

# Buddhists Concept of Brahma-Vihar: An Analysis of Morals

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## ABSTRACT

The Brahma-Viharas, or “sublime attitudes,” are the Buddha’s primary heart teachings—the ones that connect most directly with our desire for true happiness. Brahmas live in the higher heavens, dwelling in an attitude of unlimited goodwill, unlimited compassion, unlimited empathetic joy, and unlimited equanimity. These unlimited attitudes can be developed from the more limited versions of these emotions that we experience in the human heart. Maitri or good will or love is the most fundamental. It’s the wish for true happiness. Goodwill was the underlying motivation that led the Buddha to search for awakening and to teach the path to awakening to others after he had found it. Compassion (karuna) is what goodwill feels when it encounters suffering: it wants the suffering to stop. Empathetic joy (mudita) is what goodwill feels when it encounters happiness: it wants the happiness to continue. Equanimity (upekkha) is a different emotion, in that it acts as an aid to and a check on the other three. When we encounter suffering that we can’t stop no matter how hard we try, we need equanimity to avoid creating additional suffering and to channel our energies to areas where we can be of help. In this way, equanimity isn’t cold hearted or indifferent. It simply makes our goodwill more focused and effective. Making these attitudes limitless requires work. It’s easy to feel goodwill, compassion, and empathetic joy for people you like and love, but there are bound to be people we dislike—often for very good reasons. Similarly, there are many people for whom it’s easy to feel equanimity: people we don’t know or don’t really care about. But it’s hard to feel equanimity when people you love are suffering.

## 1. Introduction

Brahma-Vihar is a moral practice of collectively four sublime-attitudes of ‘Metta’, ‘Karuna’, and ‘Upekkha’ (love, compassion, sympathy and equanimity) mentioned Buddhism. The term “Brahma-Vihara” literally means “Dwelling place of Brahmas.” Brahmas are gods who live in the higher heavens, dwelling in an attitude of unlimited goodwill, unlimited compassion, unlimited empathetic joy, and unlimited equanimity. These unlimited attitudes can be developed from the more limited versions of these emotions that we experience in the human heart (citta). Buddhism does not believe in god but the term “Brahma” is not meant in this sense. Brahma means Sublime, Excellence, or Highest, in the sense of faultless, clean and pure. Accordingly the term *Brahma vihāra* is variously translated as Brahma Abode, Divine States Supreme Conditions, Sublime-Moods or Livings, and *Appamaññā*, Immeasurable, Infinites or Illimitable, etc. The mediators believe that if an individual can simply add a little more heart juice, a little more emotion, to brahma-vihara practice, his attitudes can become limitless. But if something inside him keeps churning up reasons for liking this person or hating that one, his practice starts feeling hypocritical. If we think of the heart as the side of the mind that wants happiness, the head is the side that understands how cause and effect actually work. This is why the Buddha taught the brahma-viharas in a context of head teachings: the principle of causality as it plays out in karma and the process of fabrication that shapes emotions within the body and mind. The more we can get our heads around these teachings, the easier it will be to put our whole heart into developing attitudes that truly are sublime. An understanding of karma helps to explain what people do as we develop the brahma-viharas

and why they might want to do so in the first place. An understanding of fabrication helps to explain how people can take human heart and convert it into a place where Brahmas could dwell. Buddhists think Brahma-vihar is concerned with Nirvana the ultimate goal of life, but it is developed through practice to be free from hasting state of mind, and mind is to be free from hate, anger, jealousy, fear etc. so these state of mind are similar to god or brahma. To dwell emanating thought of either loving-kindness or any one of compassion, sympathetic joy and equanimity towards beings is the noble living. Living such a life is not dry with the heat of hatred, envy, and jealousy etc. These four attitudes are said to be excellent or sublime because they are the right or ideal way of conduct towards living beings. They provide the answer to all situations arising from social contact. They are the great removers of tension, the great peace-makers in social conflict, and the great healers of wounds suffered in the struggle of existence. The term Brahma has been frequently used in Buddhist philosophy with suffix and prefix; such as brahma-charya, brahma-kaya, brahma-dana, brahma-jala, brahma cakka and so on. It has suffix and prefix like maha-brahma, brahma-sahmpati. The term vihara has also implied a spiritual life. Buddhists commentators mentioned four types of Viharas i) Iriyaapatha Vihara i.e. walking, standing, sitting and lying down at times in turn as may be considered appropriate in accordance with the four characteristic of postures ii) Dibba Vihara by which one may become outstanding being after his demise through religious exercise iii) Ariyavihara means four airya phala (fruits) which are attained through four paths and iv) Brahma- Vihara means the four jhaanas of metta, karuna, mudita and upekkha.

