

Head & Heart Together

Bringing Wisdom to the Brahmaviharas

The *brahmaviharas*, which are sometimes translated as “sublime attitudes,” are the Buddha’s primary heart teaching—the teaching that connects most directly with our desire for true happiness. The term *brahmavihara* literally means dwelling place of *brahmas*. *Brahmas* are gods who live in the higher heavens, dwelling in an attitude of unlimited good will, unlimited compassion, unlimited empathetic joy, and unlimited equanimity.

Of these four emotions, goodwill is the most fundamental, for it relates most directly to the heart. It’s the wish for true happiness, a wish that can be directed to yourself or to others. It’s also fundamental in that it was the underlying motivation that led the Buddha to search for Awakening and to teach the path to Awakening to others after he had found it.

The next two emotions in the list are essentially applications of good will. Compassion is what good will feels when it encounters suffering: It wants the suffering to stop. Empathetic joy is what good will feels when it encounters happiness: It wants the happiness to continue. Equanimity is a different emotion, in that it acts as an aid to and check on the other three. When you encounter suffering that you can’t stop no matter how hard you try, you have to develop equanimity so that you don’t create additional suffering and so that you can channel your energies to areas where you *can* be of help.

All four of these attitudes are emotions we’ve encountered throughout human life. But to become brahmaviharas, they have to become limitless. That takes work. It’s easy to feel good will, compassion, and empathetic joy for people you like and love, but there are bound to be people you dislike for one reason or another—often for very good reasons. Similarly, there are many people for whom it’s easy to feel equanimity: people you don’t know or don’t really care about. But it’s hard to feel equanimous when people you love are suffering. Yet if you’re developing the brahmaviharas, you have to include all of these people within the scope of your awareness so that you can apply the proper attitude no matter where or when. This is where your heart needs the help of your head.

All too often, meditators believe that if they can simply add a little more heart juice, a little more emotional oomph, to their brahmavihara practice, their attitudes can become limitless. But if something inside you keeps churning up reasons for liking this person or hating that one, your practice starts feeling hypocritical. You wonder who you’re trying to fool. Or, after a month devoted to the practice, you still find yourself thinking black thoughts about people who cut you off in traffic—to say nothing of people who’ve done the world serious harm.

This is where the head comes in. If we think of the heart as the side of the mind that wants happiness, the head is the side that understands how things actually work, the principle of cause and effect. If your head and heart can learn how to work together — i.e., if your head can give priority to finding the causes for true happiness, and if the heart can learn to respect the need to embrace those causes — the training of the mind can go far.

This is why the Buddha taught the brahmaviharas in a context of head teachings: the principle of causality as it plays out in (1) karma and (2) the process of fabrication that shapes emotions within the body and mind. The more we can get our heads around these teachings, the easier it will be to put our whole heart into developing attitudes that truly are sublime. An understanding of karma helps to explain *what* we're doing as we develop the brahmaviharas and *why* we might want to do so in the first place. An understanding of fabrication helps to explain *how* we can take our human heart and convert it into a place where brahmas could dwell.

The teaching on karma starts with the principle that people experience happiness and sorrow based on their intentions, both past and present. This is because our experience of the present moment is composed of three things: 1) the results of past intentions; 2) present intentions; and 3) the results of present intentions. The results register in terms of pleasure or pain, happiness or sorrow. The intentions both past and present are the causes. Those are the factors you need to master. If we act with unskillful intentions either for ourselves or for others, we're going to suffer. If we act with skillful intentions, we'll experience happiness. So if we want to experience happiness, we have to train our intentions to always be skillful. This is the first reason for developing the brahmaviharas: so that we can make our intentions more trustworthy.

Some people say that unlimited good will comes naturally to us, that our Buddha nature is intrinsically compassionate. But if anyone would have been qualified to talk about Buddha nature, it would have been the Buddha himself, and yet he didn't. He never said a word about Buddha nature. He never said that human beings are basically good; he never said they're basically bad. What he did say is that the mind is even more variegated than the animal world. We're capable of anything. So what are we going to do with this capability?

We could do — and have done — almost anything, but the one thing the Buddha *does* assume across the board is that we all desire happiness, that deep down inside we want to take our capability for anything and devote it to happiness. So the first lesson of karma is that, if you really want to be happy, you can't trust your basic goodness to tell you the right thing to do, for that would simply foster complacency. Unskillful intentions would take over and you wouldn't even know it. Instead, you have to be heedful to recognize unskillful intentions for what they are, and to act only on skillful ones. The way to ensure that you'll stay heedful in this way is to make your desire for happiness universal. Spread it around.

The second lesson of karma is that just as you're the primary architect of your own happiness and suffering, other people are the primary architects of theirs. If you really want them to be happy, you don't just treat them nicely. You also want them to learn how to create the causes for happiness. If you can, you want to show them how to do that. This is why the gift of Dharma—lessons in how to give rise to true happiness—is the greatest gift.

