

The Brahmaviharas Are Not Enough

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Goodwill is one of the reasons why we practice: wishing for our own true happiness, wishing for the happiness of other people, and hoping that our true happiness will last. And as the Buddha points out, when you think about that, you realize it'll have to be a happiness that doesn't cause any harm to anybody.

There's a passage where King Pasenadi is with Queen Mallika in their private apartment. And, in a tender moment, he turns to her and asks, "Is there anyone you love more than yourself?" Of course, he's hoping she'll say, "Yes. You, Your Majesty." But she doesn't. She says, "No. And is there anybody *you* love more than *yourself*?" Of course, he has to admit there's no one that he would love more than himself.

He leaves the private apartment, leaves the palace, goes to see the Buddha, and reports the conversation to him. And the Buddha says, "Yes, she's right." And the conclusion he draws from that is that you should never harm anyone if you love yourself, because you realize that everybody else loves themselves just as fiercely as you love yourself. If your happiness requires that they suffer, they're not going to stand for your happiness. It's not going to last.

So as we meditate, goodwill is one of the underlying motivations. We want to find a happiness of high quality, a happiness that doesn't conflict with anyone else's happiness. That's a special motivation. That's something that really should be nurtured and protected. But at the same time, we have to realize that goodwill on its own is not going to be enough. In fact, the brahmaviharas as a set are not enough.

Some books have been floating around recently, claiming that this was the secret teaching of the Buddha that somehow got lost by the tradition but has recently been uncovered: that all you have to do is practice the brahmaviharas, and they can take you all the way to nibbana. This interpretation is based primarily on a passage where the Buddha teaches the brahmaviharas to a pair of brahmans, saying that it will lead to union with Brahma. One interpreter says that because the Buddha actually mentions the concept, and because for his listeners it was their religious goal, he must have intended it as one of the names for his goal as well—which is hardly the case.

There's the famous example where Sariputta goes to teach Dhanañjanin, a brahman, on his deathbed. Dhanañjanin hasn't been meditating that much. So Sariputta asks himself what would be good for this person to hear. "Oh, these

brahmans take union with Brahma as their goal, so how about teaching him to get there?" So he asked Dhanañjanin, "Would you like to attain union with Brahma?" And Dhanañjanin says, "Yes." So Sariputta teaches him the brahmaviharas. Dhanañjanin dies and becomes a Brahma – achieves union with Brahma. Sariputta then returns to see the Buddha, and the Buddha says, "You left him in an inferior attainment," and chides him for not taking him further.

There's another passage where the Buddha's going to be leaving the monastery at the end of the rains retreat. Mahanama comes to him and says, "Suppose a person of discernment is dying when you're gone. How do I speak to him as he's facing death?" And the Buddha teaches him first to make sure that the person doesn't have any worries about his family, doesn't have any worries about leaving human sensual pleasures.

If the person does have worries about the family, he's to be told, "Look, you're dying. Your worries are not going to help them at all, so try to let go of them."

If there are any attachments or concerns about leaving human sensuality, he's to be told that there are better sensual realms, you know; there are various devas. And he takes him up through the various deva realms one by one by one. Finally he tells him, even better than the pleasures of the deva realms are the pleasures of the Brahma realms. Set your mind on those.

Then, if the person can set his mind on the Brahma realms, union with Brahma, then he's to be told, "Even that has a sense of self-identity. There's still going to be suffering; it's still fettered. Set yourself on abandoning self-identity – the way you define yourself. It's only then that you gain true freedom."

So it's obvious that union with Brahma was not a synonym for nibbana. Far from it. The Brahma realms are realms to be attained through jhana. And they're subject to birth, aging, illness, and death. There in those realms, aging and illness are pretty minor, but still there's birth and death. You could leave them and come back down again. You may come crashing down. So they're not the goal.

And especially when you get to meet some of the Brahmans in the Pali Canon, you realized that they're not the kind of people you'd like to have union with. Some of them are hypocritical; some of them are pretty stupid. There's one who's a dupe for Mara. So it's hard to see how the Buddha would have regarded union with Brahma as a synonym for nibbana.

As for the practice of brahmaviharas, there are many passages where the Buddha says that just the brahmaviharas on their own will take you to different jhanas, and then they will correspond with these different levels of heaven.

