

The Limits of the Unlimited Attitudes

THE BRAHMAVIHARAS ON THE PATH TO AWAKENING

The first meditation instructions given to a child raised in a Theravada Buddhist family usually focus on the practice of *metta*, or goodwill. The parents teach the child to spread thoughts of goodwill—a wish for happiness—to all living beings every night before going to sleep.

As the child grows older, the instructions are expanded to include three other attitudes, which—along with *metta*—are called the *brahmaviharas* when these attitudes are developed in an unlimited way. The term *brahmavihara* is a combination of two words: *brahma*, which is a being on a high level of heaven, plus *vihara*, which literally means “dwelling,” and figuratively “attitude”—an attitude in which the mind habitually dwells. The *brahmaviharas* are the habitual attitudes of beings on a high plane of existence.

Unlimited *metta* is the first of the four attitudes, the other three being unlimited *karuna*, or compassion—a wish that suffering and the causes of suffering will end; unlimited *mudita*, or empathetic joy—a wish that happiness and the causes of happiness will continue; and unlimited *upekkha*, or equanimity—an impartial acceptance of what can't be changed.

These attitudes are unlimited in the sense that they're extended to all beings everywhere—including oneself—without bias. Because human beings aren't on the level of the brahmas, they don't automatically dwell in these attitudes in an unlimited way. They tend to feel them more strongly for some living beings than for others. However, human beings can make these attitudes unlimited through conscious practice, and in that way lift their minds to a higher level.

If the child doesn't take any further interest in meditation, he or she will probably equate *metta* or the *brahmaviharas* with meditation throughout life. In fact, in Thailand, where the language has a tendency to string words of similar meaning together, the words *metta* and *bhavana*—“meditation”—are a common string. And the attitudes of the *brahmaviharas* are highly regarded throughout the culture. I've even known Thai Christians who insist that the *brahmaviharas* are not a specifically Buddhist teaching. Respect for the *brahmaviharas* is part of being Thai.

If the child *does* take further interest in meditation as he or she gets older, the development of the *brahmaviharas* provides the framework for whatever other practice he or she may specialize in. Ajaan Mun, the founder of the Wilderness tradition, specialized in contemplation of the body, but he is said to have spent time developing the *brahmaviharas* three times a day: when waking up in the morning, when waking up from his afternoon nap, and just before going to sleep at night. He taught one of his students, Ajaan Khao, a chant expressing the attitudes of the *brahmaviharas* directed to all the classifications of beings in all directions throughout the cosmos, a chant that takes a good half-hour to recite. Ajaan Lee, another of his students—who specialized in breath meditation—

popularized another chant focused on the brahmaviharas that takes a similar amount of time to recite.

When you look into the Pali Canon—the source texts for the Theravada tradition—it’s easy to see why the brahmaviharas are given so much importance in the living tradition, for there the brahmaviharas are connected to all three aspects of the path to the end of suffering: virtue, concentration, and discernment.

For virtue, the brahmaviharas provide the motivation. You undertake the precepts because both because you have compassion for others (Ud 2:3) and because you have goodwill for yourself (Ud 5:1). The Buddha once taught the brahmaviharas to a group of non-Buddhists—who weren’t sure whether actions lead to results beyond this lifetime, or even if there was a life beyond this—telling them that if they practiced in line with these attitudes, they would have nothing to fear if actions did lead to results beyond this lifetime. If there was no life after death, they could still view themselves as pure in terms of their conduct here and now (AN 3:65). In another case, the Buddha taught that if you realize that you’ve harmed another person through your misconduct, you should realize that remorse will not undo the harm. Instead, you should recognize the mistake, resolve not to repeat it, and then develop the brahmaviharas as a way of strengthening your resolve (SN 42:8).