## 2. Love

Mettaa is the Pali word and in Sanskrit it is Maitri (love or loving-kindness). It is the first one of the Brahma-viharas or the sublime states. It is also called good-will. It consists of Brahmachariya. Buddha expounded the nature of love in Mettaa Sutta. For him it is just like a mother who protects her child from all kinds of risks. Her boundless love pervades the whole world, above, below and across without any obstruction, hatred and enemy. It has welfare characteristics. It functions good towards others. It is manifested as the suppression of ill will. Being displeased someone becomes dry or unfeeling, as dry paper does not adhere together but wet one can adhere. When two individuals are displeased to each other, then they cannot adhere to each other. Society exists through strong adherence. The person who can overcome hate, aversion, his body will be changed and the blood circulation will be changed according to Buddhists. For Buddha the desirable things produce grief. If there is no grief, there is no fear. Affection, attention, attachment, lust etc. produce grief. So mettaa is quietly different from sensual lust or emotional love and higher than emotional love. The maitri can be developed by two ways-- kushala activity (activity of not self interest mentally, verbally, bodily) and mind deliverance (jhaana samapatti). It is analyzed that maitri is a kind of ethics. It is right conduct for having happiness and peace in mind. Right conduct also leads to happy rebirth and a spiritual liberation. In the maitri sutra there are 15 qualities which are called charitra shila or the moral ethics. In the precepts Buddhism there are some affirmative action in conduct and negative action in conduct. The action which is to do, is called charitra (virtue) and the action which is not to do, is called varitra (abstinence). Both charitra and vaaritra are to be practiced for developing maitri. Thus the ethics of maitri is a subjective well-being as well as giving fearlessness.

## 3. Compassion

The term 'Karunaa' is found in Buddhist texts like Visuddhimagga, shilakkhandhavagga etc. If anybody is perceived to be suffered and other one shakes or moves with compassion at once, then it is called karuna or compassion or pity. It is the second brahma-vihara. This is actually a kind of mental factor which expresses its quality by showing sympathy for the suffering people. The compassion is extended to other's welfare. The Buddhists include all beings whatever it may be tiny or large. Karuna does not make any distinction between man and man whatever their position may be rich or poor, wise or dull, white or fair. Karuna can be realized through its characters, such as--- i) karuna seeks to remove the sufferings or misery. If anyone is found to be in the miserable condition, the noble minded person feels to remove it. ii) if karuna is once generated in the mind of a person he will not be able to tolerate the miserable condition of a suffering person. iii) Refraining from injury is the expression of karuna, and peace and harmless thought manifest through karuna.

Through cultivation of compassion (bhavana) karuna can be developed. The loved person also will continue to remain as the most loved ones, one who is neutral retains the position of one who is neutral, one who is antipathetic retains the position of one who is antipathetic, and one who is hostile retains the position of one who is hostile. In the case of a person of

opposite sex, since *angry* attachment is likely to occur; one should avoid developing *karuna* towards him or her at the very initial stage. Karuna is felt to a person he sees a suffering person. The Visuddhimagga describes, "The man who received capital punishment was tied with ropes showed to the people at the junction of road. The man in custody with death hanging over his head was generally offered with delicious foods, etc., by some kind-hearted people who pitied the fate of that condemned man. The guilty man enjoyed the foods, etc., for a moment. But people who see him did not think of him as being happy. They had pity on him knowing full well that very step he took brought him closer to death. In the same way, a person who is developing *karuṇā*, though he may see a happy spectacle can develop *karuṇā* towards another person who is full of vice. It has been stated that he should develop imaging the villain may be happy now but that misery will befall him in the near future as he is going to descend to the lower states for his demerits after death." Karuna faces two enemies---77near enemy (aasanna) and far (dura). Grief (damanasa) is the near enemy and cruelty (vihesaa) is the distant enemy. When a person is seen in misery then karuna may be appeared, this is aasanna karuna. Let us give an example of distant enemy of karuna. When a man sees that a frog has been snatched to be swallowed and the man wants to escape the poor frog from being swallowed then his feeling is called karuna; but when he wants to hit the snake in favour of the frog then the feeling is called vihimsa or cruelty which comes after karuna. At that time if the person can give relief as best he can, mentally, physically, verbally or both. A man who sees an animal, chicken, goat etc, to be slaughtered at the slaughter house may have great pity, karuna on that victim which is about to be killed. He wishes to save the poor animal, but nothing else could be done. Such a kind of karuna is called manokamma karuna.

