

A photograph of a cave interior, showing layered rock walls and a central passage. The lighting is warm and focused on the central area, creating a sense of depth and texture in the rock formations. The text "SUBLIME DETERMINATIONS" is overlaid in the center of the image.

SUBLIME
DETERMINATIONS

Sublime
Determinations

A RETREAT ON THE BRAHMAVIHĀRAS

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WITH THE SOCIEDADE VIPASSANA DE MEDITAÇÃO
BRASÍLIA

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Pre-Retreat Reading

THE KARAṆĪYA METTĀ SUTTA

This is to be done by one skilled in aims
who wants to break through to the state of peace:
Be capable, upright, & straightforward,
easy to instruct, gentle, & not conceited,
content & easy to support,
with few duties, living lightly,
with peaceful faculties, astute,
modest, & no greed for supporters.

Do not do the slightest thing
that the observant would later censure.

Think: *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, gross,
seen & unseen,
living near & far away,
born or seeking birth:
May all beings be happy at heart.
Let no one deceive another
or despise anyone anywhere,
or, through anger or resistance-perception,
wish for another to suffer.

As a mother would risk her life
to protect her child, her only child,
even so should one cultivate the heart limitlessly
with regard to all beings.
With goodwill for the entire cosmos,
cultivate the heart limitlessly:

above, below, & all around,
unobstructed, without hostility or hate.
Whether standing, walking,
sitting, or lying down,
as long as one has banished torpor,
one should be resolved on this mindfulness.
This is called a Brahmā abiding
here.

Not taken with views,
but virtuous & consummate in vision,
having subdued greed for sensuality,
one never again
will lie in the womb. — *Sutta Nipāta 1:8*

Wednesday — Introduction

Good evening. Welcome to our retreat on the sublime attitudes.

We hope that the retreat will be useful to you all.

The *brahmavihāras*, or sublime attitudes, are attitudes of goodwill, compassion, empathetic joy, and equanimity that you spread to all beings, without limit. In other words, there's no limit to the amount of goodwill, etc., that you spread, and no limit on the number of beings to whom you spread it. Each of these attitudes is an antidote for mental states that can get in the way of training the mind. For this reason, they play an important role in fostering the path to the end of suffering.

- Goodwill, *mettā*, a wish that beings will be happy, is an antidote for ill will, the desire to see beings suffer. Notice that we don't translate *mettā* as love or loving-kindness, because, as the Buddha pointed out, love is partial, and can easily turn into hatred. When you're advised to develop universal *mettā*, you're not being asked to love everyone, or even to like everyone. Instead, you're simply asked not to want to see anyone suffer, regardless of whether you like that person or not.

- Compassion, *karuṇā*, a wish that those who are suffering will be freed from their suffering, is an antidote to cruelty, the desire to actually harm others when they're down.

- Empathetic joy, *muditā*, a wish that those who are already happy will continue to be happy, is an antidote to resentment and envy.

- Equanimity, *upekkhā*, the ability to maintain the mind on an even keel when events don't fall in line with your goodwill, is an antidote to irritation.

These attitudes boil down to two—goodwill and equanimity—in that compassion and empathetic joy are basically extensions of goodwill. Compassion is what goodwill feels when encountering suffering; empathetic joy is what goodwill feels when encountering those who are already happy. The Buddha may have separated them out from goodwill in his list of the *brahmavihāras* because they're good checks for the honesty and truthfulness of your goodwill. If someone whose behavior you don't like is suffering the consequences of that behavior, is your goodwill sincere enough to want to see their suffering end? If someone whose behavior you don't like is enjoying the fruits of past good actions, can you honestly say that you're happy for that person?

Equanimity is the backup for cases where, for the time being at least, there's nothing you can do to stop people from suffering or creating the causes of suffering. This means that you develop each of these qualities where appropriate. You don't regard equanimity as the goal of the practice. It always has to be based on goodwill so that it doesn't shade into apathy or indifference.

Notice that you practice developing these attitudes toward all beings—including yourself. To do this, you have to develop them consciously, because in the normal human heart these attitudes tend to be partial. It's easy to feel goodwill, for example, for those you like, or equanimity toward those who have no connection to you. But it requires a conscious effort to be able to maintain these attitudes toward anyone and everyone. It's not the case that the brahmavihāras are the heart's innate nature. After all, their opposites can come just as naturally to the heart. It's just as natural to feel ill will for those who have betrayed you or people you love as it is natural to feel goodwill for those who behave in ways you like. It's just as natural to get irritated when things don't go your way as it is to be equanimous when nothing disturbs you.

So in making your goodwill and equanimity limitless, you're learning to take these human attitudes that tend to be partial and to intentionally erase any trace of partiality in how you apply them. In doing so, you lift your human mind to the level of the Brahmās, the highest level of heavenly beings, who have developed the sublime attitudes to the point where they can extend them to everyone, no matter who, no matter where.

Because this takes effort, and because you have to keep these heightened attitudes in mind, the Karaṇīya Mettā Sutta tells you to determine on goodwill as a form of mindfulness, i.e., something you have to keep in mind. This point applies to all four brahmavihāras.

When it says to determine on these things, it's good to remember what the Pali Canon has to say about determination.

Determination has four components: discernment, truth, generosity, and calm

When we look into the way the practice around goodwill is described in the Karaṇīya Mettā Sutta, we can find all four.

Discernment: In the first line of the poem, it refers to what should be done by those who *appreciate the state of peace as the most skillful aim*. This is a reference to the third noble truth, the truth of the cessation of suffering. The Canon notes that you can practice the brahmavihāras in

two ways: to lead to rebirth in the Brahmā worlds, or as part of a larger, nobler practice that develops the skills of the noble eightfold path, leading to the total end of suffering, free from rebirth anywhere at all. In particular, the brahmavihāras strengthen three of the factors of the path: right resolve, right mindfulness, and right concentration. If you're really discerning, you'll want to practice the brahmavihāras for the noble goal of the end of suffering. That's how we'll explain them here.

In particular, it's important to note the relationship between the brahmavihāras and right resolve: This is where your heart enters into the practice, so that it's not just an intellectual exercise. As you foster a mature desire for true happiness, and you see at the same time so much suffering around you, it impresses on the heart the need to find a way of practice that really leads to a way to put suffering to an end. So just as the noble path takes the brahmavihāras to a higher level, the brahmavihāras help strengthen the path in its work.

Truth is defined as not being deceptive, i.e., not changing into something else. In English, we say that you're true to your primary intention. According to the Karaṇīya Mettā Sutta, the brahmavihāras are true in that they're attitudes to be maintained in all postures: *sitting, standing, walking, and lying down, as long as you're awake.*

To be true to the brahmavihāras, you also have to carry through with precepts. This relates to the lines, *"Don't do slightest thing that the observant would later censure,"* and *"Be upright, straightforward."*

In other words, for the brahmavihāras to be genuine, they have to show in your actions. This means:

You don't harm anyone.

You don't harm yourself by breaking precepts or provoking passion, aversion, and delusion in yourself.

