

Brahmaviharas - Part Two

Our speaker this week was Jim Bronson, the Director of Community Outreach and Education at [Kara](#). Kara is a center offering compassionate peer support and education to individuals, families and organizations coping with death and dying.)

Jim continued an excellent talk on the Brahmaviharas, begun last week by Jennifer Block, who discussed *metta* and *karuna*. Jim spoke of the other two Brahmavihara's, altruistic joy (*mudita*) and equanimity (*upekkha*).

To recap last week:

There are four Brahmaviharas (Sublime Abodes, or Divine Shelters):

- *Metta*: loving-kindness towards all; the hope that a person will be well; loving kindness is "the wish that all sentient beings, without any exception, be happy."
- *Karuna*: compassion; the hope that a person's sufferings will diminish; compassion is the "wish for all sentient beings to be free from suffering."
- *Mudita*: altruistic joy in the accomplishments of a person, oneself or other; sympathetic joy, "is the wholesome attitude of rejoicing in the happiness and virtues of all sentient beings."
- *Upekkha*: equanimity, or learning to accept both loss and gain, praise and blame, success and failure with detachment, equally, for oneself and for others; equanimity means "not to distinguish between friend, enemy or stranger, but regard every sentient being as equal. It is a clear-minded tranquil state of mind - not being overpowered by delusions, mental dullness or agitation."

We are just entering the rainy season. The monsoons in India and South Asia signal a period in which the followers of the Buddha traditionally seek shelter and enter intensive meditation retreats. In Theravada Buddhism, the rainy season is a time to look inward.

The Brahmaviharas are shelters. Other things, too, can be shelters. Earlier in the day, Jim attended the Tim Griffin House Dedication. Tim was a young man who had turned his life around after a period of drug addiction and was just starting a new future at age 21, when he was stabbed to death at an SF Giant's game after a senseless altercation.

His family and friends established the Tim Griffith Memorial Fund to keep his spirit close and help prevent the profound grief and loss to other families that such violence causes. The Tim Griffith House (<http://www.rembertim.com>) is a halfway house that provides a shelter to those affected by violence, addiction, and personal hardship. Because the House provides shelter and protection, it too, is a Brahmavihara.

"Whenever you have doubts or sad thoughts just remember this is a small period of time and it's kind of like climbing up a steep cliff to get to the beautiful waterfall." - Tim

When practicing the Brahmaviharas, be aware of the enemies. The Brahmavihara's have enemies, both near and far. The far enemy is obvious - it is usually the opposite of the Brahmavihara.

- For loving-kindness (*metta*), the far enemy is hatred.
- For compassion (*karuna*), the far enemy is cruelty.
- For sympathetic joy (*mudita*), the far enemy is envy
- For equanimity (*upekkha*), the far enemy is greed or anger.

The near-enemy, however, is more subtle, and perhaps more dangerous -- it is a state that resembles and can masquerade as the original.

- For loving-kindness (*metta*), the near enemy is attachment, or selfish affection.
- For compassion (*karuna*), the near enemy is pity.
- For sympathetic joy (*mudita*), the near enemy is comparison, hypocrisy, or insincerity
- For equanimity (*upekkha*), the near enemy is indifference.

Exercise care to avoid practicing near-enemies, thinking they are the Brahmavihara's. The following are quotes from various sources.

Sympathetic-Joy from Charlotte Bell (Yoga instructor):

We live in a society that believes in winners and losers. We spend many hours watching competitive sports. We are happy when our team wins, and we hate the other team when they win. We compare our own successes with those of our peers. We often envy and resent the success and happiness of peers as if they are taking something away from us, as if there is a little stockpile of success and happiness somewhere and they have taken more than their share, leaving less for us. The other person's success is a reflection of our lack thereof. Or is it? Is it possible that the amount of love, happiness and success available to worldly beings is not finite? How would it feel to rejoice in the happiness of our fellow humans?

The Buddha said, "In a battle, the winners and losers both lose." It is easy to understand the loss of the losers, but the winners? The winners lose because those around them envy them and become resentful of them. Eventually their position is challenged until their power is lost. The cycle of winning and losing is continuously changing and appears not to be a reflection of one's absolute superiority or inferiority.

In Buddhist psychology, the third of the four brahma viharas (divine abodes, or god-like qualities that exist within us) is a state called mudita, or sympathetic joy. Mudita is defined as a rejoicing in the happiness of others. (It is interesting to note that there is no word for this concept in our language.) The Buddha called mudita a "rare and beautiful quality." It is a boundless state that responds to others' successes not with withdrawal or envy, but with active delight. Cultivating the quality of mudita helps uproot the unhappy states of envy, judgment and comparison. It is also said to be the most difficult of the brahma viharas to develop.

The tendency of human beings to judge others according to our own preferences is a quality that hinders our ability to generate mudita. Again, this is a way of defining others in reference to ourselves. When a person makes a choice that we would not make and it brings them happiness, how do we react?

