

BRAHMAVIHĀRA: A THERAVĀDA PERSPECTIVE

Dhammadinna¹ & Nilima Chawhan², Ph. D.

¹Ph.D. Research Scholar, Samrat Ashok Subharti School of Buddhist Studies, Swami Vivekanand Subharti University, Subhartipuram, NH-58, Delhi Haridwar Meerut Bypass Road, Merut-250005 udhammadinna.udd1947@gmail.com

²Associate Professor and Head, SASSBS, SVSU, Meerut-250005.



[Scholarly Research Journal's](http://www.srjis.com) is licensed Based on a work at www.srjis.com

According to Buddha teaching, there are four sublime states of mind. There are Loving-kindness (*mettā*), Compassion (*karunā*), Sympathetic Joy (*muditā*) and Equanimity (*upekkhā*). In *Pāli*, the language of the Buddhist scriptures, these four are known under the name of *Brahmavihāra*, a term which may be rendered as excellent, lofty, or sublime states of mind; or alternatively, as *Brahma*-like, god-like or divine abodes.

These four attitudes are said to be excellent or sublime because they are the right or ideal way of conduct towards living beings (*sattesu sammā patipatti*). They provide, in fact, the answer to all situations arising from social contact. They are the great removers of tension, the great peace-makers in social conflict and the great healers of wounds suffered in the struggle of existence. They level social barriers, build harmonious communities, awaken slumbering magnanimity long forgotten, revive joy and hope long abandoned, and promote human brotherhood against the forces of egotism.

The *Brahmavihāras* are incompatible with a hating state of mind, and in that they are akin to *Brahma* - the divine but transient ruler of the higher heavens in the traditional Buddhist picture of the universe. In contrast to many other, conceptions of deities, East and West, who by their own devotees are said to show anger, wrath, jealousy and “righteous indignation,” *Brahma* is free from hate; and one who assiduously develops these four sublime states, by conduct and meditation, is said to become an equal of *Brahma* (*brahma-samo*). If they become the dominant influence in his mind, he will be reborn in congenial worlds, the realms of *Brahma*. Therefore, these states of mind are called god-like, *Brahma*-like.

They are called abodes (*vihāra*) because they should become the mind's constant dwelling-places where we feel “at home”; they should not remain merely places of rare and short visits, soon forgotten. In other words, our minds should become thoroughly saturated by

Copyright © 2020, Scholarly Research Journal for Humanity Science & English Language

them. They should become our inseparable companions, and we should be mindful of them in all our common activities. As the *Mettā Sutta*, the Song of Loving-kindness says:

When standing, walking, sitting, lying down,
Whenever he feels free of tiredness,
Let him establish well this mindfulness -
This, it is said, is the Divine Abode.

These four - love, compassion, sympathetic joy and equanimity are also known as the boundless states (*appamāna*). Because in their perfection and their true nature, they should not be narrowed by any limitation as to the range of beings towards whom they are extended. They should be non-exclusive and impartial, not bound by selective preferences or prejudices. A mind that has attained to that boundlessness of the *Brahmavihāras* will not harbour any national, racial, religious or class hatred.

But unless rooted in a strong natural affinity with such a mental attitude, it will certainly not be easy for us to effect that boundless application by a deliberate effort of will and to avoid consistently any kind or degree of partiality. To achieve that, in most cases, we shall have to use these four qualities not only as principles of conduct and objects of reflection but also as subjects of methodical meditation. That meditation is called *Brahmavihāra bhāvanā*, the meditative development of the sublime states. The practical aim is to achieve, with the help of these sublime states, those high stages of mental concentration called *jhana*, “meditative absorption”. The meditations on love, compassion and sympathetic joy may each produce the attainment of the first three absorptions, while the meditation on equanimity will lead to the fourth *jhana* only, in which equanimity is the most significant factor.

Generally speaking, persistent meditative practice will have two crowning effects: first, it will make these four qualities sink deep into the heart so that they become spontaneous attitudes not easily overthrown; second, it will bring out and secure their boundless extension, the unfolding of their all-embracing range. In fact, the detailed instructions given in the Buddhist scriptures for the practice of these four meditations are clearly intended to gradually unfold the boundlessness of the sublime states. They systematically break down all barriers restricting their application to particular individuals or places.