You don't harm others by getting them to break precepts or by provoking passion, aversion, and delusion in them. Remember: you appreciate the state of peace, and you want others, for their own well-being, to appreciate it, too.

Generosity: The extension of goodwill, etc., to all is done for free. You're not asking for anything in return from the people you give it to. You don't give it only to people you think "deserve" your goodwill. As with all forms of generosity, the Buddha defines this expansive attitude as a form of wealth: When you give happily, you gain a generous heart in return. This is why it's to be protected as mother would protect only child. In this case, the brahmavihāras are a form of a wealth you can

create from within your own heart without having to take anything away from anyone else. The more you create and extend to others, the richer you are.

Calm: In the words of the Karaṇīya Mettā Sutta, you're:

*"easy to instruct, gentle, not conceited,
content, easy to support,
with few duties, living lightly,
peaceful faculties, modest"*

The phrase "*peaceful faculties*" refers to the practice of sense restraint.

Not conceited: When developing compassion, you don't look down on people who are poor or suffering

Content: You're content with material requisites that are enough for the sake of the practice. However, you're NOT content to watch unskillful states arise in your mind. That's an area where the Buddha said you should practice staying discontent until you've freed yourself from suffering.

Not taken with views: You don't hold to views that are designed to lead to arguments—such as views addressing the question as to whether the world was or wasn't created by a god or by how many gods. These views don't just stay in cafés. They can get people to attack one another.

Instead, you're *consummate in vision:* You see clearly what's skillful, what's not, and, in particular, what needs to be done to put an end to suffering. This is a way of seeing things that gets you out of arguments and focused on your own behavior.

In this way, calm leads back to discernment.

So as you can see, developing the brahmavihāras requires more than just sitting here and repeating phrases, "May all beings be happy." It requires that you understand what you're doing:

how to develop and maintain a mind state, and
how beings will actually become happy.

It also requires that you live in a way that is in harmony with a genuine expression of the brahmavihāras.

So, during this retreat, in addition to spending time taking the brahmavihāras as a meditative theme, we'll also be discussing issues of discernment, truth, generosity, and calm as they relate to keeping

yourself determined to be constantly mindful of the brahmavihāras in thought, word, and deed.

This evening, we'll focus on getting started on how to develop goodwill as a mind state.

You may remember from our previous retreats that there are three types of fabrication:

bodily—the in-and-out breath,
verbal—the way you talk to yourself, and
mental—perceptions and feelings.

To extend a wish that others will be happy, you have to be able to make yourself happy—to provide yourself with a sense of well-being through these three forms of fabrication.

We can do that by first focusing on the breath. This will be our basic meditation method throughout the retreat—getting centered with a sense of well-being focused on breath, then using verbal and mental fabrication to extend the wish that others will experience well-being as well. We recommend that you go back and forth between these two themes of meditation—thinking thoughts of the brahmavihāras to clear the mind, then focusing on the breath to give a sense of well-being, and then using that strengthened concentration and mindfulness to give more power to your goodwill, etc., then back to the breath, and so forth. That way, you strengthen both your practice of breath meditation and your practice of the brahmavihāras.

So let's finish this evening with a guided meditation.

Thursday — Goodwill

As we noted last night, goodwill as a brahmavihāra is a wish that all beings will be happy. It's an antidote for ill will, the desire to see beings suffer.

As we also noted, it's not an innate quality in the human mind. Human goodwill tends to be partial to those you like.

For goodwill to become a brahmavihāra, you have to learn how to extend it to everyone, in all situations. That requires mindfulness and determination. Mindfulness is the ability to keep this attitude in mind. Determination involves four qualities: discernment, truth, generosity, and calm.

Discernment here means looking at the issue of happiness in terms of right view.

First, there's right view about what might be called the kamma of happiness, the principle that for beings to be happy, their happiness has to be based on their own actions.

This is why, in the Karaṇīya Mettā Sutta, the expression of goodwill is not just:

*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, gross,
seen & unseen,
living near & far away,
born or seeking birth:
May all beings be happy at heart.*

It also goes on to say:

*Let no one deceive another
or despise anyone anywhere,
or, through anger or resistance-perception,
wish for another to suffer.*

In other words, the mature and wise expression of goodwill sees that other beings will be truly happy only if they have goodwill for others, too.

So a skillful expression of goodwill is: “May all beings understand the causes for true happiness and be willing and able to act on them.”

This is an attitude you can extend to anyone without hypocrisy, even to people who have been cruel and heartless in their behavior.

Now, there may be people you would like to see suffer or be punished a little bit for their past misdeeds before they become happy, but you have to ask yourself: Why? What good would be gained by that? Would that punishment actually make them see more clearly the error of their ways? Often suffering makes people even more insistent that they were right to begin with.

Think of yourself: You know you have some bad kamma in your past. Would you want to be punished for those actions first before you can be happy? Of course not. You’d like to have the chance to come to your senses first, so extend the same forgiveness to others.

As the Buddha said, if we all had to be punished for our past bad actions before gaining awakening, no one would ever gain awakening.

Most of the cruelty in the world comes from people who are suffering and fearful. It would be better to wish that they willingly see the error of their ways and willingly change how they act.

You can then rejoice in that. In the Buddha’s image, such a person brightens the world in the same way that the moon brightens the night when it’s released from a cloud.

In addition to providing insight into the kamma of happiness—what it means to wish that beings be happy—discernment also has to apply to what it means to express goodwill in your words and deeds. It does NOT mean doing what people like, or trying to please them all the time. The Buddha doesn’t teach you to be a doormat. You have to think about the other person’s genuine well-being, which the person him- or herself may not even realize. Remember: *Appreciating the state of peace*, and hoping that other people will find that peace, too, you try to get them to observe precepts and to lessen the amount of greed, aversion, and delusion in their minds.

These are some of the ways in which discernment helps to determine on goodwill as a brahmavihāra.

As for **truth**: To be truthful in your goodwill, you have to be able to maintain it at all times. This requires that you learn how to talk to

yourself in ways that can maintain goodwill even when others mistreat you. This is why goodwill is often discussed together with patience. You may remember the story of Lady Vedehikā from our retreat on the ten perfections: the woman who hit her slave in the head with a rolling pin. It was because of her lack of forbearance that her good reputation was ruined.

Given this need for strength in your patience and goodwill, the Buddha uses many images and perceptions—mental fabrications—to remind you to stay strong and unwavering in your goodwill no matter what.

Think of his image of bandits cutting you into pieces with a two-handed saw: Even then you should have goodwill for them. That way, if you were to die at that time, at the very least you would die with your mind in a skillful state. The survival of your goodness is much more important than the survival of the body. If you die with thoughts of ill will, those would pull you to a rebirth motivated by thoughts of revenge—and that wouldn't be a happy rebirth.

Then think of the Buddha's image of the mother protecting her only son. In those days, a woman's best guarantee for future safety was to have a son. Without him, her life was in danger. If her husband were to die, she'd have no protection at all. So she would protect her baby son in every way possible. In the same way, you should protect your goodwill as your guarantee for future safety. If you allow yourself to abandon your goodwill, you're putting yourself in danger.