In developing concentration, the connection with the brahmaviharas is even more direct. The Buddha taught the brahmaviharas as themes on which the mind can focus to develop strong states of mental absorption, called the four *jhanas*. One discourse (AN 8:63) suggest that each of the brahmaviharas can lead all the way to the fourth jhana; two other discourses read in conjunction (AN 4:123 and 4:125) suggest that the first brahmavihara can lead only to the first jhana, the second only to the second, and so on up to the fourth. But in either case, because these jhanas count as right concentration in the noble eightfold path, any of the four brahmaviharas can play an integral role in the path to the end of suffering.

As for discernment, the Canon contains two types of discussions on how the concentration based on the brahmaviharas can act as a basis for discernment. The first type focuses on how a meditator should contemplate the concentration that results from any of the brahmaviharas. In two cases, the Canon recommends reflecting like this (taking goodwill as an example): “One reflects on this [state of concentration] and discerns, ‘This awareness-release through goodwill is fabricated & intended. Now whatever is fabricated & intended is inconstant & subject to cessation.’” (MN 52; AN 11:17) In another case, the recommended reflection is this: “One regards whatever phenomena there that are connected with form, feeling, perception, fabrications, & consciousness, as inconstant, stressful, a disease, a cancer, an arrow, painful, an affliction, alien, a disintegration, an emptiness, not-self.” (AN 4:126)

In both cases, the realization that these refined states of concentration are inconstant, stressful, and not-self can give rise to a sense of dispassion and disenchantment not only for them, but also for all fabricated things. The sense of dispassion can then lead to all-around release.

The second type of discussion on the relationship between discernment and the brahmaviharas (SN 46:54) focuses on the mental qualities that can be combined with the concentration based on the brahmaviharas to lead it beyond the four jhanas. These qualities are the seven factors for awakening—mindfulness, analysis

of qualities, persistence, rapture, serenity, concentration, and equanimity—brought to a heightened pitch so that they are “dependent on seclusion, dependent on dispassion, dependent on cessation, resulting in letting go.” Ordinarily, the seven factors for awakening are used to give rise to jhana, but the fact that in this case they are dependent on dispassion and cessation means that they have been refined through the contemplations mentioned in the first type of discussion: in other words, the sort of contemplation that leads through dispassion to release. For instance, you can develop a state of jhana based on one of the brahmaviharas and then—in light of your realization that it’s fabricated or stressful—analyze its qualities as they’re actually present to develop this knowledge to the level of insight where you’re really willing to let go.

According to SN 46:54, when the brahmaviharas are combined with the seven factors for awakening to the point of letting go in this way, they can lead at the very least from the four jhanas to even higher stages of concentration. For example, empathetic joy in this combination can lead beyond the fourth jhana to the a state of concentration called the “dimension of the infinitude of consciousness.” Equanimity in this combination can lead even further to a state called the “dimension of nothingness.” But SN 46:54 adds, without further explanation, that these combinations can lead still higher than that. Now, because other passages (such as MN 118) say that the seven factors for awakening dependent on seclusion, etc., can to lead all the way to full awakening, it’s easy to conclude that when they’re combined with the brahmaviharas they can lead that far as well.

So it’s clear that Theravada, both in its living tradition and in its source texts, has long given a great deal of importance to the brahmaviharas, both as a basic set of attitudes to be practiced by all human beings who hope to raise their minds to a higher-than-human happiness, and as part of the path of practice leading to the highest happiness of all: nibbana.

But recently a number of Western scholars and meditation teachers have advanced the claim that the tradition has underestimated the importance of the brahmaviharas; that the brahmaviharas are not just *part* of the path to nibbana. They can act as the *whole* path. All you need to do is develop the brahmaviharas and they’ll take you all the way to awakening.

