Expand Your Mind

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Years back, I read a book surveying the Buddhist teachings and tried to fit everything together, make it a nice, systematic presentation. But the author had trouble putting the four Brahma-viharas in the framework, so they ended up being tacked on at the end as kind of an afterthought. And it’s important to realize that they’re not an afterthought. They pervade the whole practice. First, of course, because the first of the Brahma-viharas is goodwill, and the pursuit of the end of suffering, the end of stress, has to be based on goodwill. To begin with, goodwill for yourself. You want to find true happiness. And then goodwill for others—everybody else. Because you realize if your happiness causes harm and suffering to somebody else, they’re not going to stand for it. They’re going to do what they can to destroy it. And the happiness based on goodwill based on a condition like that simply just can’t last anyhow by its very nature, whether that person has the power to destroy it or not. And because the path involves the precepts which counsel you not to harm anybody, either yourself or others, goodwill is an important part of maintaining that intention to stay with skillful action. And if you can take the attitude of goodwill and make it limitless, then you’re giving yourself a foundation where you can begin to trust yourself in your actions, that there won’t be any conditions, no matter how severe, where you would consciously harm somebody. And in the meditation, the practice of limitless goodwill, compassion, empathetic joy, or equanimity, can form the basis for some very strong states of concentration. And you can use that concentration as a basis for insight. Because these attitudes give you strength. They enlarge your mind so that you’re larger than any pain, any suffering you may be undergoing. Because, after all, we do all have some past bad karma. If we didn’t have any past bad karma, we wouldn’t be here as human beings. We’d be up in a much higher level right now. And it’s important to realize that we’re not destined to have to suffer in proportion to what the past karma was. That the state of your mind right now can make a huge difference in how much you’re going to suffer from past bad karma. And it can make a huge difference in your ability to analyze whatever pain or suffering there is that comes from that karma. Remember the Buddha’s image of a lump of salt. You put the lump of salt into a glass of water, and the water’s not going to be fit to drink. If you throw the lump of salt into a large, clean river of water, you can still drink the water because it’s so much more than the salt. The taste of the salt will be barely detectable. So developing qualities of limitless goodwill, compassion, empathetic joy, and equanimity is like making your mind like a large river. You’re larger than the pain. You’re larger than the suffering. You’re larger than whatever difficulties there may be. And when you’re not overcome by these things, you’re in a much better position to look at them for what they are, to see that pain, even really bad pain, has its limitations. It’s not going to last forever, and it doesn’t have to totally consume your mind. This is part of the power of present karma, the power of your intentions right now. You can focus on the pain and make it really bad, or you can learn ways of looking at the pain and not feel overcome by it. And having this attitude of infinite goodwill is an important tool in your ability to do that. Because if all you can think about is your own personal sufferings right now, or you get tied up in narratives about how you’re dissatisfied with this person or that person, you’re making your mind small, the kind of mind that can easily be overcome. But if you’re remembering your own pain, that’s a good thing. Other people suffer as well. Everybody else is suffering. It’s not just you. And you can develop compassion for everybody’s suffering. It takes a lot of the sting out of your own pain. Then your own pain seems a lot smaller. You can develop an attitude where you’re not even jealous of people who are happy right now. Because you know that they too have been through pain, and they may be facing pain in the future. So why should you be jealous of their current happiness? You’ve had your happiness, and you will have happiness again. So why stain it with the karma of jealousy? Limitless equanimity makes it a lot easier, too. Realize there are limitations on what you can focus on, what you can do right now. So you want to focus on things that are actually helpful to areas where you can’t make a change. You just leave them alone. In fact, it’s this principle that allows you to let go of the aggregates—your body, form, feelings, perceptions, the thoughts going through your mind. You find that you may have some control over them, but there are a lot of areas where you can’t exert any control. The body changes. As it gets older, it doesn’t ask permission to get old. When it gets sick, it doesn’t warn you ahead of time. When it dies, it doesn’t ask what would be a convenient time for you to go. Are you ready to go yet? It just does its own thing. So the Buddha recommends that you let it go. You look in the mind. Feelings are painful sometimes, pleasant other times. Sometimes you can induce a feeling of pleasure, and if you can, try to do that. Notice where the breath is comfortable, even though there may be pains in some part of the body. There are some aspects of the breath that can be comfortable, so focus on those. If you can’t control the breath in any way at all, then let it go. Focus on thoughts that are more helpful. Again, you find that your thinking is, to some extent, under your control, and to some extent it’s not. Do what you can. At the very least, make sure you’re not getting snared by crazy thoughts, thoughts that weigh the mind down as you think about how life may not be going the way you want it to. When you look into the future, all you see is you’re approaching death. Those kinds of thoughts are not helpful. Focus on what you can do, which is to develop your mindfulness. Develop your alertness. Focus on thoughts that give energy to the mind. If you find that the thoughts are getting out of control, focus on your awareness, just the simple awareness, the knowing you’re in the present moment. Remember that this knowing has no limits. Everything you can possibly be aware of is encompassed within this knowing. So do your best to see that the objects of your knowing are one thing, but the awareness itself is something else. Make that sense of awareness as large as possible. Don’t let it shrink down into little thought worlds. Don’t let it shrink down into areas where you’re feeling pain. Maintain the largeness of your awareness, the expansiveness of your awareness. You’ll find that this enlarged awareness really does make a difference. It’s larger than the particulars of any particular suffering, and it’s your resource of strength. So keep this point in mind, that you want your awareness to be as enlarged as possible. Think of whatever contemplations can help in that way. When you’re facing illness, aging, death, separation, remind yourself that everybody goes through these things. You’ve been through these things many times. Many times in the past. And everybody you know is going to go through these things. So it’s not just you, not just right now. Make your awareness large, and you’ll find that it places you above a lot of the suffering that could happen but doesn’t have to.

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