

Cultivating the Brahmaviharas

'from a talk given by Ajahn Sucitto at CittaViveka, 31/07/03.

The standard Dhamma practice for the human realm - the realm of being affected by people, events, things, ourselves, our own moods, our own limitations and disappointments is the *brahmavihara* - the cultivation of empathy. These 'measureless states' are *metta*, *karuna*, *mudita*, and *upekkha*; which we translate as loving-kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy, and equanimity. The Buddha presents these as all based on the same mental mood or tone: lofty, uncramped, measureless, free from hatred and ill-will, 'to others as to myself,'

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When I begin a meditation sitting, I often imagine or visualise sitting within a pool of light, something that is gently pleasant and holding. Or I might imagine sitting in sunshine, because I enjoy doing that. So I bring that image, that mood into the mind and spread it into the body. In walking meditation, I might walk along as if I were wading a step at a time through that warm light so that the body feels relaxed. Or I might imagine sitting with the Buddha as a father, mother, or friend - to be right there in the presence of someone who's saying 'You're all right with me. Whatever you are, I accept it.' Of course all this might sound a bit crass when I put it in words, but I'm suggesting ways of evoking a mood, because it's important to find your own space where you don't have to be that good, or happy or vigorous or punctual or neat. You have to place the body in a sense that says, 'you're welcome to be here.'

Now the bodily sense, I think, is very important. When we cultivate mindfulness of the body we sense how the body is affected by psychological/emotional experiences - as in the tension around rage and fear, or the relaxation with friendship. We can, in body meditation, give rise to the easeful affects through our mental cultivation - through imagining, for example, being in that which is pleasant, buoyant, uplifting. And this can help to free up residual tension, or the numb, shut-down bodily sense that many people are left with after years of coping with rage, fear and grief. This affective damage isn't total but we may experience it at particular times - such as with strangers - or in particular parts of the body — such as the area around the eyes or the throat, or the upper chest. It may not seem remarkable. But in meditation on the body, you can sense the dis-ease that the body carries. And then, noticing that your chest feels quite closed, you practise slowly sweeping awareness through the whole body, through these places...with the suggestion: 'what would it be like if it were

pleasant, okay, safe right here?' Around your chest or throat or diaphragm, for example, imagine being willing to receive whatever impression is there, and then being willing to respond. This is a way into the *brahmavihara*. It's not about doing something to make things better. It's not about feeling wonderful. It's the willingness to apply empathy whenever, wherever. Then what's it like to not have to prove something, defend yourself, succeed at something? Aren't you more fluent, capable and present? Isn't that a move in the right direction?

A sense of empathy and compassion is more than something that we should have in order to be proper responsible Buddhists: this *brahmavihara* sense just feels good and true. Our systems are more capable and enjoyable when this potential is available. But to come out of cramped limits on our empathy, we have to first acknowledge them. And my suggestion is to go to the bodily counterpart of the cramped sense and work from there. The mind tends to add blame and shame, or ignore its own limitations; the process is less reactive, and less deniable, in the body.

'To others as to myself': can we invite others into the presence of the *brahmavihara*? Sometimes it doesn't seem relevant, or useful or necessary...or that they'd notice anyway: such is the lens of separation, personal insignificance and resignation through which we gaze. So it's important to peel off these layers from our hearts: really is there anyone who would not appreciate being regarded with kindness and empathy? How could I imagine that 'there's no point?' And regarding others this way is always going to do me some good! So we work 'internally'— in our own minds — and 'externally' in terms of conscious action and speech that is based on sharing and respect and tolerance and friendliness. Especially in hearing people talk, try to hear beneath the topic, the dismissed remark, the stresses, the places where the pauses occur and there's a reaching out for response — what is needed? And what arises in your own heart when others talk? The character assessments, the inferences about hidden motives, the waning of attention, and finally the 'oh here he goes again' of resigned indifference. Wouldn't it be better to say something rather than perpetuate this hell of disconnection? Just to say what is happening for you; just to ask for an opportunity to question or clarify.... Otherwise our patterns just go on and there's not much use in being with others. And that in the end is what it feels like: 'I'm all right on my own, playing with my toys in my room.'

But we could be a blessing for each other. We could help our blind spots to learn how to see, we could welcome our numb patches back to life. And if I practise this towards

myself, I am pragmatically learning empathy rather than ideologically demanding that you or I should be more compassionate and loving, and joyful and serene and so on.... So in our own "inner" world: 'the cramped heart feels like this.' Welcome it, take it into your embodied presence. Then maybe we'll be able to see each other with a little less fear that: 'someone's going to dump their stuff on me.' Or react with irritation or despair if I say I don't understand where they're at right now. And the uncramped heart feels like this: 'it's good to be here.' Not that we can make that into a person, but rather, 'the afflictions are not present right now, may we all enjoy and benefit from this.'

To others as to myself: may we empathise with our wish for well-being, for freedom from hostility, for appreciation and enjoyment, to accept and to be accepted. This is the standard for the human realm.
