

Brahmaviharas on the Path

November 22, 2015

In the repertoire of chants that we recite every evening, there's a lot that seem fairly negative. The body is full of all kind of unclean things, subject to aging, illness and death, separation. The world is swept away. It does not endure. It offers no shelter. There's no one in charge. And then there's a switch: "May I be happy." Sounds like a wan hope in the face of all the negative things in the world, all the suffering in the world. But it's why we're here. We realize that there is a lot of suffering, but there's also a possibility of a happiness in the midst of all that. That's our motivation for practicing.

We extend that wish for happiness not just to ourselves, but to all beings: May all beings be happy. We realize that if our happiness depends on someone else's suffering, they're not going to stand for it. So if we want a happiness that's secure, a happiness that can last, we have to take other people's happiness into consideration, too. This is one of the reasons why we try to develop the brahmaviharas, or the sublime attitudes.

They start with goodwill—unlimited goodwill, a wish for all beings to be happy. Unlimited compassion: When you see beings who are suffering, you'd like to see their suffering end. Unlimited empathetic joy: When you see people who are happy, you want them to continue in their happiness, or if they're doing activities that give rise to happiness, you want them to continue in those activities as well. And then equanimity, realizing that there are a lot of cases where we can't make any difference. Somebody is suffering—it can be either ourselves or other people—and there are certain things that we just can't change about that fact. You have to accept that, learn how to develop equanimity in all cases, so that you can focus your energies on areas where you *can* make a change.

Making these attitudes unlimited is not easy. It's easy to feel goodwill for some people but not for others, and so on down the line. It takes some work to try to make our attitudes limitless. As the Buddha pointed out, in his previous lifetimes prior to becoming the Buddha, he actually developed these brahmaviharas. They would take him to the brahma realms but then the karma of that practice would run out and he'd be back down on Earth again. So on their own, the brahmaviharas can't take you all the way to nibbana.

Still, they can play a role in the path. And the major role is the one I pointed out just now: motivation. In the path, this fits under right resolve. We see that

there's suffering that comes from sensuality. There's suffering that comes from thoughts of ill will, suffering that comes from harmfulness, and we want to develop qualities of mind that don't allow these things to take over. The brahmaviharas are precisely those qualities. Goodwill counteracts ill will. Compassion counteracts harmfulness. And there's a passage where the Buddha says that passion is overcome in equanimity. If your mind is in a state of equanimity, it can't be overcome by passion. If the passion does move in, that means your equanimity has been destroyed. It may not be totally impervious to passion, but it is a counterbalance.

So if you see that you're engaging in any forms of wrong resolve, you can develop the brahmaviharas to counteract them. You have to realize, of course, that the brahmaviharas are not the natural, innate quality of the mind, any more than their opposites are. Ill will comes to the mind just as easily as goodwill. Thoughts of harmfulness come just as easily as thoughts of compassion. This means we have to *develop* the brahmaviharas. This is a kind of karma. It's a mental karma. It's a determination, as the Buddha said. And to stick with that determination requires mindfulness.

So to really understand the brahmaviharas, you have to understand karma, because they are a type of karma and they get expressed through karma. When you're thinking about your own happiness and the happiness of others, you have to remember that the wish for there to be that happiness requires also the wish that we act in ways that will lead to true happiness. So the brahmaviharas require at least a rudimentary level of right view in. And, as forms of right resolve, they act as the motivation for all the other factors of the path. Our practice of the precepts, right speech, right action, right livelihood: That all depends on our desire not to do harm, our desire for a happiness that gets spread around, a happiness that's harmless.

There's wisdom here, too, in the sense of the set of questions that the Buddha says lie at the beginning of discernment: "What is skillful? What is blameless? What when I do it will lead to my long-term welfare and happiness?" The discernment here lies in recognizing that our actions are the big factors that lead to happiness, and that long-term happiness is better than short-term. We want a happiness that's blameless, i.e., one that doesn't harm anyone. This is an element of right view that underlies the brahmaviharas as well.

At the same time, some people find that taking the brahmaviharas as meditation objects can provide a basis for right concentration, can get the mind into states of strong concentration. You can practice concentrating on thoughts of goodwill and spread them out in all directions. The image the Buddha gives is

of a man blowing a trumpet whose sound goes out in all directions. He doesn't have to direct it here or direct it there. It just goes everywhere.

That's the kind of quality you want to develop in your mind. When you've developed it, it carries with it a sense of spaciousness and stillness. It's a thought that doesn't have a lot of internal conflict, because, after all, when we think about true happiness, we realize it has to come from within. So your true happiness doesn't have to conflict with anyone else's true happiness.

The other pleasures of life are the ones that cause conflict. You want that job. Somebody else might have to lose it if you get it. Or if they get it, you lose it. You want this house. You want this relationship, whatever. There's always a winner and a loser with sensual happiness. But true happiness is developed from qualities inside. There doesn't have to be any conflict. There are no losers with this happiness, only winners. This is why goodwill and the other brahmaviharas can be developed as unlimited qualities.