In meditative exercises, the selection for people to whom thoughts of love, compassion or sympathetic joy are directed, proceeds from the easier to the more difficult. For instance, when meditating on loving-kindness, one starts with an aspiration for one's own well-being, using it as a point of reference for gradual extension: "Just as I wish to be happy and free from suffering, so may that being ... May all beings be happy and free from suffering!" Then one extends the thought of loving-kindness to a person for whom one has a loving respect, as, for instance, a teacher; then to dearly beloved people, to indifferent ones, and finally to enemies, if any, or those disliked. Since this meditation is concerned with the welfare of the living, one should not choose people who have died; one should also avoid choosing people towards whom one may have feelings of sexual attraction.

After one has been able to cope with the hardest task, to direct one's thoughts of loving-kindness to disagreeable people, one should now "break down the barriers" (*simsambheda*). Without making any discrimination between those four types of people, one should extend one's loving-kindness to them equally. At that point of the practice one will have come to the higher stages of concentration: with the appearance of the mental reflex-image (*patibhaga-nimitta*), "access concentration" (*upacara samādhi*) will have been reached, and further progress will lead to the full concentration (*appana*) of the first jhana, then the higher jhanas.

For spatial expansion, the practice starts with those in one's immediate environment such as one's family, then extends to the neighbouring houses, to those on the whole street, the town, country, other countries and the entire world. In "pervasion of the directions", one's thought of loving-kindness is directed first to the east, then to the west, north, south, the intermediate directions, the zenith and nadir. The same principles of practice apply to the meditative development of compassion, sympathetic joy and equanimity, with due variations in the selection of people. Details of the practice will be found in the texts (see *Visuddhimagga*, Chapter IX).

The ultimate aim of attaining the jhanas on the *Brahmavihāras* is to produce a state of mind that can serve as a firm basis for the liberating insight into the true nature of all phenomena, as being impermanent, liable to suffering and unsubstantial. A mind that has achieved meditative absorption induced by the sublime states will be pure, tranquil, firm, collected and free of coarse selfishness. It will thus be well prepared for the final work of deliverance which can be completed only by insight.

The preceding remarks show that there are two ways of developing the sublime states: first by practical conduct and an appropriate direction of thoughts; and second by methodical meditation aiming at the absorptions. Each will prove helpful to the other. Methodical meditative practice will help love, compassion, joy and equanimity to become spontaneous. It will help make the mind firmer and calmer in withstanding the numerous irritations in life that challenge us to maintain these four qualities in thoughts, words and deeds.

On the other hand, if one's practical conduct is increasingly governed by these sublime states, the mind will harbour less resentment, tension and irritability, the reverberations of which often subtly intrude into the hours of meditation, forming there the "hindrance of restlessness". Our everyday life and thought has a strong influence on the meditative mind; only if the gap between them is persistently narrowed will there be a chance for steady meditative progress and for achieving the highest aim of our practice.

Meditative development of the sublime states will be aided by repeated reflection upon their qualities, the benefits they bestow and the dangers from their opposites. As the Buddha says, "What a person considers and reflects upon for a long time, to that his mind will bend and incline."¹

Meditation on loving-kindness (*mettā bhāvanā*) means developing thoughts of loving-kindness towards others. Meditation on compassion (*karunā bhāvanā*) is developing compassionate feelings towards other beings to escape from suffering. Sympathetic joy (*muditā*) means joy or rejoicing with others in their continued happiness and prosperity. Equanimity (*upekkhā*) is a feeling of indifference with no concern or anxiety regarding other's happiness or sorrow, having a neutral feeling thinking that things inevitably happen according to the law of *kamma*, as the consequence of wholesome or unwholesome deeds.

This way of living is very useful and everyone should live in our daily life. If we live like this, we can notice and obstruct immediately when we err. We can eliminate defilements quickly. If we do not notice, it is a bigger mistake. People who guard their own minds and thoughts are different from other.

According to Buddhism, we have to practice three meritorious deeds which are generosity (*Dāna*), morality (*Sīla*) and meditation (*Bhāvanā*) to get rid of suffering and reach the real happiness. Practicing generosity (*Dāna*) is the first meritorious deed that helps us to go on the path of purification. It is like ornaments which decorate our mind with happiness.

¹Nyanaponika Thera, The four sublime states, 1994.

The second meritorious deed that gives us peace of mind is practicing morality (*Sīla*) to control our behavior and speech which is higher than generosity. The third and the most important merit is meditation, mental culture (*Bhāvanā*) such as loving-kindness or breathing meditation and so on. Meditation is the highest, fastest and most successful way to develop our spirit to the maximum level.

Research shows that this way of living has a tremendous amount of benefits and the prime thing for purification of all our actions. It increases positive emotions and decreases negative emotions. It heals severe physical and mental ailments. It reduces depression, illness, migraine pain, emotional tension and slows aging.

