

Brahmavihāra and Emptiness: Six-day online practice course

Video lecture transcription

Video Lecture 2 – Brahmavihāra 2

Welcome. This is the second talk on the *brahmavihāras*. And in this talk my main interest is how to relate the *brahmavihāras* to liberating insight. And, in the beginning I will have to cover a little bit more theory, and then afterwards I will come to the awakening factors, which I think is really the key in the practice. And this is also what the meditation instructions will be about.

So the role of the *brahmavihāras* in the early Buddhist scheme of liberation is a debated matter in academia. And there is a trend by some to argue that the *brahmavihāras* are in themselves capable of leading to final liberation. And I think that's wrong. That's a misunderstanding. I have discussed that in my "Early Buddhist Meditation Studies" – and I just want to give you the brief ideas.

First of all, you see, *vimutti*, liberation – the early Buddhism recognizes different types of liberation. There is temporary liberation: *brahmavihāras* are an example for that. For as long as we are abiding in the *brahmavihāra* the mind is really free, but, this is not yet final liberation. The defilements are being diminished, they are being weakened, but they are not being eradicated, not being rooted out. For that we need insight. We need insight into the three characteristics, into conditionality, and an experience of *Nibbāna*.

There is a latching on onto two passages in support of this idea that *brahmavihāras* are liberating in themselves. One of this is a verse in a *Dhammapada*, the other one is the famous *Mettā-sutta*. Let me start with the verse in the *Dhammapada*. So it goes: *mettāvihārī yo bhikkhu, pasanno buddhasāsane, adhigacche padam santam, saṅkhārūpasamam sukham*. Let's leave out the second part. It's just saying that this is very clearly a description of liberation. So the first two lines: *mettāvihārī yo bhikkhu* – a monastic who dwells in *mettā* – *pasanno buddhasāsane* – who has, uh.... how to translate *pasanno*? inspired joy? is inspired by the teaching of the Buddha. So the argument is this verse clearly shows that *mettā*, for somebody who has... inspired... what did I say? ... inspired, joyful inspiration in the teachings of the Buddha... is the path to full awakening.

The problem with this kind of interpretation is that – and this is a problem not confined to the idea that the *brahmavihāras* are in themselves productive of final liberation – is a tendency to take out of the whole teaching, to take just this piece here, and just this piece there, put them together because they suit my ideas, and ignore all the rest. This is what we call an unsystematic reading, or a decontextualization. The thing is that – the *Dhammapada* verse, the sutta, whatever it is – they were always given in a specific situation to a specific audience for a specific reason. They were not meant to be each of them a representation of the entirety of the teachings. In fact this idea to give a complete comprehensive account of everything is more a tendency in *Abhidharma* and later exegesis, and not in the early suttas. So it is not really possible to take just one verse and ignore all the rest of the suttas. And with this verse then, if we do the same kind of approach, there is another verse: *pāmojjabahulo bhikkhu, pasanno buddhasāsane, adhigacche padaṃ santaṃ, saṅkhārūpasamaṃ sukhaṃ*. So all the rest is the same; the only difference is that instead of the monastic being one who dwells in *mettā*, he is one who has a lot of fun, a lot of joy, *pamojjabahulo*. So if I adopt that same interpretation, I will be saying that, ‘look, if you enjoy the Buddha’s teaching and you have a lot of fun, that’s the way, that will lead you to liberation’. And that clearly makes no sense.

Then, the *Mettā-sutta* ends by saying that somebody who does this practice does not come back to a womb. And this is an implicit reference to non-return. However, the *Mettā-sutta* starts by referring to somebody who has had a penetrative understanding of that place of peace, *santaṃ padaṃ abhisamecca*. And the most convincing interpretation of this is, that this is actually referring to a stream-enterer. It is telling a stream-enterer, that for the stream-enterer to proceed to non-return, this is the kind of practice that can do the job. So, a stream-enterer has already had this penetrative experience of *Nibbāna*, of that powerful insight. So for them there’s no question that they could deviate in any way. And it is based on that that *mettā* comes in to do its job.