Some people think that the Buddha's cosmology was simply borrowed from what came before him in India. But it turns out that his cosmology was specific to

him. The Jains had their cosmology, which was very different. The Upanishads had lots of different cosmologies, all of which were very different. The Buddhist cosmology was basically patterned on the different states of mind that can be attained in concentration, as the Buddha discovered them and mapped them out.

One of the important things about his mapping out was realizing that the Brahmas are not eternal. In fact, he has to go up to the Brahma realms and teach them that lesson.

What the brahmaviharas *can* do is take you to concentration. Then, based on concentration, you have to develop discernment, and that's a different practice entirely. It's based on concentration, and there's an element of discernment that comes into concentration, but you really have to emphasize the discernment part if the concentration based on the brahmaviharas is going to take you to genuine awakening.

Specifically, you develop the seven factors for awakening. You start by establishing mindfulness. For instance, you focus on the breath—ardent, alert and mindful. You stay focused on the breath in and of itself, and you put aside any greed or distress with reference to the world. The quality of ardency is where the discernment starts coming in, as you try to do this skillfully and really analyze where the suffering is.

This active part of meditation often gets overlooked. It involves both the observer, the more passive side, and also what you might call the director, who looks over the situation in the mind, tries to notice where something's wrong, and then figures out what to do about it. The director asks questions, tries to think up solutions, puts them to the test, and then judges the results. This is not just a matter plain old goodwill, or compassion, or empathetic joy, or equanimity. You've got to consciously probe to see what's going to be skillful right now in your given state of mind.

That's the second of the factors for awakening: It goes almost seamlessly from mindfulness into analysis of qualities, trying to figure out what's skillful and what's not. That, in turn, moves into persistence when you actually try to abandon what's unskillful and develop what *is* skillful. When you do this skillfully, you get a sense of fullness, a sense of rapture. And then the mind settles down into the remaining factors for awakening: calm, deeper concentration, and equanimity.

The equanimity itself, though, is not the end. The Buddha talks about levels of equanimity. There's the ordinary garden-variety, which is when you simply try to be impartial and stay on an even keel when sights, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations, and ideas come to you. Whether they're pleasant or unpleasant, you try to stay neutral toward them. That's your ordinary garden-variety equanimity.

But then there's a deeper one that's based on the formless realms, the formless jhanas.

And even beyond that, there's what the Buddha calls non-fashioning, where you don't fashion a sense of yourself around the equanimity. Even in equanimity there can be attachment to the equanimity. If you don't analyze it, if you just have goodwill for the equanimity or goodwill for the attachment, it won't go away. You've got to question it. In Ajaan Maha Boowa's language, you actually have to destroy it. Try to find where the attachment is and tear it to shreds. That's when you get to see what lies beyond equanimity—what the Buddha calls non-fashioning. That's where you're poised, ready to go to full awakening.

There's a lot of analysis that goes on in this. You can't simply hope that having goodwill for your unskillful mental states will tame them. The Buddha said that some unskillful states will respond simply to equanimity, but a lot will require what he calls the exertion of a fabrication, where you have to change the way you breathe, change the way you perceive things, change the way you feel about them, or change the way you think about them. Ask questions, probe in: That's where the liberating insight is going to come.

So the brahmaviharas are not enough. They can get you to concentration. They can be very soothing when the mind is feeling exasperated. They act as good antidotes to states of mind when you're feeling frustrated with yourself or with other people. But the results they bring are only partial. You have to combine them with the seven factors for awakening, which involve a lot of analysis, a lot of probing and questioning, trying things out, experimenting to see what works and what doesn't work, and digging into your attachment to goodwill, compassion, empathetic joy, and equanimity. It's only then that the path is going to be complete. And the results will be complete as well.

Some of the Thai ajaans have a reputation for being really strict with their students. It's because they see that the states of mind you can gain, say, through the practice of the brahmaviharas, are states of concentration that are really seductive. It's not that they're a bad thing. You actually have to practice them. But you also have to make sure that you don't stay stuck on them, because there's something so much better than just union with Brahma. There's absolute freedom, which is something else entirely.

It's out of concern, out of compassion, out of goodwill, that these teachers are really strict, making sure that their students don't fall for things that really need to be questioned. If anything, that's the lesson of the Buddha's own description of his path: He kept questioning things until he found something that really did pass all the test of all his questions.

So settle down, settle down, settle down. But then, probe in, probe in. Poke your state of mind with questions. That's how you learn.