## 4. Sympathetic joy

Mudita is the third one of the brahma-viharas which translated as sympathetic joy or sympathy or gladness. When someone feels happy seeing other people's happiness, then it is called mudita or sympathetic joy. Most of the people feel jealousy seeing other's happiness. They do not wish other's prosperity. People are generally envious and inclined to conspire with ill-feeling to cause misery to others. This is the nature of envy or jealousy. Mudita is opposite of envy. The person who feels envy, does not desire other's happiness, successful etc. but a person who feels rejoice seeing other's successful, it is called sympathetic joy. Mudita is the expression of admiring wealth, health, fame etc. mudita or sympathetic joy can be realized more easily through its characters such as---a) it is gladness at the success of others. b) the function of mudita is not to do envy at other's success. c) It eliminates the aversion.

Mudita has also two enemies like karuna----- near and far. The direct enemy of sympathetic joy is aversion (arati) that means jealousy. When someone is successful, he doesn't like it. That is called as aversion here, the direct enemy of mudita. The near enemy of mudita is merriment. That means getting happy, not wholesome happiness. Here it is getting merry with attachment and so on. Somebody is very successful, and we are very happy, but not just wholesome happiness, but

merriment comes in. That is near enemy of mudita. In the Vibhagga Pali, the Buddha has preached that a monk radiates towards one region with the mind associated with mudita. It must be pleased and happy when seeing or heard to a person who deserves loving and adoration. Similarly, it is spread out with muditā towards all living beings. Sympathetic joy can be developed thinking "May all beings be able to retain their prosperity and wealth which they have acquired, without decrease, and continue to remain in richness with happiness as before". Like karunaabhaavana, the muditaabhaavana and it is 132 types.

## 5. Equanimity

When a person remains mentally in a neutral position between two extreme sorrow and happiness then it called Upekkha which is translated as equanimity. It is actually maintenance of balance mind between sorrow and joy. Equanimity becomes the sublime quality towards living beings. It is the most essential quality that protects the rest, love, compassion, and sympathetic joy. We need patience and energy and determination to cultivate this quality. It is detachment and impartiality. The mediator who follows the middle path is neither attracted by pleasant nor repelled by unpleasant. He keeps neutral mind without temper or anxiety. The concept of equanimity can be clearer through its characters such as----- a) it is a promoting aspect of neutrality towards beings. b) Upekkha sees equality to beings, c) it does not keep any bias. Equanimity has also two enemies---- dosa (faults) and Guna (merits).

Upekkha can be developed same as maitri, karuna and mudita. There 12 ways to develop upekkha. All are collectively called upekkhabhavana or cultivation of equanimity. Someone can achieve it when i) the neutral person neither loves someone nor hates someone. ii) he is a dear person, iii) he becomes an intimate friend, iv) he feels oneself. According to Visuddhimagga, when a person achieved the fourth jhāna by developing upekkhābhāvanā towards first person, dear person, he should proceed to develop upekkhā towards a person who is affectionate person, and towards a person who are hostile. When radiating his feeling towards an enemy, if anger arises in him, it must be subdued in the manner as prescribed in the case of developing mettā. After suppressing his anger, one should be able to contemplate with feeling of indifference, putting the mind equally balanced on all four types of persons including himself, thereby accomplishing the quality. After that, the fourth jhāna will occur. Visuddhamagga explains 10 kinds of Upekkha or equanimity suac as--- a) sixfold equanimity or chalaigupekkha i.e. the equanimity of those who have destroyed the intoxicants with regards to the six kinds of desirable or undesirable objects when they come into contact with the six sense doors, b) Equanimity as a Divine Abiding or Brahmaviharupekkha i.e. the neutrality towards beings when one is intent on one quarter of the world, etc. with a heart full of equanimity, c) energy or Vaariyupekkha i.e. neither too strenuous nor lax in arousing energy, d) enlightenment of factor or Bojjhaigupekkha i.e. the neutrality towards existing mental stage, e) Equanimity about formation or saikharupekkha i.e. neutrality towards hindrances, f) feeling of neither pain nor pleasure or vedanupekkha, g) insight or vipasanupekkha i.e. neutrality during investigating when

realizing conditioned phenomena are impermanent, etc., h) impartiality or jaanupekkha i.e. producing impartiality for highest bliss, i) specific neutrality or tatramajjupekkha i.e. equal efficiency, and j) purifying equanimity or parisuddhupekkha .