There is a tendency to discount someone's happiness when it is derived from an activity or lifestyle choice that is not our preference. Do others' choices really threaten the validity of our own? Or are their unique tastes and choices simply a complementary color that makes the fabric of humanity even more magnificent? When we begin to see others without self-referential judgment, we can learn to celebrate their happiness and respect their choices-as long as those choices are not causing harm-without judging them. Our negative judgments of others do not elevate us. Instead, they serve only to create unhappiness for ourselves and those around us.

The traditional practice is to extend the brahma vihara to ourselves first and then to others. In the weeks of intensive practice I observed that sending lovingkindness, compassion and sympathetic joy to others did not diminish my supply. In fact, I was able to see that the more I shared, the more these states began to fill me until I could not contain them. They had to be shared. I realized that love and happiness are self-generating and self-replenishing. They are not qualities you need to acquire from somewhere else. They do not increase when we keep them to ourselves. Rather they are qualities that are strengthened and multiplied in the sharing.

You can begin practicing mudita by bringing to mind someone you care about who is experiencing success and happiness. Bring your focus to this person's current source of happiness. Reflect on their joy and success, and say to yourself, "May your happiness continue forever," or "May your happiness not diminish," or "May your good fortune continue." As you begin to feel connection with the person's happiness you can extend well wishes to others you know. You may even want to extend mudita to someone you know who is currently suffering. Here, you can focus on whatever part of this person's life is happy.

You can also practice mudita by celebrating the success of someone you don't like. It is common for people to wish for the unhappiness of those we don't like, and to be especially frustrated when we observe that they are happy. Here is where an understanding of compassion and the suffering that visits everyone's life is useful. Observe your mind state when you want to deny the happiness of someone you don't like. Do you really wish for this person to experience only suffering? How does it feel to wish for someone only to suffer? What kind of environment are we creating in our own minds? In contrast, how does it feel to allow for someone's current success, knowing that at other times in their lives they-like we-sometimes experience pain and difficulty? It is helpful to remember to be patient with yourself in this and any other meditation practice. Sympathetic joy can be a challenging practice, especially if the habit of

comparing or judging is one you have cultivated over time. I have found though, that the rewards easily surpass the challenges.

Mudita is a pure, profound and liberating state. Developing mudita unhooks us from envy, avarice, comparisons and judgment, which underlie the unhappiness of the human condition. In the celebration of the happiness of those around us we create a brightness of mind and heart that benefits ourselves and everyone whose lives we touch.

- Charlotte Bell

Marcus Borg cautions us to avoid delay.

*Life is short,
and we do not have much time
to gladden the hearts of those
who travel with us.
So be swift to love, and
Make haste to be kind.*

- Marcus Borg

From [BuddhaNet](#)

Not only to compassion, but also to joy with others open your heart! Noble and sublime joy is a helper on the path to the extinction of suffering. Not he who is depressed by grief, but one possessed of joy finds that serene calmness leading to a contemplative state of mind. And only a mind serene and collected is able to gain the liberating wisdom.

Equanimity

From [Vipassana Fellowship](#)

Equanimity is a perfect, unshakable balance of mind, rooted in insight. Looking at the world around us, and looking into our own heart, we see clearly how difficult it is to attain and maintain balance of mind.

From Joseph Goldstein

In the broadest conception of the path, in the vast context of spiritual practice, we cultivate and nourish certain qualities that support and propel us forward into freedom. The Pali word parami refers to ten wholesome qualities in our minds and the accumulated power they bring to us: generosity, morality, renunciation, wisdom, energy, patience, truthfulness, resolve, lovingkindness, and equanimity. . . . Parami does not come from some being outside ourselves; rather, it comes from our own gradually accumulated purity. A Buddhist understanding of reliance on a higher power would not

necessarily involve reliance on some supernatural being. It is, rather, a reliance on those forces of purity in ourselves that are outside our small, constricted sense of I, and that constitute the source of grace in our lives.

--Joseph Goldstein, Insight Meditation (from Everyday Mind, edited by Jean Smith, a Tricycle book)

The Guest House by Rumi

*This being human is a guest house.
Every morning a new arrival.
A joy, a depression, a meanness,
some momentary awareness comes
as an unexpected visitor.*

*Welcome and entertain them all!
Even if they're a crowd of sorrows,
who violently sweep your house
empty of its furniture,
still, treat each guest honorably.*

*He may be clearing you out
for some new delight.
The dark thought, the shame, the malice,
meet them at the door laughing,
and invite them in.*

*Be grateful for whoever comes,
because each has been sent
as a guide from beyond.*

The Kalama Sutra

*Do not believe in anything simply because you have heard it.
Do not believe in traditions simply because they have been handed down for many generations.
Do not believe in anything simply because it is spoken and rumored by many.
Do not believe in anything simply because it is found written in your religious books.
Do not believe in anything merely on the authority of your teachers and elders.
But when, after observation and analysis, you find anything that agrees with reason and is conducive to the good and benefit of one and all, then accept it and live up to it
-- The Buddha*

For more talks by Jim Bronson see: http://www.dharmaweb.org/index.php/Jim_Bronson