And that job is catching two – taking care of two needs at the same time. One is the development of mental tranquility. And with mental tranquility I would like not to confine that to the attainment of absorption. Yes, absorption is of course a very powerful manifestation of mental tranquility, but there are also levels of mental tranquility that fall short of absorption, which can still do the job. In fact this is a very recent finding of mine. I have found that the definition of right concentration by way of the four absorptions is not the earliest formulation of right concentration. The path factor of concentration as part of the noble eightfold path – the

most, the more early idea of that seems to be much rather the idea that you have concentration that is cultivated in conjunction with the other path factors – with right view as the guiding principle. That is what makes concentration right, not the level of absorption reached.

So what I'm saying on tranquility I don't want to confine that to absorption. The practice of *mettā* can fulfill this one need of tranquility – and at the same time it's working on the defilements. Although *mettā* is not able to eradicate the defilements, it can weaken them substantially. This is what I said in the previous lecture about the opposites. The more *mettā* we practice, the more difficult it will be for us to get into anger. The more compassion, the more difficult to be cruel, et cetera, et cetera.

So the cultivation of the *mettā* and the *brahmavihāras* has a major contribution to make to the path of, towards liberation -- if penetrating insight is also being taken into account, also being taken care of. And it's for this reason that the *Mettā-sutta*, and you can also find it in some other passages, gives this almost recommendation that for progress from stream-entry to non-return, *mettā* is really a commendable vehicle.

So this course about the *Dhammapada* verse and the *Mettā-sutta* – just to round off the question of *brahmavihāras* and insight: the early Buddhist discourses very clearly recognize that *brahmavihāras* were practiced already in times long ago, before the Buddha. In fact, the Buddha himself practiced *brahmavihāras* in past lives, like *Mahāsudassana-sutta*, and of course he didn't get liberated by that. And the discourse I mentioned in the last lecture, the *Dhānañjāni-sutta* of *Brāhmaṇa-vagga* in *Majjhima-nikāya*, where this brahmin on his deathbed learns the *brahmavihāras*, is reborn in the Brahma world. But the sutta ends with the very clear assessment that he could have been led further. He did not attain final liberation. Final liberation in early Buddhism is not rebirth in the Brahma world; it is freedom from rebirth.

So that much to wrap that up, just about this idea that the *brahmavihāras* are in themselves liberating. They are liberating, but not in the way that they eradicate defilements. They diminish them. And the experience is very powerful, liberating in that moment.

For the *brahmavihāras* to become a vehicle towards awakening, we need to conjoin them to the awakening factors. That is the way. This means, to abide in this *mettā* or another *brahmavihāra*, and then bring into being the awakening factors. And when these are present, and getting

stronger and stronger, then there's always this – I like to call it the insight themes, it's kind of four insight themes that actualize the awakening potential of the awakening factors: in dependence on seclusion, dispassion, cessation, ripening in letting go. And if we see it in that way we can really see how this abiding cultivation of the *brahmavihāras* can be a very powerful package. It diminishes our defilements simply by dint of the quality we develop. It gives us a very beautiful and powerful approach to tranquility that sidesteps the sometimes obsessive concern in contemporary circles with 'what is a *jhāna*? did I get it, did I not get it?'. Because after all, to reach the state of temporary liberation, *cetovimutti*, all we need to do is just be boundless, not have limits. And we lose it, we come back to it. And it offers us this potential of bringing in the awakening factors and thereby having a very powerful way of then moving onwards, from tranquility to insight. And on top of that the *brahmavihāras* are of course also a very good way of preparing for everyday life. They're just so useful. If, like, I mean, for myself, I, uh, I do usually five days of retreat every week and so the day I'm coming out of retreat and have to – yeah, you can already hear it, I say 'have to deal with' (laughing) people and neighbors – yeah, the morning before that I only do *brahmavihāra* practice, nothing else. I just have to really get myself into that, and that makes it so much easier. And people actually like you more when you practice *brahmavihāras*, between you and me, you know (laughing). It's quite useful. Yeah.

So, I think that is about what I wanted to say about this basic question of insight, so now the awakening factors. Some of you have maybe done the *Satipaṭṭhāna* and the *Mindfulness of Breathing* with me, where I go into more detail on this topic, but let me just briefly cover them.

