

Brahmaviharas & Noble Truths

February 10, 2021

Back in the '90s they sold a little plasticine Buddha called "Buddha in a Box," and it came with a little booklet. Someone gave one to my niece in light of the fact that she had an uncle who was a Buddhist monk. Fortunately, she didn't read the booklet. It started out by saying how, on the night of his awakening, the Buddha awakened to four wonderful truths: loving-kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy, and equanimity.

After reading this, I happened to go to New York, so I mentioned to the staff at *Tricycle* that they ought to run a review to point out how wrong that little booklet was. Those are not the four truths the Buddha awakened to. But they said they couldn't because the publisher of the little booklet and the maker of the plasticine Buddha was one of their sponsors. So it got out there without any comment. And although the book was wrong, there was one way in which it was right, which is that the four noble truths are very closely related to the four brahmavihāras.

There was another book that came out decades ago, *What the Buddha Taught*, which was organized around the four noble truths, but the author couldn't figure out how to fit the brahmavihāras under those truths, so they were added as an appendix. But if you think about it, what would motivate the Buddha to teach about suffering and the end of suffering, if it wasn't goodwill?

That's what motivated him to find the path to the end of suffering to begin with: goodwill for himself. And then he taught it because of goodwill and compassion for others. He had empathetic joy for all those who were able to follow the path.

He developed equanimity in two ways: To begin with, in his search for the path to the end of suffering, he realized that there were a lot of things that he'd have to do that he didn't want to do. As he told Ven. Ananda and a lay person one time, when he realized he was going to have to give up sensual desire, his heart did not leap up at the idea. But he had to take an equanimous attitude: willing to look at the drawbacks of sensual desire until he was willing to admit that, yes, he did have to give it up if he wanted to find a higher happiness.

That's what equanimity is in the four brahmavihāras: the reality principle. The first three are wishes: May all beings be happy, may they end their suffering, may they not be deprived of

their happiness. But equanimity is a statement of a fact: All beings are the owners of their actions.

In other words, if you're going to find the end of suffering, you have to follow the path, and you have to be willing to accept the path as it is. The idea that you make up your own path, or that you have to adjust the path to fit to your culture, was not in the Buddha's range of thought at all.

When he taught the four noble truths, he said that each has a duty. The duty with regard to the path is to develop it. Also, there's a right path and there's a wrong path, and the rightness and wrongness are not dependent on which side of the world you're on. You have to accept that fact, because you have goodwill for yourself.

This is why the brahmavihāras go together. If you have goodwill for yourself, you have to accept the way things work so that you can take advantage of them. If you say, "I'm going to wait until there's another causal principle that allows me to relax my way to awakening," you can wait until your dying day and pass many, many dying days, and never get to awakening.

There was once a woman who came to see Luang Pu Dune, saying that she didn't want to practice under our current Buddha. She didn't want to follow his teachings because, "Look at the world, it's a very difficult place to practice in. Whereas if I wait for the next Buddha, it's going to be a world where everybody gains awakening very easily."

And as he told her, "If you're not willing to put any effort into the practice now, you're not going to have the right to be born into that world as a human being." If you want the practice to be easy, you have to be willing to put up with the difficulties.

So that's what equanimity is for: to admit the way things are so that you can take advantage of them. You don't just stay there with the way things are. You realize that things have potentials.

Think of the Buddha's teachings on the elements or the properties, what they call *dhātu* in Pali. They're not elements that just sit there, or properties that just sit there. They have potentials. They can be provoked. They may be very quiet for a while, but if you provoke them, they can become quite strong.

Sometimes, as the Buddha said, there's so little wind that even the fringe of a thatched roof doesn't move. There are other times when wind can blow whole houses down. The same with water, the same with fire. The world is full of potentials, and the same holds true with your mind. We have all kinds of potentials within us.

So when you're accepting where you are in your practice right now, that doesn't mean that you're going to just stay there. It means you realize, "This is where I am, and I'm not where I want to be. So what potentials do I have to get beyond where I am?" Then you look for those potentials. They're all in us.

