

Head & Heart Together

Thai forest monk Thanissaro Bhikkhu teaches us how to use wisdom to cultivate compassion
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The brahma-viharas, or “sublime attitudes,” are the Buddha’s primary heart teachings—the ones that connect most directly with our desire for true happiness. The term “brahma-vihara” literally means “dwelling place of brahmas.” Brahmas are gods who live in the higher heavens, dwelling in an attitude of unlimited goodwill, unlimited compassion, unlimited empathetic joy, and unlimited equanimity. These unlimited attitudes can be developed from the more limited versions of these emotions that we experience in the human heart.

Of these four emotions, goodwill (*metta*) is the most fundamental. It’s the wish for true happiness, a wish you can direct to yourself or to others. Goodwill was the underlying motivation that led the Buddha to search for awakening and to teach the path to awakening to others after he had found it.

The next two emotions in the list are essentially applications of goodwill. Compassion (*karuna*) is what goodwill feels when it encounters suffering: it wants the suffering to stop. Empathetic joy (*mudita*) is what goodwill feels when it encounters happiness: it wants the happiness to continue. Equanimity (*upekkha*) is a different emotion, in that it acts as an aid to and a check on the other three. When you encounter suffering that you can’t stop no matter how hard you try, you need equanimity to avoid creating additional suffering and to channel your energies to areas where you *can* be of help. In this way, equanimity isn’t cold-hearted or indifferent. It simply makes your goodwill more focused and effective.

Making these attitudes limitless requires work. It’s easy to feel goodwill, compassion, and empathetic joy for people you like and love, but there are bound to be people you dislike—often for very good reasons. Similarly, there are many people for whom it’s easy to feel equanimity: people you don’t know or don’t really care about. But it’s hard to feel equanimity when people you love are suffering. Yet if you want to develop the brahma-viharas, you have to include all of these people within the

scope of your awareness so that you can apply the proper attitude no matter where or when. This is where your heart needs the help of your head.

All too often, meditators believe that *if* they can simply add a little more heart juice, a little more emotional oomph, to their brahma-vihara practice, their attitudes can become limitless. But if something inside you keeps churning up reasons for liking this person or hating that one, your practice starts feeling hypocritical. You wonder who you're trying to fool. Or, after a month devoted to the practice, you still find yourself thinking black thoughts about people who cut you off in traffic—to say nothing of people who've done the world serious harm.

This is where the head comes in. If we think of the heart as the side of the mind that wants happiness, the head is the side that understands how cause and effect actually work. If your head and heart can learn to cooperate—that is, *if your head can give priority to finding the causes for true happiness, and your heart can learn to embrace those causes*—then the training of the mind can go far.

This is why the Buddha taught the brahma-viharas in a context of head teachings: the principle of causality as it plays out in (1) karma and (2) the process of fabrication that shapes emotions within the body and mind. The more we can get our heads around these teachings, the easier it will be to put our whole heart into developing attitudes that truly are sublime. An understanding of karma helps to explain *what* we're doing as we develop the brahma-viharas and *why* we might want to do so in the first place. An understanding of fabrication helps to explain *how* we can take our human heart and convert it into a place where brahmas could dwell.

The teaching on karma starts with the principle that people experience happiness and sorrow based on a combination of their past and present intentions. If we act with unskillful intentions either for ourselves or for others, we're going to suffer. If we act with skillful intentions, we'll experience happiness. So if we want to be happy, we have to train our intentions to always be skillful. This is the first reason for developing the brahma-viharas: so that we can make our intentions more trustworthy.

Some people say that unlimited goodwill comes naturally to us, that our Buddha-nature is intrinsically compassionate. But the Buddha never said anything about Buddha-nature. What he *did* say is that the

mind is even more variegated than the animal world. We're capable of anything. So what are we going to do with this capability?

We could do—and have done—almost anything, but the one thing the Buddha *does* assume across the board is that deep down inside we want to take this capability and devote it to happiness. So **the first lesson of karma is that if you really want to be happy**, you can't trust that deep down you know the right thing to do ...[and] unskillful intentions would take over and you wouldn't even know it. Instead, **you have to be heedful to recognize unskillful intentions for what they are, and to act only on skillful ones**. The way to ensure that you'll stay heedful is to take your desire for happiness and spread it around.

The second lesson of karma is that just as you're the primary architect of your own happiness and suffering, other people are the primary architects of theirs. If you really want them to be happy, you don't just treat them nicely. You also want them to learn how to create the causes for happiness. If you can, you want to show them how to do that. This is why the gift of dharma—lessons in how to give rise to true happiness— is the greatest gift. In the Buddha's most famous example of how to express an attitude of unlimited goodwill, he doesn't simply express a wish for universal happiness.

He also adds a wish that all beings avoid the causes that would lead them to unhappiness: "Let no one deceive another or despise anyone anywhere, or through anger or irritation wish for another to suffer." (*Sutta Nipata 1.8*) So if you're using visualization as part of your goodwill practice, don't visualize people simply as smiling, surrounded willy-nilly by wealth and sensual pleasures. Visualize them acting, speaking, and thinking skillfully. If they're currently acting on unskillful intentions, visualize them changing their ways. Then act to realize those visualizations if you can.

A similar principle applies to compassion and empathetic joy. Learn to feel compassion not only for people who are already suffering, but also for those who are engaging in unskillful actions that will lead to future suffering. This means, if possible, trying to stop them from doing those things. And learn to feel empathetic joy not only for those who are already happy, but also for those whose actions will lead to future happiness. If you have the opportunity, give them encouragement.

But you also have to realize that no matter how unlimited the scope of these positive emotions, their effect is going to run into limits. In other words, regardless of how strong your goodwill or compassion may be, there are bound to be people whose past actions are unskillful and who cannot or will not change their ways in the present. This is why you need equanimity as your reality check. When you encounter areas where you can't be of help, you learn not to get upset. Think about the universality of the principle of karma: it applies to everyone regardless of whether you like them or not. That puts you in a position where you can see more clearly what can be changed, where you can be of help. In other words, equanimity isn't a blanket acceptance of things as they are. It's a tool for helping you to develop discernment as to which kinds of suffering you have to accept and which ones you don't.

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[This is Part One of a three-part presentation.]