This argument takes as its scholarly basis two passages in the Canon. In the first passage, which is found in DN 13, the Buddha teaches the brahmaviharas to two young brahmins who have asked him how to attain union with Brahma. The argument based on this passage states that the Buddha is here using the phrase “union with Brahma” as a synonym for nibbana. This means that the brahmaviharas can lead all the way to nibbana. People advancing this argument admit that this interpretation requires a fair amount of reading between the lines, for the Buddha nowhere states explicitly that union with Brahma is another term for nibbana. However, they feel that the argument can be justified by a knowledge of the context in which the Buddha taught—a context of which the living tradition has long been ignorant, but which has now been uncovered by modern scholarship. Once this reading of the first passage is accepted, the second passage (Sn 1:8)—which we will examine below—can be interpreted as supporting it.

This interpretation has profound implications for anyone wanting to reach the end of suffering. If it's true, there would be no need to bother with the contemplations of inconstancy, stress, and not-self; and no need to bother with the more advanced forms of the factors for awakening. If it's not true, though, then anyone who followed it would risk missing out on the opportunity to reach any of the stages of awakening in his lifetime. So it's important to examine the basis for this interpretation, as well as its consistency with the rest of the Canon, to see if what's read *between* the lines in DN 13 is consistent with what's stated *in* the lines of the other canonical discourses treating the brahmaviharas and the results to which they lead. If it is consistent, then the interpretation is worthy of credence. If not, it's not.

DN 13 is a long discourse that begins with an unusual incident. Two young brahmins, quoting different brahmanical teachers, are unable to agree on the path leading to union with Brahma, their highest religious goal. So they decide to take the question to the Buddha, for they have heard that the Buddha claims knowledge of this path. Now, according to brahmanical orthodoxy, this is something no good brahmin would ever do, because the Buddha was not a brahmin, and brahmins would never go to non-brahmins for spiritual advice. This point of orthodoxy has led some modern scholars to conclude that the entire discourse is meant to be ironical and tongue-in-cheek. However, the Pali Canon is full of brahmins coming to the Buddha for advice on spiritual matters of all sorts, and many became Buddhist monks or lay-followers as a result. So it would seem that brahmanical orthodoxy was not always strictly observed in the Buddha's time—which we know was a time of great spiritual upheaval—and the incident at the beginning of DN 13 might not have been as outlandish as brahmanical orthodoxy would make it seem.

On hearing the question of the two brahmins, the Buddha agrees to teach them the way to union with Brahma. He begins undiplomatically with a put-down of the brahmanical priesthood as a whole, saying that their tradition is no better than a string of blind people led by a blind person, or a man building a stairway to a palace whose location he doesn't know. In other words, none of the brahmin teachers who teach the path leading to union with Brahma have ever experienced union with Brahma, so they don't know what they're talking about.

The Buddha then launches into his discussion of that path. He starts with a detailed description of the precepts of a Buddhist monk—a description that parallels word for word a description that he gives in several other discourses (such as DN 2 through DN 12) on the path leading to awakening. But then, when coming to the topic of meditation, the description reaches a fork in the road. The parallel passages at this point include a discussion of the four jhanas, followed by the powers that can be developed based on the jhanas, including the development of insight into the four noble truths, followed by total release in the here-and-now. In DN 13, however, this account is replaced with an account of the four brahmaviharas, followed by the statement that if they are developed, then after death the meditator can expect to attain union with Brahma.

The traditional interpretation of this discourses takes it at face value: The Buddha is teaching the two brahmins how to reach the goal of their religion, even though their goal is inferior to nibbana. Read in conjunction with DN 2 through DN 12, DN 13 is thus an obvious assertion of the Buddha's superiority to the brahmins. Not only does he know the path to their goal—a path that they

themselves don't know—but he also knows the path to a superior destination: the ultimate goal of total release in the here-and-now.