It's not like love. Love is something else. The Pali word for love is *pema*. When the Buddha talks about love, he focuses on its obvious drawbacks. There's hatred, he says, that can come from love. In other words, if you love someone, and someone else is going to do something harmful to them, you're going to hate that person. There's also love that comes from hatred: If you have a mutual enemy, you become friends.

So in the Buddha's eyes, love is not an attitude that you can make unlimited. It's based on making distinctions. It *creates* distinctions many times, whereas goodwill can be more universal and can erase distinctions of that sort away. That's why it can be an object of concentration that allows the mind to be still with a sense of unity: no inner hypocrisy, no inner conflict.

So the brahmaviharas do play a role in many factors of the path, but they're not the complete path.

There's been a change over the years in the way that the brahmaviharas are treated in scholarly books on Buddhism. When I was taking my first class on Buddhism, way back, we read the book, *What the Buddha Taught*. It was organized around the four noble truths, but then at the very end, as a kind of afterthought, it tacked on a chapter on the brahmaviharas. There was never any sense that the four noble truths and the brahmaviharas were in any way connected to each other at all. The brahmaviharas were just part of the Buddha's social philosophy. The way the four noble truths were organized, the brahmaviharas seemed to be expendable.

More recently, things have gone to the other extreme. In the book *What the Buddha Thought*, it says that all you have to do is the brahmaviharas, and that's

the whole path, all the way to nibbana. It also claims that this path has been intentionally suppressed by the monks, but now Western scholars have liberated it. These claims have been picked up by a lot of LKM teachers—that's what they call lovingkindness meditation teachers, now—as well.

This idea based on reading between the lines in a particular sutta, but it requires ignores what's clearly in the lines of other suttas. As the Buddha explicitly pointed out, the brahmaviharas can take you only to the brahma worlds, which are clearly inferior. In fact, he says that, on their own, the brahmaviharas don't lead to dispassion, cessation, or nibbana. On top of the concentration that comes from the brahmaviharas, you need to develop the insights of the four noble truths. Now, you can develop those insights in a state of concentration that's been developed through the brahmaviharas, but they're an added element in the practice that doesn't automatically come with the brahmaviharas. The four noble truths look not only at the suffering of the world out there, but also—and more importantly—at what you're doing right now.

Even in the practice of the brahmaviharas, there's stress. You're not going to see that if you just sit there generating goodwill without reflecting on what you're doing. But if you learn how to reflect on the state of mind that you've got here —“Is there still some stress here? And what am I doing to contribute to it? How could I stop?”—that's when the path becomes complete.

So the brahmaviharas do provide a rudimentary foundation for virtue, concentration, and some discernment. They're not just something tacked on to the path. But at the same time, you have to learn how to step back from them eventually and see that there's more work to be done. That's primarily the function of what's called transcendent right view: the right view that looks at things in terms of the four noble truths—and then can look at itself in terms of the four noble truths.

There's a nice passage in Ajaan Mun's teachings where he talks about how there's a stage in the path where the four noble truths become one. In other words, you see that everything has one duty at that point. You've comprehended stress. You've abandoned the cause. You begin to realize the cessation of suffering. You've developed the path. But there's something more that needs to be done. There comes a point where *everything* has to be let go. Even the path has to be let go; your insight into cessation has to be let go; the brahmaviharas have to be let go. The insight that sees into what's going on in the mind as you develop the brahmaviharas: That has to be let go as well, along with everything else.

So the brahmaviharas are not a complete path. There's more that needs to be done. But working on them is a good part of the practice. This is why we have the

chant every day, to remind ourselves that at the very least that this is the motivation for why we're here. We want a happiness without bounds. We want a happiness without boundaries. We have to train the mind so that it sees that that's a good thing to really develop unlimited goodwill.

It's not just a matter of repeating a phrase over and over again, "May I be happy. May all beings be happy." You have to think about what that means and what it entails. What does it mean to be happy? What is needed for all beings to be happy? What kind of happiness can I search for that doesn't step on the happiness of others? You want to reflect on that. If you find that there is someone for whom you have difficulty feeling thoughts of goodwill, ask yourself, "Why? What's the problem?" After all, wishing that all beings would act in ways that lead to true happiness: That's something you can wish for anybody, even people who have been extremely unskillful, cruel, heartless, damaging to others. You'd like to see them change their ways.

If you can't feel a desire for them to change their ways, what's wrong? Do you want to see them suffer and squirm a little bit before they change their ways? Well, why? Ask yourself these questions. In this way, goodwill is not just a pink cloud that you radiate out in all directions. It becomes a way of contemplating what you understand about happiness and the causes for happiness, so that you can dig up any unskillful or poorly thought-out ideas about happiness that come to light. Then it becomes easier and easier just to think, "May all beings be happy," and there's no conflict, there's no problem inside.

Don't pretend that there are no problems when there are. Dig them up. Work through them. That's when the practice of brahmaviharas really does become a part of right resolve, part of the path.

So make sure you don't just stop with the phrases that we chant. Think them through. Think about their implications, because that kind of thinking can really illuminate and clean out lots of the dark corners in the mind, so that you can get everybody in the mind on board with the practice. You want your goodwill to be unlimited not only toward others, but also unlimited inside you. That's when it really provides strength for the path.