Think also of the Buddha's image of goodwill as large as the Earth, greater and vaster than the actions of other beings. It's a strength, not a gentle attitude for weak people to develop. Think of the story of Ajaan Lee fighting off an elephant with his goodwill, or fighting off hordes of mosquitoes with goodwill, "with no holds barred."

Think also of the Buddha's image of goodwill as being like space. People can try to write things in space, but there's no surface on which their writings could stick. In the same way, don't let people's bad words or actions stick in your mind. Don't carry them around and ruminate on them. Just let them vanish.

When someone close to you does something displeasing, think of the good things that person has done: This makes it easier to feel goodwill for that person. Like a monk looking for pieces of cloth to make a robe, and who finds a piece of cloth that's partly dirty: He tears off the good, clean part and leaves the dirty part aside. In other words, the monk benefits by knowing what to take and what not to take.

If you can't think of anything good the person has done, think of him or her as being like a sick person on the side of the road in a desolate place: You have to have compassion for such a person.

The purpose of all these images and perceptions—which, as I noted, are mental fabrications—is to help you maintain your goodwill independently of other people's actions. Remember: If your goodness depends on other people being good, then it's not secure, and you yourself can't trust it.

Now, this doesn't mean that you go out of your way to help other people when they abuse your help. Remember, one of the best ways to help others is to get them to act wisely. If you can't do that, maybe it's time to go your separate ways, wishing the other person well, but staying out of each other's lives.

Ajaan Fuang, my teacher, once discovered that a snake had moved into his room. Every time he entered the room, he saw it slip into a narrow space behind a storage cabinet. Even though he tried leaving the door to the room open during the daytime, the snake wasn't willing to leave. So for three days they lived together. He was very careful not to startle the snake or make it feel threatened by his presence. But finally on the evening of the third day, as he was sitting in meditation, he addressed the snake quietly in his mind. He said, "Look, it's not that I don't like you, but our minds work in different ways. It'd be very easy for there to be a misunderstanding between us. Now, there are plenty of places out in the woods where you can live without the uneasiness of living with me." And as he sat there spreading thoughts of goodwill to the snake, the snake left.

If Ajaan Fuang had tried to show lovingkindness to the snake by petting it, the snake would have probably felt fearful and would have bitten him. So the lesson here is that when you meet with human snakes—and we've all met many of them in our lives—often the kindest thing to do is to wish the other person well and to go your separate ways. Or, if you have to live together, you have to establish clear boundaries.

That's how truth helps to determine on goodwill as a brahmavihāra.

As for **generosity**: Goodwill, to be a brahmavihāra, has to be freely given as a gift. It's not just for people who "deserve" to be happy. "Deserving" and "not-deserving" don't come into the issue at all. Think of Buddha's goodwill: He didn't teach the end of suffering only to people who didn't deserve to suffer. If he had, he wouldn't have found anyone to teach.

So you give goodwill freely to all. As the Karaṇīya Mettā Sutta says, you extend it to:

*Whatever beings there may be,
weak or strong, without exception,
long, large,
middling, short,
subtle, gross,
seen & unseen,
living near & far away,
born or seeking birth:*

In the Buddhist understanding of action, giving a gift is seen as a trade: You give the gift and get something good in return. What you get depends not only on the gift, but also on your motivation and attitude while giving.

We can apply Buddha's teachings on the levels of *motivation* for giving in general to the gift of goodwill. The higher the motivation, the greater the happiness that results.

The lowest motivation is, "I'll get good kamma coming back to me in future."

In this connection, [AN 11:16](#) lists karmic rewards of goodwill when it's thoroughly cultivated:

"One sleeps easily, wakes easily, dreams no evil dreams. One is dear to human beings, dear to non-human beings. The devas protect one. Neither fire, poison, nor weapons can touch one. One's mind gains concentration quickly. One's complexion is bright. One dies unconfused and—if penetrating no higher—is headed for a Brahmā world."

In terms of protection: There are many stories in the Canon of the Buddha being protected by his goodwill: as when the elephant Nalagiri was let loose to attack him, or when a bandit was hired to assassinate him. In both cases, when they came into the range of his goodwill, they stood still in their tracks. Your goodwill may not be as strong as the Buddha's, but if you consciously develop it, you'll find that there are times when it can unexpectedly get you out of danger.

Some of the higher attitudes are these:

"Goodwill is good."

"I'm happy, it's not right that I don't wish the same happiness to others."

"Goodwill makes the mind serene. Gratification and joy arise."

"Goodwill is an ornament for the mind": In other words, it's a natural expression of a mind that has developed concentration and discernment.

As for your *attitude*, you give goodwill with respect for other beings' desire for happiness.

As with giving in general, you have to use your discernment to figure out, in individual cases, what is the best way to express your goodwill to others. In some cases, it's expressed by loving-kindness. In others, as with Ajaan Fuang and the snake, it's best expressed by leaving the other person alone and wishing him/her well.

One expression of goodwill that's always an appropriate gift is the gift of forgiveness. In one of the standard phrases for goodwill—"May all beings be free from animosity"—the Pali word for animosity, *vera*, is the opposite of forgiveness. It's the vengeful animosity that wants to get back at someone for perceived wrongs. So when we wish that others be free from *vera*, we're saying two things: "May all beings receive forgiveness for their wrong actions," and "May all beings forgive others who have wronged them."

When you forgive others, you're not saying that you're going to love them—or that you're even going to forget the wrong that they did. You're simply saying that you won't try to get back at them.

When you forgive someone who's wronged you, it doesn't erase that person's kamma in having done wrong. This is why some people think that forgiveness has no place in the karmic universe of the Buddha's teachings. But that's not so. Forgiveness may not be able to undo old bad kamma, but by erasing any thoughts of *vera*, it can prevent new bad kamma from being done.

The Dhammapada, a popular collection of early Buddhist poems, speaks of *vera* in two contexts. The first is when someone has injured you, and you'd like to inflict some injury back. The second is when you've lost a contest—in the Buddha's time, this referred primarily to military battles, but now it could be extended to any competition where loss entails harm, whether real or only perceived—and you want to get even. As when Brazil loses to Argentina in soccer.

In both contexts—injury and competition—forgiveness is what puts an end to *vera*. You resolve not to settle the score, even if society grants you the right to do so, because you realize that, from the point of view of

*When you've trained yourself,
living in constant self-control,
neither a deva nor gandhabba,
nor a Mara banded with Brahmas,
could turn that triumph
back into defeat. — [Dhp 103–105](#)*

Other victories can be undone—“settled” scores, in the light of kamma and rebirth, are never really settled—but victory over your own greed, aversion, and delusion is something that lasts. It's the only victory that creates no vera, so it's the only victory that's really safe and secure.

But this isn't a victory you can hope to attain if you're still harboring thoughts of vera. So in a world where we've all been harmed in one way or another, and where we could always find old scores to avenge if we wanted to, the only way to find a truly safe victory in life is to start with thoughts of forgiveness: that you want to pose no danger to anyone at all, regardless of the wrong they've done. This is why forgiveness is not only compatible with the practice of the Buddha's teachings. It's a necessary first step.

