

Brahmavihāra and Emptiness: Six-day online practice course

Video lecture transcription

Video Lecture 1: Brahmavihāra 1

Welcome. This is the first of two talks I want to give on the topic of the *brahmavihāras*, the divine abodes, and their meditative practice, sometimes also referred to as the *appamāṇas*, the boundless states.

And I thought I start with my own personal experience. This is way back when I was, had just become a monk, some maybe 25 years ago, or even more. And my personality is anger. I have, I am an anger type, and my mind is very quick to get into a rage, very good at finding faults. And so I was recommended to practice *mettā*. And so I did in the traditional form. As you know there's these set of phrases, which one uses to express *mettā*. And then you direct them to self, a friend, a neutral person, an enemy. And I kept doing that and doing that and doing that, and it had really no result. It didn't have the effect that I was anticipating. And after some time I realized that for some reason, maybe I'm, my nature is such that *mettā* doesn't work for me, or whatever it is. But I just keep doing this and no results.

And that was the time when I started to read the suttas. At that time I still didn't know the other languages to do the comparative study. As I keep reading the suttas, I found that there is actually this idea of myself, friend, neutral person, enemy – is not found in the suttas at all. And instead they describe this boundless radiation. One just arouses this condition of *mettā* and then it just goes out into all directions.

And I came to one discourse, this is the *Dhānañjāni-sutta* in *Brāhmaṇa-vagga* of the *Majjhima-nikāya*. And there we have this brahmin, he's a friend of Venerable Sāriputta. And at an earlier time he has clearly been acting in morally reprehensive ways. He has been doing unwholesome things and Sāriputta gives him a teaching – “You shouldn't do like that”. And on this other occasion he's on his death bed. He is dying and he is in severe pain. And Sāriputta gives him a, like a, tries to, he has come, trying to help him to navigate this moment of passing away. And at that time Sāriputta gives him a teaching on the cultivation of the *brahmavihāras*.

So this person, we can be quite sure he was not a meditator. And he gets this teaching apparently for the first time, and the discourse continues saying that he was reborn in the Brahma world after passing away – which is the kind of rebirth to be expected from someone who has successfully cultivated this boundless radiation. So when I read this discourse it became clear to me that this idea that one should just do these individual beings with phrases, and only when one has obtained absorption in this method is one ready to do this boundless radiation – that this doesn't really fit so well with what we find in the suttas. In fact the, this – can we call it a discovery, understanding, realization? – that I got from this discourse was what really inspired me to do all my research eventually, my whole “career” if you like, as an academic, started with that understanding – with this realization that however much the commentarial tradition has really preserved a lot of important and interesting perspectives, they can differ considerably from the suttas. There's a historical time between these centuries, of differences in understanding, and we should not look at the suttas *through* the lenses of the commentaries, but we should see them as really two distinct perspectives. And then eventually later finding that this perspective of the suttas can further be improved by looking at the parallels of other oral transmission lineages.

And so when I just started to work with this instruction as it is in the suttas, just trying to arouse that condition really at the heart level, at the mind level, and not relying just on phrases that I'm telling myself, and specially trying to have this broad mental condition, this boundless radiation – suddenly it started to work. Suddenly my tendency towards anger started indeed to diminish, and I was really able to relate to people from my heart. It really changed me.

And so this is the, basically the practice that I will be presenting to you in the guided instruction. The idea that as long as the mind is temporarily free from the hindrances, we are ready to do the radiation. We do not have to first build up concentration to absorption level, and only then can do the radiation. And the radiation is simply about becoming open in all directions, of not imposing boundaries, of not being limited. This is the gist that I get from this alternative to *appamāṇa*, boundless, immeasurable. A simply not saying, like “okay, *mettā*, okay, I'll have this one, and that one, no no no no this one no.” Simply not excluding anyone. And having this openness, without being concerned of how far it goes. That would actually be measuring, no? How far can I get?

And there's a simile that describes this boundless radiation. And it's about a conch blower. In ancient India they used these conches as a way of making sound – either for religious purposes, you can see that even today if you go to some Hindu temple, and also in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition, they use these conches. But they were also using them in war times on the battlefield, because the sound of the conch is so penetrative that you hear it even over all of the shouting and other noise during a battle. And the thing about the conch is that it is very beautiful, it's <imitating sound of conch being blown>, very beautiful sound. It's very penetrative. It goes very far. Like if I blow it here, you hear it all over the place. But it's not something that you need like particular, like very forceful. It is more a skill. You have to position the conch right at the right place on the lips, and then the lips have to vibrate. You have to let them vibrate <demonstrates lips vibrating as in conch blowing> kind of thing. And if you get it just right then it makes a really loud sound. But if you don't get it right it's just <ppffpoffop>, nothing comes out. And so I really like that simile of the conch because it gives me different aspects of this meditative experience of boundless radiation. It shows the penetrative nature, in all direction, but it also shows that it is more a skill than something forceful. And it is very beautiful. The sound is very agreeable, just as the *brahmavihāras* are very agreeable.