When the Buddha described the qualities that led to awakening—resolution, ardency, heedfulness: These are things that didn't belong exclusively to him. They're qualities that we all have to some extent. It's simply a matter of learning how to ferret them out, give them importance, and develop them as much as we can.

So the potentials are there. That's something you accept. And they're going to require work—that's something you accept as well, because of that motivation: You have goodwill for yourself. You want to find a happiness that you can depend on, something that's not going to turn on you.

There are so many things you can do in the world where, when you're done with them, you ask yourself, "Well, what was that all about?" But the path to the end of suffering isn't anything like that. It's going to be totally satisfying. In fact, it's going to satisfy you more than you can imagine.

So you have goodwill for yourself in aspiring to that goal, and goodwill for others in the realization that in the course of developing that path, and in the course of reaching that goal, you're going to be learning how to be more and more harmless all the time. There are so many ways in which people look for happiness in the world that cause a lot of harm, and because it's their happiness, they turn a blind eye to the harm. They're very irresponsible.

But this is a path with no blindness. This is a path that's responsible, that causes no harm to anybody in any direction. That's how you show your goodwill for yourself and for beings all around.

Think of the qualities you develop as you follow the path: generosity, virtue, meditation. The generosity is an expression of compassion. All the brahmavihāras are there, embodied in your practice, but we go beyond the brahmavihāras.

There's a passage where the Buddha talks about how, in a previous lifetime, he happened to be a king. The tradition within that line of kings was that as soon as you had your first white hair, you would abandon your kingdom, pass it over to your son, then go off into the forest and develop the brahmavihāras. And so, he said he did that. He added, however it did not lead to dispassion, it did not lead to nibbana. The brahmavihāras, on their own, are not a path all the

way. But they can be part of the path, and part of the motivation for following the path.

This again, is where equanimity comes in: realizing that there's more you've got to do, because the brahmavihāras are fabricated states. If you just stay with those fabrications, you're never really free. Freedom comes when you can look at the mind as it fabricates things, and then step back from its fabrications. We do that as we develop the path, because right view, which is part of the path, encourages us to step back even from the path when it's completely developed.

As the Buddha said, of all the dhammas of the world that are fabricated, the path is the highest. But of all the dhammas of the world, whether fabricated or unfabricated, dispassion is higher. Dispassion comes when you see that the best you can do with fabrication is to develop long-term happiness—but the long-term is eventually going to end, and you want something better.

So you look at those fabrications and develop dispassion for them and through that dispassion you see something that's unfabricated—which, because it doesn't depend on any causes at all, is totally harmless, and at that point doesn't require any effort.

Ajaan Fuang said that one of Ajaan Lee's most memorable quotes was when he said that "Nibbana is easy." Of course, he didn't mean that it's easy to get there, it's simply that once you're there, you don't have to take care of it. You don't have to look after it; you don't have to maintain it. It's just there. So it places no burden on you and, of course, it places no burden on anyone else. It's something entirely separate and entirely good—far, far more valuable than whatever effort goes into gaining it.

So even though the Buddha didn't awaken to the four brahmavihāras on the night of his awakening, they were there in his heart: motivating him in his practice and then motivating him as he taught.

They say that the Buddha, after his awakening, began to doubt whether it was worth the effort to teach or not. The commentaries stumble all over themselves saying that he didn't really mean that doubt. He was just playing coy, waiting for someone to invite him.

But I think he generally did have that freedom to choose: That's the point. When you're awakened like that, fully awakened, you have no debt to anybody. He was free not to teach. There was no compulsion in his teaching at all. But because he had developed that compassion, goodwill, all the brahmavihāras, he chose to teach, and we've been benefiting from that ever since.

So as you practice, try to develop the brahmavihāras as part of your practice, to nourish your motivation, but also as a reality check: being willing to do whatever needs to be done. If you have that kind of willingness, then there's nothing much standing in your way.