That's one important way in which generosity helps in determining on goodwill.

In connection with **calm**, three passages stand out from the Karaṇīya Mettā Sutta:

1. *Santindriyo*: Have peaceful faculties. You have to look carefully at how you engage with the world through your senses. Do you look at it with the eyes of greed, aversion, and delusion? Listen with the ears of greed, aversion, and delusion? If so, you're going to find things that aggravate those attitudes, and it'll be hard to live in peace with others. You have to look at:

- a) your motivation for looking, etc.
- b) the results of how you look, etc., at other people and things.

In other words, see your engagement with the senses as a cause-and-effect process. Then you change the causes—your motivation and what you're looking for—so that their effects don't aggravate the mind.

For example, when you look at a beautiful person: If the way you look at the person aggravates lust or envy, you have to look at the person in another way. What features of that person's body or personality are NOT attractive? Focus on those.

Similarly, when looking at a desirable material object, ask yourself: What would the drawbacks of owning that object be?

2. *Santussako ca subhara ca*: Content and living lightly. You have to look carefully at how you impose on the world with your material needs. Be content with just enough to get by and to practice the Dhamma. If you're greedy for things, it's bound to get you in conflict with others who want the same things—this is why there are conflicts in families and wars between nations. Think about what I just said about winning and losing: It's best to look for happiness in a way where everyone wins, and that's easiest when you can keep your greed, aversion, and delusion under control.

3. *Diṭṭhiñ-ca anupagamma... dassanena sampanno*: Not taken with views, but consummate in vision. What "not taken with views" means is that you don't grab on to views that would get you into conflict with others. Some views actually seem to be designed to create conflict and arguments, such as how the world began. If people believe there's a single god who ordains what has to be done in world, they go around trying to force their views on others.

"Consummate in vision" means that you see clearly what's skillful and what's not: This is designed for you to take as a guide for your own behavior. You don't have to impose it on anyone, and you actually create more peace in world.

In this way, calm comes back to discernment.

It's in these ways that your determination on being mindful of goodwill all the time actually becomes a guide to your activities throughout life, leading to a genuine and lasting happiness, both for yourself and for others.

Friday — Compassion & Empathetic Joy

As I mentioned Wednesday night, the second and third brahmavihāras—compassion and empathetic joy—are expressions of goodwill. Compassion is what goodwill feels when encountering suffering; empathetic joy is what goodwill feels when encountering those who are happy.

We tend to think of these attitudes as being very easy: Of course we feel sorry for people or animals who are suffering. Of course we feel happy when we see other people being happy. But these attitudes are easy only some of the time. In fact, like goodwill, our human level of compassion and empathetic joy tends to be partial. It's easy to feel these attitudes around innocent people who we feel are suffering unjustly or around people we think deserve to be happy.

But for compassion and empathetic joy to become true brahmavihāras, you have to be able to feel them in all situations. When someone who has harmed you or your loved ones, and is now being punished for his or her wrongdoing, you still have to feel compassion for that person, even if you feel the punishment is precisely what that person deserves. When people who are enjoying good fortune abuse that good fortune—say, using their power to create war and mayhem in the world—you can't wish for them to lose their good fortune. A more skillful attitude would be to wish that they would see the error of their ways and then use their good fortune for greater good.

It's cases like these that test the discernment and truth of your determination on goodwill: You say you want all beings to be happy, but are you willing to extend the same wish to people like these? Can you see why it's the wise thing to do? And that it's good for you? When Argentina beats Brazil in soccer, can you be happy for them? When Argentina loses to Guyana, can you feel compassion for them?

The best way to strengthen your discernment and truth in developing these two brahmavihāras is to think about the Buddha's teachings on kamma and rebirth. These teachings provide a context that makes it easier to feel compassion and empathetic joy in difficult situations. They do this by helping you to see why these attitudes are appropriate and actually good for you. In this way, these two brahmavihāras not only test

your discernment, truth, generosity, and calm, but they also make these qualities stronger.

First, kamma: When someone is suffering, you have to reflect on the reasons why people suffer.

Here we have to correct a common misunderstanding about kamma. The Buddha didn't say that our present suffering comes entirely from our past actions. In fact, he actually said that to believe that what you experience now depends solely on past actions is an extreme form of wrong view. He took this point so seriously that—even though he wasn't the sort of person to look for fights—when he heard that other people were teaching this view, he sought them out to argue with them. If you teach that everything depends on past kamma, he said, it leaves your students unprotected and bewildered, for it leaves them with no way of escaping from suffering in the present.

One case involved some Jain ascetics: They claimed that by engaging in extreme asceticism, they were burning off the pains caused by their past bad kamma. So he asked them: "Have you noticed that when you don't engage in asceticism, you don't feel those intense pains?"

They answered, "Yes."

"So how can you say that the pain comes from past action? It comes from what you're doing right now."

The Buddha's actual teaching on kamma is that the pleasures and pains you experience come from a combination of two things: your past actions *and* your present actions. In fact, your present actions are the more important of the two. Past actions provide the raw material from which your present actions shape what you actually experience right now as pleasure or pain.

So when people are suffering in the present moment, the causes come down to two: unskillful actions in the past, or unskillful actions in the present. They either did something harmful in the past, or they're doing something harmful now—either to others, in mistreating them, or to themselves, in how they engage in the three types of fabrication in the present: bodily, verbal, and mental.

If a person is suffering from the results of past bad actions, and you would like to help the person in an external way, what you're hoping is that your help represents the point at which the person's past good actions are beginning to bear fruit, and the past bad actions are beginning to end their influence. This is perfectly praiseworthy, and if you can succeed in helping to improve the external situation, it's all to

the good. But there are times when the person's past bad kamma is still strong. That's when you have to focus on the person's present kamma, and in particular, on the way the person fabricates his or her own experience.

As you may remember, the three fabrications are these: Bodily fabrication is the in-and-out breath. Verbal fabrication is how you talk to yourself. In technical terms, this is called directed thought and evaluation: You direct your thoughts to a topic and then you make comments and ask questions about it. Mental fabrication is perception and feeling: the mental labels you apply to things, and the feeling tones you focus on.

These forms of fabrication take the raw material provided by your past kamma and shape it into what you actually experience in the present moment. It's as if you're a cook. Your past kamma is the raw food and other ingredients in your kitchen. Your present kamma consists of your skills as a cook. If you're a bad cook, you can spoil even good ingredients. If you're a good cook, you can take even garbage and turn it into good food.

So when someone is suffering, the four noble truths teach us that it's not so much from external circumstances. It's because of that person's lack of skill. This is what the Buddha meant when he said that the causes of suffering can be traced to *avijjā*, or ignorance. The ignorance here is not just a matter of not being informed of certain facts about reality. It's ignorance of how to skillfully act in thought, word, and deed.