And so with this presentation, with this perspective, I am quite definitely departing from the traditional way the *brahmāviharas* are taught. And in doing so I just want to be clear that this is not meant in any way to say that those who are using this step-by-step - myself, friend, neutral person, enemy – that there's something wrong about this approach. I'm just saying that this is not the only approach, and what I present is meant to be simply an alternative, another way of doing it.

And I've done some research also on this commentarial approach, and in particular the idea of doing it first to oneself, seems to actually be the result of a variant reading. A variant reading means sometimes, you know, with the Pali texts coming down by oral transmission and then being written down over centuries and centuries, sometimes we get some, some letter that is, there is some difference. So there's this phrase, *sabbatt(h)atāya*, and we have two different spellings – is that the right word, I'm not sure - two different formulations of this word – and they just differ in one single letter – whether it's an aspirated “t” or an unaspirated “t”. And according to whichever of these two we choose, the word gets a different meaning. One way gets the meaning “in every way”. The other one it is usually understood to mean “to all as to oneself”.

Now, the idea “to all as to oneself” is the one accepted by the *Visuddhimagga* and the commentarial tradition. But comparative study shows that actually the other one is quite certainly the more original meaning. And this also fits with the general pattern of how in the discourses they describe something, because they would usually use a few – like a series of different words to say pretty much the same thing. This is part of the oral transmission, that they would say like – it’s good, it’s agreeable, and I like it – something like that, just to make really sure that the meaning comes over and it is also being easily transmitted. And we have before *sabbatthatāya*, we have *sabbadhi*, which means “everywhere”. And so these two words really basically mean the same thing. There’s not a major difference. And this whole idea of having to first direct it to oneself and then to others, seems to emerge only at a later time.

From the viewpoint of the radiation, the issue in fact doesn’t arise as something that I might bypass myself because as I’m arousing this condition, and I’m fully immersed in it, and then radiate it out – I’m fully in the middle of it. I won’t miss out on getting my part of the *mettā* that is being done.

The arousing of the *brahmavihāras* can take place in different ways. And I’ll be just leaving it open to you to decide what way you like to adopt. My own personal preference is just the name - just *mettā*, *karunā*, *muditā*, *upekkhā*. I just, I have such a - anyway I love Pāli of course – and I have such a rich range of association around each term that I just say the term, and it’s just “vrrrrrooom, yeah! that’s what we’re talking about”. But that is my own way. Sometimes it can be useful to have some phrases. But, because of my own experience earlier of finding that I was not really meditating or contemplating, if you like, but I was just talking to myself, with these phrases, and this - I would almost call it chattering – I was just mentally chattering, “may all beings be blahblahblah may I blahblahblah” – and nothing was happening below the throat level, kind of. I was not embodying it. It was not touching my heart. I would really suggest to make the use of phrases something used sparingly, or only to the degree necessary. Be careful of not getting into too conceptual type of mental attitude. Use the phrases skillfully, and then as soon as possible, I would invite you to shift from what I call “from *doing* to *being*”. Here the idea is that we generate the condition of the *brahmavihāra* - but then we just abide in it. We don’t keep churning. We don’t keep *doing*. But we just allow it to flourish by itself.

Images can also be useful. I have one image that I used a lot for the cultivation of compassion. That was one time I was meditating outside in Sri Lanka. There are these very cute lizards. And

there was one living in the area of my kuṭi, my hut. I had seen it a few times but they are very shy, usually they see you far away and they run off. And so I was meditating and suddenly I felt that there was something by the vicinity of my right knee and looked, and there was that little lizard, so close to me. And he was looking in front, very scared, <panting hard, shaking>, and looking looking. So I looked in front, and there was a huge white snake coming towards us. And I could see the whole body was just, in the way that it was pointing, she was just turning around to move away again. And so, clearly the snake had been hunting the lizard, and the lizard cleverly enough had come close to me thinking the snake's not going to come all the way up to the human being, to the monk – and he was right. The snake left. And so there's me sitting there with this little lizard <panting hard... release... exhalation...relaxation>. I had of course the natural arousing of compassion, the wish for this little animal not to be harmed. And so whenever I want to call up compassion, just having that image <finger snap> immediately it's there. So you might find it useful to use some image that can call up that attitude of the *brahmavihāra*.

