people to be happy. You want them to do things that lead to happiness. It's not like you're pretending you can take a magic wand and wave it over their heads and they'll immediately be happy. That's not how it works. The principle of karma says that if you're going to be happy, you have to do things that are skillful. So if you want to imagine people being happy, you have to imagine them doing skillful things, being generous, being happy in being generous, being happy in exercising restraint. And if it's not too much of a stretch, think of them being happy meditating.

In the *Metta Sutta* in the *Sutta Nipata*, where the Buddha talks about how to express a thought of goodwill, he doesn't simply say, "May all beings be happy."

That's part of what he has to say, but not all. He goes through all the various categories of beings: long, middling and short; seen, unseen; big and small. But he also says, "May all beings not despise anyone." In other words, may they not create the causes for unskillful actions. So you have to think about cause and effect, and realize that if the people you don't like could actually understand the causes for happiness, the world would be a much better place. This is why you can't have your likes get in the way of universal goodwill. Goodwill is one thing. Liking and disliking other people: that's something else. We're not pretending that everybody is okay, or that everybody is nice. We simply realize the world would be a much better place if everybody understood the causes of happiness and would act on them. That's something you can wish without feeling hypocritical. It's not make-believe.

So that's one area in which you start developing right view in the process of developing goodwill. Then you take it further, by learning how to develop a feeling of goodwill that you really feel down into your bones. How are you going to do that? You can't simply repeat goodwill phrases. There's more to a genuine feeling than that. As the Buddha said, you fabricate your emotions through three kinds of fabrication: physical, verbal, and mental. The breath counts as physical fabrication. Directed thought and evaluation count as verbal fabrication. And feelings and perceptions count as mental fabrication. The breath is what actually takes an emotion and makes it real in the body. So a good way to start with the brahmaviharas is to learn how to breathe in a way that feels really good. You have to develop some sense of wellbeing within yourself before you can wish it for other people.

Ajaan Lee's image is of a water tank. If there's no water in the tank, then when you open the faucet, all that comes out is air. In other words, you have to have the water of well-being inside before you can offer real water to other people. So you work on breathing in a way that feels really good, and use your directed thought and evaluation, the verbal fabrication, to help with that. But that can help with other issues as well. You can start thinking about how, if there are people out there who you really have trouble feeling goodwill for, it's in your best interest to develop goodwill for them.

One of the images the Buddha gives is of a person walking across a desert, hot and trembling with thirst, coming across a little tiny puddle of water in a cow's footprint. He realizes that if he's going to drink the water, he'll have to get down on his hands and feet and slurp it up. If he tries to scoop it up with his hand, it's going to get muddy. So he very carefully puts his mouth down on the ground and slurps up that little bit of water.

This image describe you when you're angry. Notice your position. You're hot and trembling with thirst; you can't afford to focus on the bad points of other people because that's going to get you even hotter and thirstier. Your goodness is going to burn away. You look at the human race, and don't see that there's anything good out there, there's no reason to treat people kindly, because they're all selfish or whatever. If that's your thinking then you're going to make it harder and harder to develop your own goodness. So your goodness requires that you think about the goodness of other people, no matter how little it may be. It's not that you're pretending that they have a lot of goodness, but you have to focus on it realizing that there is some goodness in these people. You don't have to wait

for everybody to have Buddha Nature before they're good enough for you to treat well. Just a little bit of goodness is enough to nourish your own goodness. Because it's not a question of their deserving your goodwill. You need to develop goodwill for your own well-being.

So when you think in these ways, holding these perceptions in mind, you can develop a more and more genuine feeling of goodwill, a feeling that's not threatened by the fact that other people are going to continue to act in sometimes really outrageous and horrible ways. Because when you see them acting in horrible ways, you've got to have compassion for them. They are creating causes for suffering.

As you develop these thoughts of goodwill, you're giving yourself a stronger foundation for your own virtue, creating a stronger foundation for concentration, and gaining some practice in understanding this process of fabrication, which is what discernment is all about: to see how states of mind are fabricated, how emotions are fabricated both in body and mind, and to get more and more sensitive to how this process takes place.

So it's not the case that you work on virtue and then, when it's all taken care of, you move on to concentration. Or that when that's all taken care of, you move on to discernment. You have to work on developing the mind in such a way that all three parts of the training work together, help one another along. So even though the process is gradual, it's gradual in a sense that all three develop together.

Keep this point in mind. As you sit down to meditate, working on developing your concentration, it's not only concentration that's going to get developed. If you learn how to carry the concentration into your daily life, you're going to gain help with your virtue, looking after the precepts and helping with your discernment.

So learn not to compartmentalize the practice. Remember it's all of a piece and that all the different facets of the practice help one another along.