When we say that people suffer because of their actions, past and present, it means that there's no one in the human world who's really innocent. Even if someone has behaved perfectly in this lifetime, there may be some bad seeds in his or her kamma field from past lifetimes that are now sprouting. Now, this doesn't mean that that person deserves to suffer. And it doesn't mean that you shouldn't feel compassion for that person. If your compassion is so picky that it can go only to innocent people, you won't find anyone to give it to. Accept the fact that the human realm is one where we all have a mixture of past bad kamma and past good kamma. We're all in this together, so we should all have compassion for one another.

And remember that the Buddha never talked about people deserving to suffer. He offered his teachings on how to stop suffering to all beings, no matter what their past kamma was.

He also pointed out that by changing the way you fabricate the present moment, making your attitudes more skillful, you can greatly

weaken the results of past bad kamma. When your mind is well trained, it's as if it's rich and expansive. An untrained mind is narrow and poor. An analogy he gave was this: The results of past bad kamma are like the fine for stealing a goat. If a rich man steals a goat but then gets fined, he can easily pay the fine without feeling any hardship. If a poor man steals a goat, and he has nothing with which he can pay the fine, he gets thrown in jail.

The ways to make the mind rich are these: You train it in virtue, discernment, and the brahmavihāras. You also train the mind so that it's not easily overcome by pleasure or pain. This last ability comes from practice in concentration. You train yourself to master the skills of breathing so that when there are pains in the body, you can use the breath either to dissolve the pains or to give you a place to stay in the body that's not overcome by pain. When pleasure arises in the meditation, you allow it to spread through the body, but you don't let your focus leave the breath to go wallowing in the pleasure, for that would destroy your concentration. When you can master these skills, you can deal with the results of past bad kamma without suffering from them.

So when you see someone who's suffering, you don't just tell yourself that they deserve to keep on suffering. Even if you can't change their external circumstances, you should try to think of what ways they can make their thinking more skillful. In other words, your thought should be: "May this person learn to act in ways that don't cause more suffering." That's the wise expression of compassion.

Otherwise, if you just leave people to their suffering, they're not just sitting there, on the receiving end of suffering. They're engaged in intentions and the processes of fabrication all the time. If they get overwhelmed by their suffering, they can easily start thinking and acting in ways that will cause more suffering. Either they thrash around and make their own suffering worse, or else they get irritable and strike out at the very people who are trying to help them. That's the kind of thing you want to see stop.

So look to see how you might actually help that person learn to fabricate his or her experience in a skillful way. This is why the gift of Dhamma—explaining how to stop suffering—is the highest of gifts. It's also why this gift is the best way to show compassion. You're not trying to make people depend on you for their happiness. You're training them in how to be independent in creating their own well-being. Remember the phrase in the brahmavihāra chant: "May they look after themselves

with ease." You're teaching them the cooking skills they'll need for the rest of their lives.

If people who are suffering can listen and comprehend what you're saying, try to find the best advice for their particular suffering. If you can get them to meditate, so much the better. If not, try to get them to accept the fact that suffering is part of life—think of all the other people who are also suffering right now, and feel goodwill and compassion for them. This helps the person to realize that he or she is not being singled out by the universe to suffer, and that suffering is a universal part of the human condition. This helps the person to expand his or her thoughts, and this can lift the state of that person's mind.

If the person is in really bad shape and can't be taught, then try to create a peaceful atmosphere around the person as best you can, and speak in ways that are soothing and help to allay any anxiety the person might have.

As for empathetic joy, the teaching on kamma also applies. People are happy because of their actions, past and present. Either they did skillful things in the past, or they're fabricating their experience in a skillful way right now, or both.

Now, there are a lot of people who managed to do something good in the past, and are now reaping the rewards of those good actions, but they get complacent, conceited, and careless, thinking that they're better than other people or that the rules of good behavior don't apply to them. Maybe they've seen that they can break the precepts, for instance, without suffering any immediate consequence. If they're very good-looking, maybe they've learned that they can get away with things that ordinary-looking people can't. From our point of view, that's because their past good actions are still bearing fruit. But when they're ignorant of right view, they don't see that. The Pali Canon is full of examples like this, not only on the human realm, but also in the realms of the devas. And I'm sure that you can think of lots of examples from your own life.

So, just as compassion focuses on the wish that people who are suffering will learn how to behave in skillful ways, when you practice empathetic joy, you spread a similar wish to people who are enjoying good fortune: "May these people learn to act in ways that will create even more happiness." In other words, may they learn to find joy in skillful actions, such as practicing generosity, being virtuous, and developing thoughts of goodwill for all.

So, both in the case of compassion and in the case of empathetic joy, the emphasis is on hoping that the people to whom you extend these attitudes will create good kamma in the present—kamma that reduces suffering and extends happiness.

It's in this way that we can see how important it is to remember that pleasure and pain in the present moment are not just the products of past kamma. The actual fact of the matter is that present kamma is more important than past kamma in determining whether a person will experience pleasure or pain in any given situation.

A proper understanding of kamma is necessary because it helps to correct some erroneous ideas that people often have around compassion and empathetic joy. One is the erroneous idea that if people are suffering they deserve to suffer, so you might as well be equanimous and leave them alone. If you ever catch yourself thinking in those terms, remind yourself: 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. Also, you have no idea what other seeds, what 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 moment is the current running balance in each person's account. Actually, no one's karmic history is 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, with 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, because 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 die at any 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. Suppose 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 find yourself thinking 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?

When you really understand kamma, you realize that your own thoughts in the present moment are also a kind of kamma, so you want your attitudes in the present to be as skillful as possible. This includes the kamma you’re creating right now in reaction to other people’s pleasure and pain. If you’re hard-hearted toward somebody’s suffering, someday you may face the same sort of suffering. Would you want people to be hard-hearted toward you? Or if you’re resentful of somebody else’s happiness, someday when you become happy there’s going to be somebody resentful of yours. Is that what you want?

So be mindful to create the kind of kamma that gives the results you’d like to see. As I said, in the case of compassion, this means thinking, “May these people”—and this includes you—“learn to act in ways that don’t cause more suffering.” In the case of empathetic joy, the proper attitude is, “May these people”—and this includes you as well—“learn to act in ways that will create more happiness.”

Now, there are lots of rich, powerful, or beautiful people for whom that wish seems unrealistic, but you never know: Someday they may see the emptiness of simply enjoying their pleasures. Maybe they’ll see the dangers that come with wealth, power, and beauty. Wealthy and powerful people can never really trust people who try to befriend them. Beautiful people attract the attentions of people they wouldn’t want to attract.

So maybe people who are currently heedless about their good fortune will come to their senses and start looking for something with more meaning for their lives. Of course, this also means that we should come to our senses about good fortune and happiness, too.

With this thought, we come to look a little more deeply at the lessons to be learned from compassion and empathetic joy: further lessons related to kamma and rebirth. This is where we go beyond the brahmavihāras and begin to develop genuine wisdom and discernment related to the path to the end of suffering. As the Buddha said, the brahmavihāras on their own don’t lead to dispassion, so they’re not a complete practice. The discernment they require is simply the

discernment on the level of mundane right view: the level of right view that leads to good rebirths. At best, they can take you to the Brahmā worlds, but no further.