The more recent interpretation of DN 13, however, is that it has to be read in conjunction with the *Brhad-aranyaka Upanisad*, a brahmanical text of which the Theravada tradition has long been ignorant. The *Brhad-aranyaka Upanisad* asserts that the brahma worlds are the ultimate spiritual goal, the only post-mortem destination from which the soul does not return. The Buddha, in using the phrase, “union with Brahma,” is referring to these brahma worlds and is also adopting the idea that they are the ultimate goal, replacing the brahmanical conception of what constitutes that goal with his own. In other words, he's being ironic. When teaching the way to union with Brahma, he's actually teaching the way to nibbana. This means that the brahmaviharas, on their own and without any other steps of meditation, lead all the way to nibbana.

If this interpretation holds, then SN 1:8 could conceivably be read in support of it. This discourse gives a detailed description of how to develop the first brahmavihara, unlimited goodwill, followed by this passage:

*Not taken with views,
but virtuous & consummate in vision,
having subdued desire for sensual pleasures,
one never again
will lie in the womb.*

The phrase “never again will lie in the womb” is a description of the result of the penultimate level of awakening, called non-return. A person who reaches this level will never again be reborn in this world, and instead will be reborn in one of the brahma worlds called the Pure Abodes, where only non-returners are born and where they all are destined to reach full awakening.

As for practices listed in this passage—not being taken with views, being virtuous, being consummate in vision, and having subdued desire for sensual pleasures—there is no explanation of how they relate to the practice of unlimited goodwill: whether they automatically happen as part of that practice, or have to be added on top of it to reach the level of non-return. The traditional interpretation of the passage adopts the second reading. Just as the description of the practice of unlimited goodwill in this discourse is prefaced by a number of practices that have to be done separately to provide a foundation for the practice of unlimited goodwill, that description is followed by a series of other practices that have to be done separately in addition to it to reach awakening. However, if we can accept the new reading of DN 13, then it's possible that the other interpretation could be right: Unlimited goodwill automatically encompasses these practices.

The problem, however, is that the new interpretation of DN 13 is drastically inconsistent with many other passages in the Canon that explicitly stress the limitations of the brahmaviharas and the brahma worlds to which they lead and where union with Brahma is attained.

To begin with, AN 4:125 states that each of the brahmaviharas, when practiced on its own, leads to rebirth in a particular brahma world, with goodwill leading to the lowest of the four—the Abhassara, or Radiant brahmas—and

equanimity leading to the highest, the Vehapphala, or Sky-fruit brahmas. DN 1 indicates that these levels are higher than the heaven of the Great Brahma, and although they are not destroyed with the destruction of the rest of the universe at the end of each cosmic cycle, the beings who live there can still fall from there and be reborn elsewhere, usually on a lower plane in the universe. In fact, AN 4:125 states explicitly that a person who practices the brahmaviharas without having become a noble disciple—in other words, without having reached the first level of awakening—can, after having lived out the life span of a brahma in any of these four brahma worlds, be reborn in any of the lowest realms of the cosmos: in hell, as an animal, or as a hungry ghost. So from the testimony of these discourses, it's hard to see how the attainment of a brahma world could be equal to nibbana, which constitutes total release from the cosmos as a whole.

The modern interpretation, however, asserts that these discourses shouldn't really be taken seriously because they were later additions to the Canon, composed by literal-minded monks who didn't understand the Buddha's ironic tone when referring to "union with Brahma" and "brahma worlds" in discourses like DN 13. However, there's no proof that DN 13 is any earlier or more authentic than DN 1 or AN 4:125, so the assertion of which discourses came first is nothing more than idle speculation.

But two other discourses show clearly that the difference between nibbana and union with Brahma is anything but an idle issue, for it touches on the long-term consequences of choices made at the moment of death. Both discourses state clearly that if a dying person has his mind set on any of the brahma worlds, he should be told the drawbacks of those worlds so that he can set his mind on the higher goal of release.