According to texts, *Brahmavihārabhāvanā*, the development of the Four Divine sentiments has come to occupy a central position in Buddhist life and forms an essential preliminary in the field of mental training in Buddhism. From the ethical point of view these principles constitute the moral foundation of man and are indispensable to his happiness and peace. The four *Brahmavihāradhamma* plays an important role and a state which ought not to forget to be secure and peaceful in human society as generally parents care for their children by way of those four sublime states.

In the Buddhist system the *Brahmavihāra* together with higher meditation tends to *Nibbāna* (*Nirvāna*) as the ultimate goal; but if they are not developed to that height, the immediate result is the attainment of the *Brahma* world. The *Brahmavihāras* are incompatible with a hating state of mind, and in that they are like *Brahma*, the divine but transient ruler of the higher heavens in the traditional Buddhist picture of the universe. *Brahma* is free from hate, anger, jealousy, harbour and resentment (*averā* and *abyapajjā*, etc); and in the *DonabrahmaSutta* of the *Aṅguttaranikāya*, it is said by the Buddha that one who constantly develops these four sublime states, by conduct and meditation, is said to become equal to *Brahma*, (*Brahma-samo*). If they become the dominant influence in his mind, he will be reborn in pleasant worlds, the realms of *Brahma*. Therefore, these states of mind are called God-like, *Brahmā*-like. In *Pāli*, it goes like this;

*So ime cattāro brahmavihārā bhāvetākāyassabhedāparamarnaṃsugatim
brahmalokaṃ upapajjat, Evaṃ kho Dona brahmano brahmasamo hoti.*²

²A. Vols.ii.p.198.line.12.GS.Vols.iii. p.165.

The Buddha's Teaching on the Four *Brahmavihāra* is wide in scope and great in depth. While the territory of their direct experience is universal, timeless and entirely transcultural, the actual concept of the *brahmavihāra* probably has its origins somewhere in pre-Buddhist India.³ In the Buddhist Teaching the *Brahmavihāra* take a role of central importance; references to the whole group of Four and to each of them individually can be found from the oldest strata of Buddhist texts (e.g. the *Suttanipāta*)⁴ up to the works of the later commentarial tradition⁵ in all the great sections of the *Pāli* Canon and indeed all forms of later Buddhist literature.⁶

Literally at the heart of human experience, they are qualities of mind referred to in the early *Pāli* texts where they are understood to take place in – and in turn affect – a continuum of experience called *citta*. The *Pāli* term *citta* is rendered in English both as mind and as heart⁷ and represents the process we intuit as the experiential centre of our being. The nature of the *citta* is described in the *Pāli*-Suttas as inherently luminous and pure (*pabhassaram*). Rather than being an immutable nucleus at the core of our existence, the *citta* is dynamic, resonant and highly changeable – indeed, it is hard to find a simile for the speed at which it can change. The *citta* may be malleable, lofty and expansive – or it can be neglected and obscured with adventitious defilements (A. I 7); occasionally, it may even turn into the proverbial monkey-mind (*kapicittam*; J 435, 6). If untroubled and tamed, it is capable of recognizing its own good, the good of others and the common good. Most importantly, if understood as it truly is (*yathābhūtam*) it can be developed through development and completely liberated. (A. I 10)

The *Brahmavihāra*, the *Brahmā*-like abodes are sublime expressions of the *citta* in differing tones of universal empathy. On one level these *Brahmavihāra* are paradigms of a free mind and Buddhist ideals of how to live in the relational world; they are the standard

³The *Brahmavihāra* are enumerated in Jaina literature in the *Tattvārthādhigamasūtra* (7.6) and in *Patañjali's YogaSūtra-s*, (i, 33. *samādhi-pāda*). In both texts they are found as a group (*maitrī, karunā, muditā, upeksā*) without explicitly being referred to as *brahmavihāra*. While the dating of the *Yoga Sūtras* is problematic (learned opinions suggest a range from the 2nd century B.C. to the 4th century A.D.) it seems undecided whether these texts show Buddhist influences.

⁴E.g. Snip 73 (*Khaggavisāna-sutta*); M i 36 / MN 7 (*Vatthūpama-sutta*); M ii 74 (*Maghadeva-sutta*); can be considered as *locus classicus*; D i 251 / D 13 (*Tevijja-sutta*), many more.

⁵Pts ii 136 (*Maggangavāro*); Vism chap. ix, (*Brahmavihāraniddeso*/Description of the Divine Abidings)

⁶For a late example see e.g. Machik Labdrön: An Explanation of the Four Limitless Attitudes (Machik Namshe)

⁷In this essay I shall use the terms heart and mind synonymously to render the double meaning of *citta*.