But when you start reflecting on the nature of mundane happiness, and begin to see how empty and dangerous it is, your brahmavihāra practice provides a foundation for developing transcendent right view: the level of right view that leads to the safety of total freedom from suffering.

There's a pair of suttas where the Buddha has you reflect that when you see someone who is suffering greatly, you should remind yourself that, over the long course of saṃsāra, you've been in that position, too. Conversely, when you see someone who is rich and powerful, you should remind yourself that you've been there as well.

These suttas teach many lessons. One is that if you see someone who's suffering, you shouldn't feel proud that you're better off than they are. You've been in that position, too. When you can think in this way, you can keep your compassion from becoming condescending.

Similarly, when you see someone who's rich, beautiful, and powerful, you shouldn't resent, envy, or begrudge that person's good fortune. You've been there, too. This way, you can learn to feel genuine empathy even for people whose station in life is much higher than yours. They're human beings, too, just like you, and you shouldn't let their good fortune blind you to the dangerous position they're in. Just as you lost your power and wealth in the past, they're going to lose theirs. Like you, they need to keep on developing the causes for further happiness.

But these suttas also warn you against the dangers of staying on in saṃsāra. Even though, through the practice of generosity, virtue, and goodwill, you can return in a future lifetime to a position of power and influence, look at what happens to most people who have that good fortune: They abuse it. This is the nature of happiness in the world. It tends to contain the seeds of its own destruction. Even devas can be reborn in poor families who live on the side of the road. When you see people who are wealthy and complacent, you have to remind yourself: You're not immune to that. If you became wealthy again, you could easily become complacent again, and create a lot of bad kamma through your complacency.

It's as if saṃsāra were a sick joke: You work hard at the causes of goodness, but then when you get the results of goodness, they destroy your goodness.

When you think in these ways, it makes you more inclined to want to gain release from saṃsāra entirely.

And that's precisely the lesson you should draw when you're really discerning in your practice of compassion and empathetic joy.

So far, we've been talking about empathetic joy for people who are enjoying worldly happiness. But it's also important to develop empathetic joy for people who are experiencing happiness in the Dhamma.

Think of the story of Aṅgulimāla. He was a bandit chief who had killed many, many people. But the Buddha saw that he had some good potential buried deep inside him. So he used his psychic powers to impress Aṅgulimāla. Aṅgulimāla threw down his weapons and ordained as a monk. The king decided not to punish Aṅgulimāla, and to let him stay on as a monk. Later, Aṅgulimāla became an arahant.

When we hear this story, it encourages us: If a criminal could become awakened, then maybe we can, too. But there were many people at the time who were *not* encouraged, and instead were upset: They may have been relatives of the people who Aṅgulimāla had killed. It didn't seem right to them that he was getting away with murder. So when he went on his alms round, they would throw stones and other things at him: breaking open his head, breaking his alms bowl, tearing his robe. The Buddha reminded Aṅgulimāla to bear with the pain. It was a lot less than the pain he would have suffered in hell if he hadn't become awakened.

This story teaches us several things. One is: Never be envious of people whose meditation is going better than yours. When, during the Q & A, someone talks about getting the mind into deep states of rapture and stillness, don't resent them. Be happy for them. After all, when you finally get to experience rapture and stillness in your meditation, don't you want other people to be happy for you?

A second point: Don't let your ideas of justice and rightness get in the way of your compassion and empathetic joy. Don't be like the people who threw things at Aṅgulimāla after he became an arahant and so heaped up bad kamma for themselves.

Our Western ideas of justice depend on the idea that we can know the beginning point of any story, and from there we can determine—if wrong has been done—who was the first to do it, or whose response was excessive. But given the long, long nature of saṃsāra, we can never know the beginning point of any story. And remember, the Buddha's teachings are not intended to see that justice is done. They're intended to

put an end to suffering. So when you see people who are suffering, extend compassion to them, without thinking about whether they deserve to suffer or not. When you see people who are experiencing good fortune, extend empathetic joy to them, without thinking about whether they deserve to be happy or not.

Then reflect on your own suffering and happiness: Don't think about whether you deserve to be happy. The way to put an end to suffering is open to all. Do what you can to create the causes, not only for happiness in this life, but also for a happiness that's solid and sure: the happiness of awakening. That's when you have real compassion and empathetic joy for yourself. And that's not a selfish thing.

Saturday — Equanimity

As I mentioned Wednesday night, the four brahmavihāras all come down to two: goodwill and equanimity. Goodwill—together with its extensions, compassion and empathetic joy—is a wish for happiness. Equanimity is the ability to maintain the mind on an even keel when events don't fall in line with your goodwill. The suttas say it's an antidote to irritation.

The difference between the first three brahmavihāras on the one hand, and equanimity on the other, can be easily seen in the phrases we repeat to express these attitudes. The first three are expressed as intentions: "May all beings be happy. May they be freed from stress and pain. May they not be deprived of the good fortune they have attained." It's all "may, may, may." But with equanimity, it's a statement of fact: "All beings are the owners of their actions, heirs to their actions, born of their actions, related through their actions, and live in dependence on their actions. Whatever they do, for good or for evil, to that will they fall heir." It's the reality check for the other three attitudes: Because of the principle of people's free choice in deciding how to act, you have to accept the fact that not all beings will be happy anytime soon.

As I also noted on Wednesday, goodwill as a brahmavihāra is said to be a form of mindfulness, something you have to keep in mind. And you have to be determined to keep it in mind. That's why you need all four factors of determination to develop and maintain it: discernment, truth, generosity, and calm.

There's no place in the Canon that says explicitly that equanimity is a form of mindfulness or that it's related to determination. But when you try to practice it, you realize that it, too, is a form of mindfulness that you have to be determined to develop if it's going to become a brahmavihāra. As with ordinary, human goodwill, ordinary, human equanimity is partial. It's easy to be equanimous about some things but not about others. If a stranger in foreign land gets sick, you may feel a little compassion, but it's easy for the mind to switch to equanimity: This is the way of the world. It happens every day. But if someone you deeply love gets sick, it's hard to stay equanimous. Yet at times like that, if you really want to be of help to that person, you have to develop some equanimity, to get the mind to calm down so that you can think clearly about what's the most helpful thing to do.

In this way, equanimity is clearly related to the fourth determination, calm, but it's also related to the other three.

First, the fact that you're willing to accept the principle of kamma is related to **discernment**. So is the fact that you can see that equanimity itself is something you have to develop as a brahmavihāra to be able to apply it whenever is necessary, regardless of what the situation may be.

To begin with, note that there are skillful forms of equanimity and unskillful forms. The type of equanimity that simply doesn't care, that's indifferent to the sufferings of others, is unskillful. So is the lazy equanimity that doesn't care if unskillful qualities are taking over your mind, the equanimity that simply accepts their presence without thinking of doing anything about them. The Buddha didn't teach indifferent or lazy equanimity.