And another one of course then is to have phrases. So for *mettā*, the way is the wish, well-wishing to all beings. May all beings be well and happy. *Mettā* comes from *mitra*, friend. It is really this idea that I meet everybody assuming that we are going to be friends. I approach others from the position of wanting to be friends with them.

Karuṇā, compassion - here we need to be careful. There are different ideas about compassion in the Buddhist traditions. The type of compassion that I am presenting here, which is early Buddhist compassion, is not about taking on ourselves the pain of others. If I take on myself the pain of others, I will also be in a painful condition. The arousing of compassion, instead, it is the ability to be *close* to the pain of others, but then to give, to pay attention to focus on the *absence* of that pain, on *freedom* from pain, on freedom from harm. And that *absence* is something that can, leads to a joyful mental condition. And joy is needed for the meditative cultivation of *karuṇā*, to leading to deeper levels of concentration. And the formulation that I find useful - which I owe to His Holiness the Dalai Lama, I've a little bit modified it, but the idea is his, or from the Tibetan tradition where he would have gotten it from – the wish that beings may be free from what *causes* their suffering. Not just the wish to be free from suffering, but from what causes their suffering – to bring in that understanding of conditionality.

Then *muditā*, joy, rejoicing in the good fortune of others – and again I would bring in conditionality – the fruition of their wholesome deeds. May other beings enjoy the fruits of the good they have done.

And equanimity – uh, this, uh – may beings take responsibility for what they do. This understanding that I wish them well, but at some point they also need to take care of themselves. And if somebody decides to do something that is for their own harm, I can try, but then at some point I also have to stand back and say, good, that is your decision. In fact, equanimity, in a way, it rounds off the other three. And these four *brahmavihāras* together are the appropriate responses, that we can choose one of them for any kind of situation. They are basically the way the awakened mind relates to the world. It would be either *mettā*, or compassion, sympathetic joy, or equanimity.

And, I have this simile in which I like to bring out their flavor. I use the sun for that. So the idea is that the – Imagine you're in a place where the sunshine is experienced as agreeable, not as oppressive. And so the *mettā* is like the sun at midday, which shines on everyone equally, and does not depend on a reaction. If we step out of the sunlight into the house, the sun doesn't get upset and stop shining. It just keeps shining in every direction to everybody who's willing to receive it. And similarly *mettā*. There's this boundless open friendliness towards everyone.

Then *karuṇā*, compassion, is like the sun at sunset. Darkness is very close by, palpably close by. Yet the sun shines all the more beautiful. Beautiful sunset color in the sky.

And *muditā*, sympathetic joy, or sometimes empathetic joy, is like the sunrise, early morning, sun is rising, birds are singing, maybe there's a dewdrop on a leaf, sun hits it and it sparkles in the sunlight.

And in the completion of this imagery, equanimity is like the full moon. The full moon doesn't shine itself, but it reflects the sunlight. There's a more cool quality to it. But at the same time equanimity rounds off the other three. There are times when the appropriate response is equanimity – not *mettā*, not compassion, not sympathetic joy.

There's also an ethical perspective to the *brahmavihāras* in that they have what is directly opposed to them. And this can also help us to get a clearer flavor of understanding for each. So

mettā - being a friend is the opposite of anger, irritation, ill will. *Karuṇā*, compassion – is the opposite of cruelty and harming, wishing for the absence of harm. Sympathetic joy is the opposite of discontent, jealousy, envy. And equanimity is the opposite of this liking-disliking, preferring-rejecting, this constantly giving pluses and minuses to whatever is happening.

I think that is about what I wanted to say by way of introducing the basic practice of the *brahmavihāras*. *Brahmavihāra*, divine abodes, they are really, they are really like heaven on earth. If we dwell in these conditions we are living in heaven even though we are on earth.

And just the basic ideas again: So this permission, I think we can say, that we have, that we do not need to rely on this person-oriented approach and phrases. We can use them to start, but we can simply radiate these conditions out. The particular flavor of each can be aroused through the word, a reflection, an image. But whatever tool you use, the sooner rather than later, shift to just resting in that condition.

And in as much as daily life practice is concerned, I think it is good to make *mettā* the main practice. In the discourses it is clearly that *mettā* is the one that is related to bodily, verbal, and mental activities, whereas the others are more like meditative qualities that build on *mettā*.

Thank you for your attention.