So these awakening factors, there are seven, seven mental qualities. And the foundational one is mindfulness. Mindfulness is really the one that we want to have all the time. And building on that, the next one is investigation, investigation of states. It stands for an attitude of sincere interest, curiosity, wanting to know. And out of that interest and curiosity there comes an upsurge of energy. Energy here is not *qi* or *prāṇa*, but it is, just means this application, this wanting to do, and wanting to stick with things. It's particularly *virīya asallīna*, unwavering energy, responsible for continuity of practice – not too pushy, not too little. And joy. Yeah, joy is one of my favorites. I think it is just so important to develop joy in the practice – wholesome types of joy. That is really what keeps us, keeps us going, what makes the going easy. So never miss out on the joy whenever it is possible to have joy. Rejoicing in our own wholesome actions, wholesome condition of the mind. The joy of being in the present moment, something that I

emphasize a lot in *Satipaṭṭhāna* and *Mindfulness of Breathing*. There's all those sources of joy that we can tap in. That is just a very intelligent way of working. Tranquility: tranquility of body and mind, a kind of settledness. Concentration, *samādhi*. The word *samādhi*, *samādhīyati*, has this idea of bringing together. And my understanding of *samādhi* has really developed a lot. In my early years as a monk I thought that *samādhi* means to get everything out of the way and then really go for something and grab it. And now my understanding is much rather like letting everything just gather together, let it come together, and settle, and be quiet. So that is more the feeling like the coming together, conjunction, unity, natural unity that comes out of *samādhi*. And then *upekkhā*, which I like to translate as equipoise when it is an awakening factor, but as equanimity when it is a *brahmavihāra*. *Upekkhā* has a whole range of different meanings in its usage in the early suttas, so I think it's okay to use different translations. My concern is simply to bring out that awakening factor is predominately about balance, and that the joy doesn't have to go away for the awakening factor of *upekkhā* to come into play. These seven awakening factors can be at the same time in the mind. This is why I choose equipoise. But if you prefer equanimity, no problem. I just wanted to clarify why I was using that.

The normal way which we find in the suttas is then to arouse these just in the way I have just described. So, mindful, investigation, energy, joy, tranquility, concentration, equipoise. This kind of lining them up in this way. And after that the task is to keep them balanced. And so, mindfulness is the foundation, needed at all times. Then the next three are the energizers. Investigation energizes, energy of course, and joy is also something that brings up energy. So when we are at a point in the practice where we feel (yawning) just a little bit like this, this kind of like the energy is a little low and... Then it's time to bring in energy. We want these three. Stir up energy by having investigation, and then joy, and then move on. But then at other times it's also maybe a little bit like we are getting slightly – I'm exaggerating now – slightly excited, slightly agitated. Then we want the others. Tranquility of body and mind, collectedness, balance. So it's kind of, the question is, arousing these awakening factors, and then mindfulness monitors - and she knows if we're getting off balance, then she gives a little bit more attention to those awakening factors that can bring us back into a balanced cultivation.

In my instructions, I am actually departing from that traditional sequence of arousal. And, that, I will just want to explain where I got it from. I find it useful, this different sequence, just for the cultivation of the *brahmavihāras* and also for emptiness practices. And it's just something that I present to you, and in the understanding that this is just Anālayo's idea. You can simply try it

out, and then if you don't find it useful, just chuck it out and go with the traditional sequence. The idea, I got this from a discourse that is called the *Pariyāya-sutta*.

Pariyāya-sutta says: 'Ha, I'm gonna give you a different perspective on the hindrances, and on the awakening factors. Did you know there are ten hindrances? Did you know there are fourteen awakening factors? Hmmm.' So what it actually does is it takes the five hindrances and teases them apart, each one into two different types, to get to ten. And it does the same with the awakening factors – each has two different... parts is maybe not the right word... two different aspects... two different dimensions. Mindfulness can be internal or external. The basic idea is, I can be aware of my own mental condition and I can be aware from external signs of the mental condition of someone else. And that same internal-external applies also to #2, investigation – and to the last one, equipoise. I can investigate what's happening in myself; I can investigate what's happening externally, for others. I can have equipoise related to myself; I can have equipoise related to others. So these are three in this *Pariyāya-sutta* presentation, kind of belong together.