Dhamma practice for the human realm – the realm of being affected by people, events, things ourselves, our own moods, our own limitations and disappointments (Sucitto, 2003).

All four of them refer to a quality of intrinsic non-separateness in human experience and to a set of *inherent* and *boundless* qualities of being, fundamental to all our understanding of health, wellbeing and happiness. On the one hand, being *inherent*, they form the basis of our capacity to relationship and are indispensable to any emotional, personal, social and spiritual development. In this respect it can be said that they are at the core of our nature and constitute our humanity proper. On the other hand, being *boundless*, they are the natural expression of a mind unfettered and not clinging to any self; they manifest the activity of an enlightened heart entirely free from all affective and cognitive impurities and represent the culmination of the Buddhist path.

All of the four *Brahmavihāra* apply in the human, the relational world. They are essentially forms of love and a profound willingness to see, welcome, accept and resonate with others. The name Abiding of *Brahmā* or *Brahmā*-like abiding comes from the Vedic deity *Brahmā*, whom the Buddhists have adopted and given a celestial place in their cosmology.

When these qualities of empathetic connection in one's mind and heart have been developed to maturity, they have become truly immeasurable and are referred to as boundless deliverance of the heart (*appamānā cetovimutti*). (M.iii.145; and S.iv.296)⁸ The latter text goes on to state that the qualities which are said to measure or limit the heart are desire (*rāga*), hatred (*dosa*) and delusion (*moha*), in particular a most suffering inducing type of delusion that insists on the existence of a permanent and separate entity called myself. To the degree that our deliverance of heart has become unshakeable (*akuppa*), we are effectively delivered from our mistaken notion of a separate selfhood and all the anguish that goes with it.

The empathetic nature of all four of the *Brahmavihāra* is such that they enable us to access the aspect of non-separateness in our experience of the world and the other. This means that whenever we allow ourselves to rest in one of these Four Immeasurables, we are

⁸Anuruddha Sutta (M 127) and S 41, 7 (Godatto-sutta)

operating in a mode of mind and heart that is radically opposed to our habitual experience of self versus-world-and-other.⁹

References:-

- Visuddhimagga* (Engl. transl. as *Path of Purification*)
Mahasi sayadaw, *Brahmavihāradhamma*. (Selangor Buddhist Vipassana Meditation Society, Malaysia. 2005)
- Ashin Janakābhivaṃsa, *Abhidhamma in Daily Life*. (International Theravada Buddhist Missionary University, Yangon. 1999)
- T.W. Rhys Davids and William Stede, *Pāli-English Dictionary*, (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers, 1997)
- Karl H. Potter, *Encyclopedia of Indian Philosophy*, Vol IX. (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers, 2008)
- Lord Chalmers (tr), *Buddha's Teachings*. (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers, 2000)
- Tevijja Sutta and Mahā-Sudassana Sutta (trns. by Rhys Davids, 1899)
- Kala Acharaya (Dr). **Buddhanusamiti** (Mumbai: Samaiya Publication, 2002)
- Lord Chalmers (ed), *Majjhimanikāya*. (London: Pāli Text Society, 1899)
- Phra Dhammapitaka, *Dictionary of Buddhism*. (Bangkok: Mahachulalongkom Buddhist University Press, 1995)
- M.K. Gandhi, "TRUTH IS GOD" (Ahmadabad: Navajivan Publishing House, July 2002,)
- Arahant Upatissa. *The Path of Freedom (Vimuttimagga) Translated into English by N.R.M. Ehara, Soma Thera, and Kheminda Thera*. (Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society, 1995)
- Bhikkhu Nanamoli (tr), *The Path of discrimination (Patisambhidāmagga)*. (London: The Pali Text Society, 1991)
- Buddhavamsa pāli, khuddakanikāya*, (Yangon: the Religious Affairs, 1997)
- Bhaddanta Vicittasārābhivaṃsa, the Great Chronicle of the Buddha, Vol. 1, Part. 1, Trans by U Ko Lay and U Tin Lwin*, (Yangon: 1991)
- Dhammasanganī pāli, khuddakanikāya*, (Yangon: the Religious Affairs, 1997)
- Mulapaṇṇāsa pāli, Majjhimanikāya*, (Yangon: the Ministry of Religious Affairs, 1997)

Website Sources

- www.google.com
<http://www.buddhanet.net/e-learning/buddhism/lifebuddha/21>.
<https://www.insightmeditationcenter.org>
<https://www.dhamma.org>

⁹The Pali text call this *sabbadhi sabbattatāya sabbāvantaṃ lokam* – the entire world everywhere and equally (D 13)