## 6. Target of Brahma-Viharas

The brahma-viharas must have aim. Maitri, karuna, mudita and upekkha embraces respectively---- all beings, suffers, prosperous and discrimination between good and bad, pleasant and unpleasant etc. The preceding remarks show that there are two ways of developing the sublime states--- by practical conduct and an appropriate direction of thought; and by methodical meditation aiming at the absorptions. Each will prove helpful to the other. Methodical meditative practice will help love, compassion, joy and equanimity to become spontaneous. It will help make the mind firmer and calmer in withstanding the numerous irritations in life that challenge us to maintain these four qualities in thoughts, words and deeds. On the other hand, if one's practical conduct is increasingly governed by these sublime states, the mind will harbor less resentment, tension and irritability, the reverberations of which often subtly intrude into the hours of meditation, forming there the "hindrance of restlessness." Our everyday life and thought has a strong influence on the meditative mind.

## 7. Social importance

The Buddhist concept of Brahma-Vihara has the moral importance for getting perfection in life as well as peaceful society. The emotions we should cultivate toward other beings in order establish a strong foundation for spiritual practice, and are also the best attitudes to have toward people if we want our relationships to be harmonious and beneficial. In this episode I introduce the Brahmaviharas as a whole, including how they fit within the context of other Buddhist teachings. Today's episode is on Buddha's teaching of the four Brahmaviharas, or sublime attitudes: Goodwill, compassion, sympathetic joy, and equanimity. The four Brahmaviharas are more than a list of positive emotions; each one leads to and depends on the others, so they're meant to be practiced together. Evil-will, hard-heartedness, envy, and distress are signs of self-attachment and delusion, so working on the Brahmaviharas can allow us to better see and understand our negative karma and challenge us to change it. The Brahmaviharas as a whole, including a definition of each sublime attitude and a description of how all four of them are necessary for a balanced and effective response to living beings, have been analysed.

## 8. Conclusion

The Brahmaviharas are natural human capacities, they may be underdeveloped and unavailable when they are most needed. So that they can be available at all times, specific practices, especially meditation practices, are useful for developing each of them. One of the principles of doing Brahmavihara meditation is that it's best to start by summoning each of the Brahmaviharas toward someone who easily evokes the associated attitude, intentions, and feelings. Rather than trying to artificially make ourselves feel love, we can begin these practices by recognizing how we already experience the

different aspects of love. Even if it's only toward an endearing puppy, once we recognize any of these four qualities of love within ourselves, the meditation practice is to focus on staying present with this attitude, so we can get to know it better, feel it in the body and mind, and allow it to grow. A big part of meditating on one of the Brahmaviharas is developing the ability to stay focused on it without being distracted by anything else. It is learning to dwell in love. When we develop a stable focus on this love, we again let it grow so it fills our body and mind. Then the next step in the practice is to progressively do the same for people who are decreasingly easy to love. Eventually, we practice cultivating love for those who are difficult—e.g., people with whom we have conflict or people who are hostile. As it can be challenging to cultivate love for those we have difficulty loving, the meditation practice can help us systematically and gradually discover and develop our capacity to love. This is not an easy task, but by undertaking it we can discover the healing and wisdom that makes universal love possible. Through regular practice, it is possible to have unlimited love—that is, love which is not withheld from anyone.

In deep meditation practice with the Brahmaviharas, the experience of *metta*, *karuna*, *mudita*, and *upekkha* can become, as described by the Buddha, “extensive, expanded, limitless, and free from hatred and ill-will.” When they radiate outward in all directions of the compass without limit, the four Brahmaviharas are called the “Four Immeasurables.” It is phenomenally transformative to be absorbed in the radiance of any of these four. Outside of meditation, the Brahmaviharas also grow as we begin to recognize and cultivate them in our ordinary life. If one of them appears, it might be possible to stay aware of it rather than becoming preoccupied and forgetful of love's presence. If we have a regular familiarity with what it's like to love, we may be able to evoke any of the Brahmaviharas when it is appropriate. The Brahmaviharas can also become a guide for our actions as we seek to discover the wise and loving thing to do in every situation. Developing the Brahmaviharas in our social life provides a double benefit. We benefit from the inner goodness they bring us, and those who are the recipients of our love benefit as well.

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