Ajaan Chah calls lazy equanimity the equanimity of a water buffalo. You may know the story. A storm went through his monastery one time, and the next day he was walking around the monastery to survey the damage. He came upon a hut with half of its roof blown off. The monk who lived in the hut was sitting inside, meditating. Ajaan Chah called out to him, "Why aren't you fixing the roof?" The monk replied, "I'm practicing equanimity." Ajaan Chah scolded him, "That's the equanimity of a water buffalo. You're a human being. Fix the roof."

If you look in the Canon, you'll notice that the Buddha never teaches equanimity alone. It's always taught in combination with other qualities, and it takes on aspects of the qualities that accompany it. In the context of the brahmavihāras, the Buddha is teaching the equanimity of a good doctor. A doctor has to start with goodwill and compassion for the patient. But he also needs equanimity. If he tries one approach to treat the patient but it doesn't work, he doesn't get upset. He has to develop some equanimity to think clearly, to try to figure out what other approaches might work. If he sees that there are some symptoms that he cannot alleviate at all, again, he can't get upset. He has to be equanimous about those symptoms so that he can focus on the symptoms he *can* alleviate.

When you discern the type of equanimity the Buddha is talking about here, you'll also discern why equanimity is a necessary complement to the other three brahmavihāras. There are three main reasons in all.

The *first reason* relates to the intention in each of the other brahmavihāras: You focus on the wish that other beings will behave in a skillful way, for the sake of their own happiness. Remember the statement for goodwill: "May all beings understand the causes for true

happiness and be willing and able to act on them.” Compassion: “May this person learn to act in ways that don’t cause more suffering.” Empathetic joy: “May these people learn to act in ways that will create more happiness.” You’re placing your hopes on the choices that other people will make—and you know how little control you have over their choices. So these attitudes are bound to be disappointed if they’re not backed up by equanimity. As Ajaan Fuang once said, goodwill—if it isn’t supported by the equanimity of concentration—is a source of suffering. So to prevent yourself from suffering, you have to accept the fact that not all beings will follow in line with your good wishes for them.

But some people will. This is the *second reason* for why equanimity is a necessary complement to the other three brahmavihāras. It allows you to focus your energies on areas where you actually can be of help, to yourself and to others, without wasting energy trying to help those who resist or simply can’t benefit from your help. You accept the fact that there may be some past kamma—either your past kamma or the other person’s past kamma—getting in the way, and you can’t go back and undo what was done in the past. So you focus your energies in areas where you can be of help.

In this way, equanimity is related to a basic principle of generosity: As the Buddha once said, you should give where you feel inspired or you feel that your gift would be well used. You may feel inspired to help everyone, but because your energies and resources are limited, it’s best to focus on areas where your help would be well used.

Ultimately, though, we have to be like the doctor who knows that even though he can cure some of his patient’s illnesses, someday the patient will have to die. So the doctor has to be equanimous about that fact. In the same way, we have to realize that all living beings are subject to aging, illness, and death. We ourselves are subject to aging, illness, and death. This is the *third reason* for developing equanimity. We have to realize that if we don’t put an end to our craving, we’ll have to keep coming back to worlds where we and all the beings around us are subject to more aging, illness, and death. Do you want that? If not, you have to focus your energies on the practices that will free you from the processes of saṃsāra. This requires that you’re equanimous about areas that, if you gave your attention to them, would pull you away from the practice.

In this way, you’re practicing equanimity in line with the first line in the Karaṇīya Mettā Sutta: “*This is to be done by one who appreciates the state of peace.*” You’re taking your brahmavihāra practice and using it to

help in your practice of the duties of the four noble truths, leading to the peace of the third noble truth. You may remember from Wednesday that you can practice the brahmavihāras either for the sake of becoming a Brahmā or for the sake of gaining awakening. When you develop your discernment, you realize that awakening is a much better goal for this practice.

As for the **truth** of your equanimity, it's similar to the truth of your goodwill: You have to learn how to breathe, think, and use perceptions and feelings to help keep your equanimity solid in the face of events that would otherwise shake it up.

The Buddha talks about many levels in developing equanimity. He notes that our ordinary, everyday type of equanimity—where we happen to keep the mind on an even keel in the face of good and bad input coming through our eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body, and mind—is not very reliable. It can easily be shaken as new input comes in, especially if you're not mindful. So, in different suttas, he explains how to develop your everyday equanimity to make it stronger. In some cases, such as [MN 137](#), he emphasizes developing equanimity by using insight before concentration; in others, such as [SN 36:11](#), he advises developing concentration before insight. In both cases, he's again taking you beyond ordinary brahmavihāra practice and using it to serve the purposes of the four noble truths.

It's important to note, however, that in either case, he doesn't have you go straight from everyday equanimity to heightened equanimity. Instead, he has you develop joy and refreshment—either through insight or concentration—as an intermediate step. And it's easy to see why. If you went from ordinary “blah” straight to stronger “blah” with no sense of joy, the practice would get dry or depressing pretty fast. As Ajaan Fuang once said, if the practice doesn't have a sense of rapture and joy to keep it alive, it's like an engine without any oil to lubricate it. It's going to seize up and stop running.

So let's look at how the Buddha would have you develop joy as a way to strengthen your equanimity, to see which method would work for you.

In the case where he would have you start with *insight*, he recommends that when you feel distress over the inconstancy of the things you love, you shouldn't go running to sensual pleasures to escape that distress. Instead, you remind yourself that there are people who have gained liberation from all distress, and you give rise to a desire to follow their example. This thought in itself may be distressing—you

think about how far you are from the goal—but at least it offers hope: There is a way out. I read recently someone saying that Buddhism doesn't have a word for hope, but it actually has two: the noun, *āsā*, and the verb, *paṭikankhati*. And the Dhamma is as hopeful a teaching as you can imagine: It teaches that there is a sure way out of all the disappointments of life.

When you set your sights on gaining some release from your sufferings, then you contemplate on how *all* objects of the senses—past, present, and future—are inconstant and subject to change. When you adopt this attitude and can willingly accept it, it can lift your mind to a level where you feel above all that change. For some people, this realization is accompanied by joy. They feel liberated from their day-to-day concerns. Then as that joy calms down, you move on to equanimity as you maintain that same perspective of insight.

From there, the Buddha would have you develop that equanimity into the higher levels of concentration. And then, once that concentration is established, he would have you reflect on how it, too, is inconstant, stressful, and not-self. That realization can lead to unbinding, which—like your original insight—is accompanied first by joy. In fact, it's the highest happiness of all. Then when you reflect back on the changing phenomena of the world, you can view them with an unshakeable equanimity, because your happiness lies beyond their reach. That's one approach.

Now, some people find the insight into inconstancy, if it's not backed up and preceded by concentration, can be disorienting rather than joyful. They feel as if the ground has been pulled from under their feet. If that's the case with you, you should develop concentration first.

Here the first step, the Buddha notes, is to strengthen your everyday equanimity through a series of perceptions: Try to make your mind like earth. People throw disgusting things on the Earth, but the Earth isn't upset by them. Make your mind like fire: Fire burns garbage, but isn't upset by the garbage. Make your mind like water: Water washes away dirt, but isn't upset by the dirt. Make your mind like wind: Wind blows garbage around, but isn't upset by the garbage. Make your mind like space: People can try to draw pictures and write words in space, but there's no place for pictures or words to stick.

