

The Brahmavihara of Equanimity

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Regardless of tradition, the teachings of the great spiritual masters agree that spiritual realization results in achieving profound and fundamental goodness of the heart.

One cannot venture far or for long along the Buddhist path without becoming aware of one of its most wonderful teachings: the four divine abodes of the heart (*brahmaviharas*): the practice of compassion (*karuna*) / loving kindness (*metta*) / sympathetic joy (*mudita*) and equanimity (*upekkha*.) I think of the first three of these as facets of the same diamond: the awakened heart; a heart filled with kindness. The Dalai Lama on many occasions has said his religion is simply just that: Kindness. The fourth, equanimity, is at once a foundation that supports the arising of the other three, and a culmination. When the heart is equanimous, any or all of them arise naturally, in appropriate response to whatever is happening.

The extent to which a practitioner dwells within these divine abodes, in continuous direct experience of an awakened heart, is a reliable measure of his or her spiritual maturation.

The classical practice for developing one (or any) of the *brahmaviharas* involves cultivating its direct experience by focusing first on a situation or subject that engenders it easily. Once that is accomplished, the practitioner learns to project the feeling towards increasingly difficult subjects.

For most people, arousing feelings of kindness towards one's spouse, children, or friends sounds like an achievable task. And skillful: cultivating kindness in this way opens our heart, keeps us more in touch with the intention to be kind moment-to-moment, and helps our meditative concentration. But, almost inevitably, in a group where kindness practice towards more difficult subjects is discussed, someone asks "How could I possibly feel metta towards _____? He/she is so awful." And most people run into the same obstacle. Here's a simple exercise that may help.

Exercise

Ask yourself "What would have to happen for me to be able to genuinely feel metta/mudita/karuna towards _____?" Or, "How would I have to change in order to sincerely feel kind to _____?"

To start answering, think of someone who would be difficult for you. Almost certainly it's someone who— in your eyes— has behaved very badly. They may have caused terrible injury to you, your family, your friends, or your community. Think about them and what most disturbs you about what they've done. Even if it's unpleasant, focus on and allow yourself to get really worked up about it. When you're really steaming, take a step back and observe what you feel— in your body and in your heart.

Now you have a real handle on what is *not* equanimity; this is aversion and it blocks your ability to cultivate greater kindness. Similarly, greed, lust, any form of grasping or clinging are not equanimous and block kindness.

This simple exercise makes clear why equanimity is a prerequisite for deep kindness:

The fuming of aversion fills the heart with hatred, replacing its natural good-naturedness with fabricated turmoil. In a heart that has cultivated equanimity, the seeds of discord don't germinate.

So the answer is "in order to feel kindness towards ____ I have to begin by establishing equanimity." And the next question is "How do I do that?"

There are many ways to cultivate equanimity. First, of course, is intention. You have to want to be equanimous to deeply experience the other brahmaviharas. This isn't always easy. You may discover that you do not want to give up your attachments, whether they are greedy or aversive. Perhaps your aversion to certain politicians helps feel self-righteous. Perhaps an aversion to someone else allows you to avoid examining ways in which you are similar to your nemesis.

SIDEBAR:

One way to convert aversion or apathy into kindness is to contemplate how we are all interconnected. If you find it difficult to love that special enemy, consider the lyrics to "There but for Fortune".

Show me the prison, show me the jail
Show me the prisoner whose face is growin' pale
And I'll show you a young man with so many reasons why
There but for fortune, go you or I
You and I.

Show me the alley, show me the train
Show me the hobo who sleeps out in the rain
And I'll show you a young man with so many reasons why
there but for fortune, go you or I
You and I.

Show me the famine, show me the frail
Eyes with no future, that show how we fail
And I'll show you the children with so many reasons why
There but for fortune, go you or go I
You and I.

Show me the country where bombs had to fall
Show me the ruins of buildings once so tall
And I'll show you a young land with many reasons why

There but for fortune, go you or I
You and I.

You and I.

There but for fortune, go you or go I
You and I.

Greed, too, derails equanimity. So much of our modern experience comes from ceaselessly being told that the next thing will bring happiness, that more of something is better. It creates an endless cycle of dissatisfaction causing more seeking of happiness through the acquisition of objects of desire.

I remember the AHA! moment of discovering that greed and aversion share common a felt sense rooted in dissatisfaction with things as they are. They are two sides of the same coin: a grasping or clinging to a desire for things to be different from the way they are. Both are based on the illusion that the path to happiness requires making things different.

Consider the utter lack of utility that aversion has. Does it make the world a better place? Does it make you a better person? Does aversion make you feel good? Perhaps you see a benefit to aversion because it motivates you to action. While it's true that anger and aversion are motivational, actions taken in anger may be unwise; many times they simply fan the flames of conflict. As the Buddha noted "Hatred is never ended by hatred; by love alone is hatred ended."

Similarly, has greed ever paid off for you? Brought you lasting happiness?

If the drawbacks of greed and aversion don't motivate you to try equanimity, try analyzing equanimity's benefits. Certainly, it feels better! It's healthier for the body, heart, and mind. It's a foundation for wise action. Thich Nat Hanh, the Vietnamese Buddhist monk who became famous as a peace activist during the Vietnam War always advises activists in training to start by meditating. {MORE SPECIFICS}. If you're thinking that being equanimous means not taking action, be reminded of the many people who selflessly volunteer their time to help others.

Equanimity plays a role in breaking the mental cycle known as *dependent origination*. The Buddha delivered this deep and original teaching as an analysis of the mechanisms by which we create our own suffering (remember that wonderful saying "Pain is inevitable, suffering is optional.")

The cycle of dependent origination is often portrayed as a sequence of reactive stages that the mind passes through as the experience of an event develops from benign awareness to reactive grasping for things to be different. Without mindfulness and equanimity, then mind completes the cycle, perpetuating

suffering. But equanimity creates a non-reactive space that allows us to recognize what is going on and break the cycle.

All the above points to adopting the *brahmaviharas* as behavioral values in our everyday life. Daily practice of them has clear benefit. In addition, the *brahmaviharas* offer another profound if less obvious benefit: they are a key contributing factor to concentration. And a lot of their helpfulness in this regard has to do with how great they feel. After all, concentrating takes practice and effort, and they provide an immediate reward. By taking, say, *metta*, and using it as the object of concentration, the classical practice helps us cultivate something that feels great while we train our brain to concentrate. As those *metta*-neurons fire more frequently, that part of our brain grows, our ability to feel *metta* grows, and our concentration deepens. As this happens, we are, at least while sitting, dwelling more and more continuously in the divine abode itself. This forms a kind of positive feedback loop, propelling the practitioner towards greater skill that culminates with achieving the states of meditative absorption known as the *jhanas*.

Because the cultivation of *metta*, *mudita* and *karuna* has such pleasurable results, there is the danger of becoming attached to the *jhana* states where they are experienced so deeply. But the final *jhana* state is accessed by concentrating on equanimity alone, which involves detachment even from the other three *brahmaviharas*. And thus it is that equanimity is both the foundation and the culmination of this practice.

References

1. Nyanaponika Thera. The Four Sublime States: Contemplations on Love, Compassion, Sympathetic Joy and Equanimity
http://www.vipassana.com/meditation/four_sublime_states.php