In the Buddha's most famous example of how to express an attitude of unlimited good will, he doesn't just express the following wish for universal happiness:

*"Happy, at rest,
may all beings be happy at heart.
Whatever beings there may be,
weak or strong, without exception,
long, large,
middling, short,
subtle, blatant,
seen & unseen,
near & far,
born & seeking birth:
May all beings be happy at heart."*

He immediately adds a wish that all beings avoid the causes that would lead them to unhappiness:

*"Let no one deceive another
or despise anyone anywhere,
or through anger or resistance
wish for another to suffer." — Khp 9*

So if you're using visualization as part of your good will practice, don't visualize people simply as smiling, surrounded willy-nilly by wealth and sensual pleasures. Visualize them acting, speaking, and thinking skillfully. If they're currently acting on unskillful intentions, visualize them changing their ways. Then act to realize those visualizations if you can.

A similar principle applies to compassion and empathetic joy. Learn to feel compassion not only for people who are already suffering, but also for people who are engaging in unskillful actions that will lead to future suffering. This means trying to stop them from those actions if you can. And learn to feel empathetic joy not only for those who are already happy, but also for those whose actions will lead to future happiness. If you have the opportunity, give them encouragement.

But you also have to realize that no matter how unlimited the scope of these positive emotions, their effect is going to run into limits. In other words, regardless of how

strong your good will or compassion may be, there are bound to be people whose past actions are unskillful and who cannot or will not change their ways in the present. This is why you need equanimity as your reality check. When you encounter areas where you can't be of help, you learn not to get upset about those things. Think about the universality of the principle of karma: it applies to everyone regardless of whether you like them or not. That puts you in a position where you can see more clearly what *can* be changed, where you *can* be of help. In other words, equanimity isn't a blanket acceptance of things as they are. It's a tool for helping you to develop discernment as to which kinds of suffering you have to accept, and which ones you don't.

For example, someone in your family may be suffering from Alzheimer's. If you get upset about the fact of the disease, you're limiting your ability to be genuinely helpful. To be more effective, you have to use equanimity as a means of letting go of what you *want* to change and focusing more on what *can* be changed in the present.

A third lesson from the principle of karma is that developing the brahmaviharas can also help mitigate the results of your past bad actions. The Buddha explains this point with an analogy: If you put a lump of salt into a glass of water, could you drink the water in the glass? No, because it would be far too salty. But if you put that lump of salt into a river, could you drink the water in the river? Yes, because there's so much more water in the river than salt. When you develop the four brahmaviharas, your mind is like the river. The skillful karma of developing these attitudes in the present is so expansive that whatever results of past bad actions may arise, you hardly notice them. So it's in your own interest to develop these unlimited attitudes.

A proper understanding of karma also helps to correct the false idea that if people are suffering they deserve to suffer, so you might as well just leave them alone. Actually, karma doesn't work that way. When you catch yourself thinking in terms of someone's deserving to suffer, you have to keep four principles in mind.

First, remember that when you look at people, you can't see all the karmic seeds from their past actions. They may be experiencing the results of past bad actions, but you don't know when those seeds will stop sprouting, and you have no idea what other seeds, whatever wonderful latent potentials, will sprout in their place.

There's a saying in some Buddhist circles that if you want to see a person's past actions, you look at his present condition; if you want to see his future condition, you look at his present actions. This principle, however, is based on a basic misperception: that we each have a single karmic account, and what we see in the present is the current running balance in each person's account. Actually, each person's karmic history doesn't collect into a single account. It's composed of the many different seeds planted in many places through the many different actions we've done in the past, each seed maturing at its own rate. Some of these seeds have already sprouted and disappeared; some are sprouting now; some will sprout in the future. This means that a person's present

condition reflects only a small portion of his or her past actions. As for the other seeds, you can't see them at all.

This reflection helps you when developing compassion, for it reminds you that you never know when the possibility to help somebody can have an effect. The seeds of the other person's past bad actions may be flowering right now, but they could stop flowering in a moment. You may happen to be the person who's there to help when that person is ready to receive help.

The same pattern applies to empathetic joy. Say that your neighbor is wealthier than you are. You may resist feeling empathetic joy for him because you think, "He's already well-off while I'm still struggling. Why should I wish him to be even happier than he is?" If you think in those terms, remind yourself that you don't know what your karmic seeds are; you don't know what his karmic seeds are. Maybe his good karmic seeds are about to die. Do you want them to die any faster? Does his happiness diminish yours? What kind of attitude is that? It's useful to think in these ways.