The first discourse, MN 97, makes this point in a fairly poignant manner. The brahman Dhanañjanin, a former student of Sariputta, is dying and asks for Sariputta to visit him. Dhanañjanin has been negligent as a meditator, and Sariputta, on arrival, reflects, "These brahmins are set on the brahma world. What if I were to teach Dhanañjanin the brahman the path to union with the brahmas?" So he teaches him the way to union with the brahmas, and Dhanañjanin, on dying, is actually reborn in a brahma world. However, when Sariputta returns to the Buddha, the latter chides him for directing Dhanañjanin to an inferior goal at the moment of death when he could have directed him to a higher one.

This, of course, raises the question as to why the Buddha would have limited his discussion with the two young brahmins to this inferior goal, and yet criticizes Sariputta for doing just the same thing. This question, though, ignores a crucial difference: Sariputta's instructions were Dhanañjanin's last chance to hear the Dhamma in this lifetime, whereas the Buddha, when teaching the young brahmins, could use his knowledge of the way to the brahma world to induce them to return to him later for more instructions on higher attainments.

The second discourse (SN 55:54) explains why the brahma worlds are an inferior attainment. In this discourse, the Buddha's cousin, Mahanama asks the Buddha for instructions on how to advise a wise person who is about to die. The Buddha replies that if the dying person is plagued by worries about his family, he should be reminded that his worries at this point cannot help his family, so he should let those worries go. If he is fixated on human sensual pleasures, he should be told that human sensual pleasures are no match for the pleasures of the sensual heavens, so he should focus his mind on those heavens instead. If

he's fixated on the pleasures of the sensual heavens, he should be told that even those are inferior to the pleasures of the brahma world, and he should instead focus his thoughts there.

If the dying person is fixated on the brahma world, he should be told that even the brahma world is "inconstant, impermanent, and included in identity." In other worlds, the brahma worlds are unstable, and the beings reborn there still have a sense of identification with the five clinging-aggregates: form, feeling, perception, fabrications, and consciousness. Because this identification is a fetter dropped even on the first stage of awakening, the brahman worlds are inferior to that level of attainment. For this reason, the dying person should be told to focus on the cessation of identification. If he can do that as he dies, then even though he may be a layperson, his release is in no way inferior to the release of a monk whose mind is released.

These two discourses show clearly that the Buddha regarded rebirth in a brahma world as a goal inferior to nibbana. And because the distinction between nibbana and the brahma world is such a serious, life-and-death matter, it's unlikely that the Buddha would have wanted to speak ironically about it, blurring the distinction when talking to the two brahmans in DN 13.

The limitations of the brahma worlds are directly connected to the limitations of the brahmaviharas as a path. This connection is especially clear when we read SN 55:54, the discourse just cited, in conjunction with AN 4:178. This latter discourse points out that it's possible to develop a state of concentration based on the brahmaviharas and yet still feel no interest in bringing an end to identification. This shows that the brahmaviharas on their own are not enough to arouse that interest. Something more is needed—such as the reflection on the inconstancy, stress, and not-selfness of that state of concentration—to arouse the interest needed to bring identification to an end.

Another discourse—MN 106—makes a similar point: that it's possible to develop a strong state of equanimity in the higher levels of concentration and yet still cling to that equanimity. Only when there is the added determination not to fashion a sense of identification around the equanimity (MN 137) can that clinging be abandoned.

So it's obvious that the unlimited attitudes of the brahmaviharas do have at least one limit. On their own, they cannot lead to awakening. As a practice, they can't by themselves bring about dispassion of identification, and so they can lead only to an inferior goal in which identification is present as well.

This means that the new interpretation of DN 13 is unreliable as a guide to practice. It also means that the concluding passage of Sn 1:8 has to be interpreted in the traditional way, as a list of qualities to be developed *in addition to* the brahmaviharas if the concentration based on the brahmaviharas is to lead to any of the stages of awakening.

In other words, the traditional emphasis on the brahmaviharas as a path to awakening is neither too little nor too much. The brahmaviharas can function as part of the path to awakening, but only a part. To attain even the first level of awakening, you have to add other practices to induce the disenchantment and dispassion leading to genuine release.