Then the internal – staying just with the internal and letting go of the external – this can be distinguished into bodily and mental. And this distinction into bodily and mental applies to energy. Kind of logical, no? You can have, stir up energy mentally or physically. And to tranquility. You can have a tranquil mind, and a tranquil body. And you see how it's kind of internally nested, it's not going for the internal, it's just bodily and mental. And then we drop off the bodily, and we just have the mental. And there the distinction is made between being with-and-without *vitakka-vicāra*. *Vitakka-vicāra* are two factors characteristic of the first absorption. They stand – my understanding of them, this is a debated topic, I've written about that also – my understanding is they stand for, like, one part of the mind that says 'I want to do this' and another part of the mind that sustains that. Just as now as I'm talking to you, I don't have my talk written and I'm reading it out, I'm just, my mind, there's a certain, I mean like, hmmm, these are the main points that I would like to communicate now – and there's another part of my mind that puts the different pieces into place. This can be done while talking. This can also be done during the first absorption. And so this basic distinction is whether I am intentionally applying and sustaining the mind for a particular purpose, or whether this is happening more naturally. And this distinction applies to joy and concentration.

And so the *Pariyāya-sutta* inspired me to use this different sequence, because I found this works particularly well with the *brahmavihāras*. So what I'm doing is of course I start with mindfulness. But then, the internal-external ones, I go for investigation, okay still – but then I jump to equipoise. And you see, I have one energizer and one calmer here. They can nicely balance themselves out. And from that I go to the bodily-mental group, again first the energizer, energy – and the calmer, tranquility. And then I go for the with-and-without *vitakka-vicāra* group, the energizer, joy – the calmer, concentration. So one more time, it's: mindfulness, investigation-equipoise, energy-tranquility, joy-concentration.

In the end this is not such a massive revolution because it's just about how we move into them, and once they are established, it's the same kind of balancing thing. But I personally just found this sequence, which is inspired by *Pariyāya-sutta*, but this is not the intention of the *Pariyāya-sutta*. The *Pariyāya-sutta* is not presenting this as a way how this should be aroused one after the other. This is entirely Anālayo's idea, and, as I said again, if you don't find it useful, just chuck it out and do it another way. But for me, I found this useful because it really leads up to this due to concentration, and that fits so well with the *brahmavihāras*.

Whichever way we use to build up the awakening factors, we relate each of them to a *brahmavihāra*: mindfulness of the *mettā*; investigation of the state of mind with *mettā*; etcetera – all the way up.

Whichever way we arouse them, once we balance them, we abide in the *brahmavihāra* with the balanced mind of the awakening factors.

And then when we find that the, we get the feeling, this is now, yeah, it's kind of time to conclude the meditation session - then we bring in these four awakening themes, insight themes. Secluded, from the hindrances. We are still in a mental condition where we are not overrun by the hindrances. Dispassion, *virāga*. The, *rāga*, this idea of *rañj-*, to color; we color things with our passion. A de-coloration, becoming dispassionate, a non-attachment - even towards this meditation experience we have just been having. Later on, other things. And the more dispassion grows, the more we are able to diminish our attachments, the easier it becomes for us to accept the fact that things end – whether it's the meditation session we were just having or any other thing, friendships, whatever it is. Everything is bound to end. And this is what normally, when we don't practice, what we most like to avoid. We like things new, starting,

beginning, but we don't like it when things end. And just this allowing things to end: cessation, to cease. And from there letting go. Letting go of all clinging, attachments, holding on, sense of self. By going through these themes, the insight potential of the *brahmavihāras* can be fully captured.

I think that's about what I more or less wanted to say. So just to bring it all together again. The *brahmavihāras* are not in themselves liberating in the final sense. But they can make a powerful contribution to progress to liberation because they can – they are very beautiful and powerful way of developing tranquility. And by their quality, they are diminishing specific defilements. In order to activate their awakening potential, we need to bring in the awakening factors. It means these seven factors are related to the *brahmavihāra*. And, then bringing in, cultivating them by completing them or concluding them with these four insight themes. In this way, the *brahmavihāras* can become a whole package of the path to awakening.

Thank you for your attention.