When you can adopt these attitudes, then it's easier to deal with the difficulties of getting the mind in concentration. You can observe clearly what's working and what's not working as you try to get the mind to

settle down, without getting overly excited or upset. That makes it possible to develop concentration as a skill.

In other words, when your mind is like earth, it's not just a clod of dirt. It's simply solid and not easily shaken. That's the kind of mind you need to observe and understand what's going on in your mind so that you can get it to settle down with a sense of ease.

Then, to get the mind to a deeper equanimity—the equanimity of the fourth jhāna—you first have to develop the first three jhānas, which are characterized by pleasure and rapture or refreshment. When the mind has been nourished by the pleasure and refreshment, then it's ready to settle into a secure state of equanimity with a strong sense of well-being.

From there, you can develop the insight that will take you to awakening, which as we've already noted, is the highest happiness, and is accompanied by equanimity when you reflect on the world on which you no longer need to feed.

When you give your equanimity a strong, solid foundation like this, you're making it unshakeable and true. Your truth is also taking you beyond ordinary brahmavihāra practice and using it for the sake of awakening.

As for **generosity**: When you solidify your equanimity with a sense of well-being, you're giving yourself a safer food inside for the mind to feed on. Or even better, if you follow these steps all the way to awakening, the mind has found a happiness that no longer needs to feed at all. This means that you don't have to feed off the other brahmavihāras, and that helps to purify your practice of them. Your gift of the other brahmavihāras becomes more pure.

Let me explain. There are times when people feed off of their own goodwill and compassion, expressing these attitudes in their actions in ways that may not necessarily be conducive to the good of others. They're actually more concerned with how good their compassion feels to them, and don't notice that they're actually not being helpful to the other person at all.

I heard a Dhamma teacher once say that he didn't want to be reborn in a world where no one was suffering, because he wouldn't have the opportunity to express his compassion. On the surface, this sounds noble—he always wants to be helpful—but when you think about it, it's actually quite selfish: This teacher needed to have somebody else suffer so that he could feel good about his compassion.

A nobler attitude is one that doesn't have to feed off of compassion. And that's what developing a well-grounded sense of equanimity encourages, even if it's just the equanimity based on concentration. It provides you with your own inner food of well-being that allows you to see more clearly, when the time comes to help other people, exactly what kind of help would actually benefit them the most.

And as for **calm**: We've already noted that equanimity is a calm mind state in and of itself. But there are gradations of equanimity. The levels of equanimity that come from developing strong concentration—or even better, that come from awakening to the highest happiness—are the calmest of all, in that they're based on a strong inner sense of well-being.

We might call this the equanimity of a winner. This is different from the way equanimity is sometimes taught with a defeatist attitude. A defeatist attitude says, basically, that there's no lasting happiness to be found in the world, so you might as well give up trying to find it. Just learn to accept things as they are and don't hope for them to be better than what they are. When you give up on your search for happiness, you can be equanimous and content with what you've got.

That, as I said, is a defeatist attitude. It's equanimity tinged with regret, disappointment, and a sense of powerlessness. It's heavy and narrow, a contentment found by lowering your standards for satisfaction.

We bow down to the Buddha, though, because he actually has us raise our standards for satisfaction, to accept nothing less than the ultimate happiness. There's nothing defeatist in his attitude at all. In fact, he called the noble eightfold path the path to victory: You can find a happiness that's not subject to aging, illness, and death, that's totally free of sorrow. You win out over all your defilements and all the changing and unreliable things in the world.

This is what Ajaan Fuang called the brightness of life: Even though there's suffering, there's also a path to the total end of suffering, and it's open to everyone. When your equanimity is based on well-being, it's expansive and light. Because it comes from well-being, there's no regret or disappointment or powerlessness at all. It's a state of calm that's really satisfying—and when a state of calm is satisfying, that's the highest calm of all.

So when you understand the Buddha's teachings on equanimity, you can see that it's a necessary complement to the other brahmavihāras. It keeps them from leading to suffering. It keeps them focused. It keeps them pure. And when you develop it properly, it helps all four brahmavihāras lead to something even higher: a state of mind that can

experience a happiness beyond the world, one that frees you from having to come back and feed off the world ever again. This is the ultimate way in which you show goodwill for yourself and other beings: You provide for your own true happiness—as the phrase says, you look after yourself with ease—and your happiness doesn't require you to take anything from anyone ever again.

Sunday Morning — Closing

At the end of every retreat, the question always is: How can I take the lessons I learned on the retreat and carry them into my life?

As the Karaṇīya Mettā Sutta says, it requires a combination of mindfulness and determination.

Otherwise, it's all too easy, after you've been sitting for several days, thinking thoughts, "May all beings be happy. May all beings be happy," but then you get in your car to go home, someone cuts in front of you, and you think, "And may this being go to hell!"

So to prevent that, stop to remind yourself of some of the lessons you've learned over the past few days.

One is that the brahmavihāras don't come naturally. Our human goodwill and equanimity are natural, but they tend to be partial. And that partiality means we can't depend on ourselves to act skillfully in all situations, which means that it's easy to fall off the path to the end of suffering.

To raise the level of your heart and mind, you have to fabricate new mental states, through using the three fabrications: the way you breathe, the way you talk to yourself, and the perceptions and feelings you focus on.

For example, both for goodwill and for equanimity, breathe in a way that gives rise to a sense of well-being inside. When you're coming from a sense of well-being, it's easier to wish for the well-being of others. As Ajaan Lee says, it's like opening a faucet to a tank full of water: Cool water will come out. If you don't have a sense of well-being inside, and you try to spread thoughts of goodwill, it's like opening the faucet to an empty tank. Nothing comes out but air.

That's bodily fabrication.

With verbal fabrication, talk yourself in ways that encourage you in the practice of goodwill, reminding yourself of how it will give strength to your practice all around.

And as for mental fabrication, think of the images the Buddha and the ajaans give for goodwill: that your goodwill is strong and vast like the Earth, as cool as the River Ganges, as free and wide-open as space. It's a form of wealth.

Think also of his image of the bandits cutting you up, and of the mother protecting her only child: You have to protect your goodwill with your life.

And remember, goodwill for others doesn't mean that you simply do what they want. It means that you think about what would be conducive to their true well-being—and especially, what influence you can have on them to get them to behave in skillful ways.

All of that is *discernment*.

When you keep these lessons in mind, it's easier to be *true* to your original determination to practice the brahmavihāras, and you can become more *generous* with them as well. Remember that goodwill is a form of wealth that you can create from within, and that there's no reason to put any limit on the amount of wealth you create.

As for *calm*, remember also to develop equanimity as a back-up for your goodwill, so that you can keep it focused and pure, and you can keep yourself from suffering from your goodwill.

When you determine to keep these lessons in mind, then your practice will grow stronger all around. You stay focused on the desire to find a happiness that causes no harm to anyone—not to yourself, not to other people. You'll reap the benefits from following through with this desire, now and into the future, and so will all the people around you.

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