The second principle to keep in mind is that, in the Buddha's teaching, there's no question of a person's "deserving" happiness or "deserving" pain. The Buddha never talks in terms of *people* deserving suffering. He simply says that there are actions leading to pleasure and actions leading to pain. Karma is not a respecter of persons; it's simply an issue of actions and results. Some people are really good people but they may have some bad actions squirreled away in their past. Other people smirk and swagger and do horrible things—you can't stand even to look at them—but their past may contain some wonderful actions. You never know. So there's no question about a person's deserving or not deserving pleasure or pain. There's simply the principle that actions have results, together with the principle that your present experience of pleasure or pain is the combined result of past and present actions. You may have some very unskillful actions in your past, but if you learn to think skillfully when those actions bear fruit in the present, you don't have to suffer.

Remember the story of Angulimala. He killed 999 people and then became an arahant. Many people were still upset over the murders and would pelt him with stones when he went out for alms. But he didn't suffer from the pain, because his mind no longer reacted under the sway of greed, anger, or delusion. So remember that "deserving" is a useless thought to bring to issues of pleasure and pain. A more useful thought centers on how we can be skillful in shaping pleasure from whatever past karmic fruit we're experiencing right now.

A third principle applies to the question of whether the person who's suffering "deserves" your good will. You sometimes hear that everyone deserves your good will because they all have Buddha nature, that they're all essentially good inside. But this forgets the primary reason for developing good will as a brahmavihara in the first place: You need to make your good will universal so that you can trust your intentions. If you regard your good will as so precious that only Buddhas deserve it, you won't be able to trust yourself when encountering people whose actions are consistently evil. Remember

that you don't have to like someone to feel good will for that person. All you have to do is wish for that person to be happy. And the more you can develop this attitude toward people you actively dislike, the more you'll be able to trust yourself.

The Buddha illustrates this point with a graphic analogy: Even if bandits attack you and saw off your limbs with a two-handled saw, you have to feel good will starting with them and then spreading to include the entire world. If you keep this analogy in mind, you help to protect yourself from acting in unskillful ways, no matter how badly provoked.

The fourth principle to remember concerns the karma you're creating right now in reaction to other people's pleasure and pain. If you're resentful of somebody else's happiness, someday when you get happy there's going to be somebody resentful of yours. Do you want that? Or if you're hard-hearted toward somebody who's suffering right now, someday you may face that same sort of suffering. Do you want people to be hard-hearted with you? Always remember that your reactions are a form of karma, so be mindful to create the kind of karma that gives the results you'd like to see.

When you think in these ways you see that it really is in your interest to develop the brahmaviharas in all situations. So the question is, how do you do that? This is where another aspect of the Buddha's teachings on causality plays a role: his teaching on fabrication, or the way you shape your experience.

Fabrication is of three kinds: bodily, verbal, and mental. Bodily fabrication is the way you breathe. Verbal fabrications are thoughts and mental comments on things—your internal speech. In Pali, these thoughts and comments are called *vitakka*—directed thought, and *vicara*, evaluation. Mental fabrications are perceptions and feelings: the mental labels you apply to things and the feelings of pleasure, pain, or neither pleasure nor pain you feel about them.

Any desire or emotion is made up of these three types of fabrication. The way you breathe gets the emotion into the body. This is why emotions have so much more power than mere passing thoughts. An emotion is basically a thought that's gotten into your breath, from your breath into your hormones, and from your hormones into the rest of your body—which is why it seems so real, so insistent, so genuinely “you.”

But as the Buddha points out, you don't have to identify with it. Emotions and desires are normally conditioned by ignorance, which is why they make us suffer, but if they're conditioned by knowledge they can form a path to the end of suffering. In the classical enumeration of the factors of the path, the ability to generate skillful desires comes under the factor of right effort. So it's in your interest to change your desires and emotions by bringing knowledge to each of these three types of fabrication. And a good place to start is with the breath.

If, for example, you're feeling anger toward someone, ask yourself, “How am I breathing right now? How can I change the way I breathe so that my body can feel more comfortable?” Anger often engenders a great sense of discomfort in the body, and you

feel you've got to get rid of it. The usual ways of getting rid of it are two, and they're both unskillful. Either you bottle it up—which of course turns it into "The Thing": a tentacle runs underground and suddenly shoots up out of nowhere and strangles you—or else you try to get it out of your system by letting it out in your words and deeds. And that, of course, just creates more bad karma.

So the Buddha provides a third, more skillful alternative for dealing with this bottled up discomfort: Learn how to breathe through it. Use your breath in a way that creates feelings of ease in the body. His beginning instructions on breath meditation focus on creating a sense of ease and rapture simply by the way you breathe, allowing those feelings to saturate the entire body. This physical ease then helps put the mind at ease as well. In other words, you're using bodily fabrication to create a healthy mental fabrication, in the form of feeling, which puts you in a position where you can engage in more skillful ways of verbal fabrication, along with mental fabrication in the form of perception.

