

Brahmavihāras: Loving-kindness (1 of 5)

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SUMMARY KEYWORDS

equanimity, Brahma, internalization, care, deer, abodes, divine, deep, tenderness, qualities, Buddha, god, world, love, compassion, appreciative, preserve, attitudes, supported, divinity, joy, suffering, groom, *brahmavihāras*, immeasurables, dwelling, quiet, *vihāra*, *mettā*, *karuṇā*, *muditā*, *upekkhā*, *anukampā*, face, body, goodwill, mammalian

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On this Monday, we start a new theme for the week. This theme will continue for a few weeks. It will be what's called in Pali, the *Brahmavihāras*, sometimes known as the Divine Abodes. Sometimes a different word is used to describe them: the immeasurables – the immeasurable abodes or dwellings. These are four qualities of social attitudes, four different flavors of caring for the world and for ourselves.

A background for these. In ancient India, the records we have – and we don't know what else was going on – the earliest surviving writings on the religions of ancient India begin with the idea that there are gods. The gods influence the events of the world. And we need to make sacrifices and offerings to the gods, so they'll treat us favorably. Crops will grow, the cows will flourish, and whatever else is needed, whatever else we want, will happen.

Over time, a couple of centuries before the Buddha, there arose the idea that the external world – the cosmos, the divine world, the world of the gods – was to be found inside oneself. There was an internalization. The very thing that's found outside is also found within. There was an internalization of religious practice, of looking inward. Maybe that's where meditation began. And the Buddha was part of this internalization movement of ancient India.

One way we see it is that the divine, which in the earlier tradition was looked for within oneself, eventually coalesced in some areas of India around the idea of a divinity. There was a prime or main god named Brahma. The Buddha, rather than focusing externally on the concept of a divinity or a god, pointed out that with this internalization, we can experience in ourselves these attitudes, qualities, abidings – the life of Brahma. We can dwell like Brahma. We can be like this great god if we dwell in the four *brahmavihāras*. *Vihāra* means dwelling or abode – the four abodes of Brahma.

The dwellings where Brahma lives are loving-kindness (goodwill), compassion, appreciative joy, and a certain kind of social attitude called equanimity. We'll talk about that. These are fairly well known in our vipassanā scene: *mettā*, *karuṇā*, *muditā*, *upekkhā*.

It's quite a movement, the ancient Indian idea of internalizing or finding within oneself, the qualities of the divine. Some people will translate *brahmavihāras* as "the divine abodes," rather than as "the abidings of the god Brahma." It's quite powerful in English to call something divine – and to discover it inside oneself. That's where it can be found.

In the lore and iconography of Buddhism, you'll find statues of Brahma. The statues have four faces, pointing in the four different directions. Each of these four faces represents one of the *brahmavihāras*. The one in the front, looking out on the world, is one of goodwill and kindness. To the right, I believe, is compassion. To the back is appreciative joy. And to the left is equanimity. The four faces of Brahma. In a way, this represents the four faces we can bring to the world – depending on the circumstances at the time. These are ways we can gaze upon the world.

We might also think that there's more than the idea of the face in the way we look at the world. In the *body* of Brahma, deep inside of Brahma, there is something deeper than loving kindness, compassion, appreciative joy, and equanimity. It's something that animates us into action – and that is a word I talked about last spring: *anukampā*. I translate it as care – a basic caring for the world and for others. It's a kind of love – tender love, tender care that is the seed or the source for these four qualities.

This happens when we drop deep inside and get really quiet, still, calm, and relaxed. There's a kind of sensitivity, vibration, warmth, a glow of tenderness, that's not quite compassion. It's not quite loving kindness. It's not quite appreciative joy or equanimity. But it has qualities that are related to all of those. It's quieter and more tender. Maybe it's almost like it doesn't want a label or a word. It's not quite each of those, but it's often seen as love because we have no other English word for it.

It could also be experienced differently. It could even be a sense of coziness. It's a deeper sense of care. This is one of the things that happens as we meditate and get quieter and quieter. We put things on the shelf, leave things at the door, and really allow ourselves to settle in this movement of internalization. We really get deeply quiet – not concerned with our thoughts anymore about what's happening during the day, our relationship to other people, about the future, the past, or getting lost in fantasy. When we really get settled, it's as if there's a natural capacity there – our natural capacity to care.

A wonderful image for this came up some weeks ago. I was hiking up in the hills nearby at a nature preserve with wide grasslands and oak woodlands. There are many deer living there. The rules of the preserve are that everyone's supposed to walk only on the trails. The deer, of course, can walk anywhere. Over the decades in this preserve, the deer have become quite used to people. They seem to understand well that people stay on the trails. So, they come relatively close to the trail. They're just grazing and living there, mostly feeling pretty comfortable and safe, I think.

The last time I was there, I saw one deer grooming with its teeth, cleaning the neck of another deer. I realized that deer can lick themselves in different parts of their bodies, but they can't really clean their necks. They can't, like cats, rub the top of their heads. If they want to clean their necks or the tops of their heads, they have to do it for each other.

And the deer are fellow mammals. They are herd animals that care for each other in different ways. The caring, cleaning, and tending is such a basic human – maybe even mammalian – activity that is like an instinct inside of us. I associate this very much with a parent taking care of a very young child, a little baby. There's tenderness, care, and gentleness in the dedication, devotion, and love when caring for something so vulnerable and in need of our attention. There's an innate capacity that sometimes is covered over. It may be a unique experience for each person – very different from that of other people. I like the word care. And care, depending on the circumstance, manifests as or morphs into goodwill, compassion, appreciative joy, or equanimity.

Care is pretty fundamental. There's a lot that can support it. We can be supported by inner stability, mindfulness and awareness. We can also be supported by the capacity to recognize what it is that takes us away from this. We recognize what we get caught up in and what disconnects us from a deeper place of settledness, sensitivity, and openness. There's even a place of deep safety inside, which we discover in meditation. No matter what someone says or does to us, we can discover a place that's not harmed by anything. It's a place of deep, deep safety that is coterminous with – or very connected to – a deep place of warmth, care, and tenderness.

Goodwill – *mettā* – is the feeling of wanting people to be happy. It's how we meet the happiness of the world. Compassion is how we meet the unhappiness of the world, the suffering of the world. We wish that suffering would go away. We empathize and sympathize with the suffering. Appreciative joy is celebrating the good fortune people have. Equanimity is the feeling of love when we can't really do anything. Sometimes people's fortunes are not so good; unfortunate things happen. And we can care for them and love them. But there is also a degree of not getting upset, agitated, or reactive to the misfortune of the world. We can have this beautiful love and care, supported and protected by a certain kind of equanimity or balanced non-reactivity.

That's going to be the topic over this next period of time. For the rest of this week, we'll talk more about loving kindness and *mettā*. I hope that, as we do this series, you'll think of these as topics pointing toward finding a home base, a supportive base for mindfulness practice itself – for meditation. Thank you.