

## *Unlimited Mind, Limited Resources*

*January 14, 2017*

There are four brahmaviharas in all, a fact that often gets forgotten. Sometimes all the emphasis is on goodwill, sometimes it's all on compassion. But the complete practice has all four. The first three form a set. You have goodwill for all. When you see that beings are suffering or are doing things that are going to lead to suffering, your goodwill leads you to have compassion for them. If you see that they're happy or doing things that lead to happiness, your goodwill leads you to feel empathetic joy.

But then the fourth one is something of an outlier. The first three are expressed as wishes: "May all beings be happy, may they be free from suffering, may they not be deprived of the good fortune they have attained." But the fourth one is based on a statement of fact: "All beings are the owners of their actions." And the meaning is different, too. There are cases where you can't let yourself be affected by what another person is doing or has done. When you encounter cases like that, you try to develop and maintain a sense of stability and non-reactivity in all directions.

There's something of a conflict, you might say: goodwill for everybody but also equanimity for everybody. The point is that you have to develop these attitudes whenever and wherever they're appropriate. It requires some discernment to see when goodwill is appropriate, and when equanimity is called for.

Now, these attitudes don't come naturally. Some people say that goodwill and compassion are part of our innate nature, but you could also say that ill will is part of our innate nature, too. It's just as easy to get angry as it is to love somebody, sometimes easier. These attitudes have to be consciously cultivated if they're going to be universal. We may easily feel goodwill, say, for some people, but with other people it's hard. The same with equanimity: With some people it's very easy to be equanimous, with other people it's not so easy, but you have to learn how to develop these attitudes when they're appropriate, for all beings.

Because what is comes down to is that although a mind of goodwill may be unlimited, our resources are limited. There are only so many people you can help, only so much strength you have, only so much time you can give. So you have to figure out where that time and strength are best served or best used.

That chant we had just now on the seven past Buddhas. Think of it: seven Buddhas, and yet we're still mucking around here, trying to practice. It's not the case that a Buddha can save everybody or bring everybody to the Dhamma. Even Buddhas have had to recognize their limitations.

When our Buddha was teaching, a horse trainer came to him once, and he asked the horse trainer, "When you train horses how do you train them?" The trainer said, "There are those that are easy to train, and so you treat them in a gentle way. Others you have to train using harshness; with others, you have to use both gentleness and harshness. But if I get a horse that doesn't respond to either gentleness or harshness, I kill it." The Buddha says, "It's the same when I teach." And the horse trainer says, "How can you kill anybody?" The Buddha says, "If people don't respond to gentle teaching or harsh teaching or a combination of gentle and harsh, I basically pull back the bridge—in other words, I don't teach them. That's the same as killing them." Why is that? Because the horse trainer has to spend his time training the horses that can respond, and the Buddha has to train the people who can respond. He can't waste his time on people who don't respond.

So you have to take that into consideration. There are a lot of people you don't kill but you have to be equanimous about what they're doing, what they're suffering from, what unskillful activities they're doing. This can be for a variety of reasons. One may be that they don't listen to you at all. Or they come for a lot of help but they never put it into practice, and there comes a point when you realize, "This is a waste of time." There are people who might benefit from what you have to do or say or think, so you save your limited energy for them.

This means that when you practice the brahmaviharas, remember to develop all four parts of the practice. And make the practice all around. Include yourself. Having goodwill for yourself means that you have to know your strengths, your weaknesses, and your limitations. We try our best to expand our range of abilities,

but everybody has limitations. As I say, even the past seven Buddhas weren't able to save all beings. There are a lot of people who can't be taught, a lot of people who can't be helped. That's what the equanimity's for. The hard part, of course, is when these are people really close to us, people we care about. But if you see that nothing is helping, for the time being at least you have to develop equanimity.

So each of the attitudes should be practiced in a way that's all around, so that you can call on them when you need them. All of the meditation exercises that are forms of thinking things through—the recollections of the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha; the analysis of the body into elements or into its various parts—these are ways of thinking to exercise so that when trouble comes up, you've got them right there, you've got the ability right there.

The recollection of the Buddhas, the recollection of the Dhamma, and the recollection of the Sangha are for encouraging yourself. The recollection of your generosity and your virtue serves two functions. One, when you're meditating and you're beginning to feel like you've got no ability at all, try to recollect the times when you were generous or you abstained from doing something harmful even though you could have gotten away with it. That gives you a sense of your worth. That's an encouragement. But if you find that there are only one or two incidents you can think of for each of those, the recollection reminds you that you've got to do more. Because acts of generosity and taking the precepts are food for the mind.

Recollection of death is for when you're getting lazy. After all, death could come at any time. Earthquakes happen, little things can malfunction in your body, and they don't come with any forewarning. So you have to ask yourself, "Am I ready to go tonight?" If not, that means you've got to work more. There's work to be done. You can't just say, "Well I'll just pack it in for tonight and think about it tomorrow." You work until you feel that there's nothing more you can do in the meditation. But push yourself more than you ordinarily do.

So there are skillful ways of thinking that you want to be able to apply at the right time and the right place. We do the brahmaviharas for the same reason. They're skillful ways of thinking and they're in your service when you need them—when you're driving, when you're dealing with difficult people. Because that's

what they're for. Even though we dedicate goodwill to all beings, the primary beneficiary of all this is ourselves. We're doing this so that we can maintain a skillful intention when things are difficult or when things are happening quickly and we tend to have some unskillful knee jerk reactions and we've got to change the way the knee jerks. That's why we think about these things. As with any mind state that has an emotional quality to it, it requires all those three forms of fabrication—bodily, verbal, mental.

So this is a complete practice in the sense that it takes all of your energy while you're doing it. And it's a good practice to frame the day—the beginning of the day, the end of the day. It's also good to think about these topics at the beginning of each formal meditation because they set your motivation straight. You're trying to develop your inner resources so that you actually can be helpful to beings that are suffering but you also have the strength to be equanimous when you realize that certain people are beyond help, or that you're in a situation you can't change. You have to be able not to suffer from that. Ajaan Fuang once commented that goodwill without equanimity is a source of suffering. So try to get good at all four of the brahmaviharas, so that instead of causing you suffering, they can give energy to your practice and a sense of spaciousness to the mind.