Skillful verbal fabrication, in terms of the processes of directed thought and evaluation, can help first by finding the best way to breathe so as to alleviate the inner tension of the anger. Then, as they work together with skillful perceptions, they can help you find a skillful way to frame the issue with which you're faced. You can look at your thoughts of anger with more objectivity, and ask yourself, "What in this particular feeling of anger is really useful?" Is there something in the situation you're facing that needs to be changed? How can you do that skillfully? What reactions would be best postponed? Which aspects in the situation can simply be let go? When you're operating from a basis of physical ease, it's a lot easier to examine your emotion and answer these questions in an objective way.

The Buddha's analogy of the lump of salt plays a direct role in this process. Instead of letting you perceive yourself as immune to the dangers of letting your mind stay in a limited state, it reminds you that you can't afford to indulge in hatred and ill will. You have to evaluate the situation in terms of your need for your own good will to protect yourself from bad karma.

Part of this protection is to look for the good points of the person you're angry at. Here the Buddha provides an even more graphic analogy to remind you of why this approach is not mere sentimentality: If you see someone who's been really nasty to you in his words and deeds but has moments of honesty and good will, it's as if you're walking along in the desert—hot, trembling, thirsty—and you come across a cow footprint with a little bit of water in it. Now what do you do? You can't scoop the water up with your hand because that would muddy it. Instead you get down on your hands and knees, and very carefully slurp it up. The other person's good intentions, even if fleeting, are *that* valuable.

Notice your position in this image. You're going through the desert; you're hot and trembling. You need water. If all you focus on are the bad points of other people, you're going to feel even more oppressed with the heat and the thirst. You'll get bitter about the

human race and see no need to treat it well. But if you can see the good in other people, you find it easier to treat them skillfully. This means that the good points of other people are like water for your heart. Learn how to focus on them because you need them to nourish your own goodness now and on into the future.

If, however, the person you're angry about has no good qualities at all, then the Buddha recommends another analogy: Think of that person as a sick man you've found on the side of the road, far away from any help. You have to feel compassion for him and do whatever you can to get him to safety. In the same way, if a person is acting in totally unskillful ways, you have to feel compassion for the suffering he or she is creating for the future, and focus on what you can do to help that person to change his or her unskillful ways.

When you bring these perceptions to bear on your unskillful emotion, they allow you to frame the issues around it so that you can more easily deconstruct it and construct a skillful emotion in its place.

Because emotions contain these elements of thought, evaluation, and perception—they're not totally preverbal, as we sometimes assume—we can thus use our knowledge of karma and fabrication to shape these elements in the direction we want. Our knowledge of the *what* and *why* of the brahmaviharas helps us master the *how*. This is why head teachings are needed even in matters of the heart. At the same time, because we've sensitized ourselves to the role that the breath plays in shaping emotion, we can make a genuine change in how we actually feel about these matters in the body. We're not playing make believe. Our change of heart becomes genuine.

This helps get away from the feeling of hypocrisy that can sometimes envelop the practice of the brahmaviharas. Instead of denying our original feelings of anger or distress in any given situation, smothering them with a mass of cotton candy or marshmallow cream, we actually get more closely in touch with them so that we can skillfully reshape them.

All too often we think that getting in touch with our emotions is a means of tapping into who we really are—that we've been divorced from our true nature, and that by getting back in touch with our emotions we'll get back in touch with our true identity. But your emotions are not your true nature; they're just as fabricated as anything else in the world. Because they're fabricated, the real issue is to learn how to fabricate them skillfully, so they don't lead to trouble and can instead lead to a trustworthy happiness. They're not ends; they're means.

That's the important point you need to remember about emotions: They cause you to act. They're paths leading to good or bad kamma. If you follow an unskillful emotion, you'll create trouble for yourself or others. For that reason you want to learn how to detect all your unskillful emotions so that you can take them apart in terms of these elements of fabrication—breath, directed thought and evaluation, perception and feelings—and reassemble them into something better. As you learn to see them as paths, you can make them into a path you can trust.

When you can learn how to deconstruct emotions of ill will, hard-heartedness, resentment, and distress, and reconstruct the brahmaviharas in their place, you don't simply attain an unlimited heart. You gain practice in mastering the processes of fabrication. As the Buddha says, that mastery leads first to strong and blissful states of concentration. From there it can fabricate all the factors of the path leading to the point of all the Buddha's teachings, whether for head or for heart: the total happiness of nirvana, unconditionally true.

Which simply goes to show that if you get your head and your heart to talk to each other, they can take each other far. Your heart needs the help of your head to generate and act on more skillful emotions. Your head needs your heart to remind you that what's really important in life is how to put an end to suffering. When they learn how to work together, they can make your human mind into an unlimited brahma mind. And more: They can master the causes of happiness to the point where they transcend themselves, touching an uncaused dimension that the head can't encompass, and a happiness so true that the heart has no further need for desire.