Brahmaviharas

December 24, 2021

The Buddha recommends goodwill, and all the Brahmavaras have an attitude to three of the hindrances. The obvious one, of course, would be ill will. When you find yourself wishing to see somebody suffer or wishing to see them punished for their misdeeds, you’ve got to correct that thought. Try to have goodwill for that person. When you get anxious about things that you’ve done in the past, harm you’ve done, develop thoughts of goodwill for yourself, for the other person, and again for all the Brahmavaras. Have empathetic joy for that person if the person has found some happiness and some equanimity around the whole issue of karma. That helps to settle the mind. You recognize that you made a mistake. You don’t deny it. But at the same time, you don’t get buried in the mistake. You simply resolve that you’re not going to repeat it. And then you use goodwill and the other Brahmavaras in order to strengthen that resolve. And then, with uncertainty, if you’re not sure about the Buddhist teachings, if you’re not sure about your ability to practice them, you can always practice goodwill. And it’s obviously something good. The desire not to harm anybody is a desire to be honored. The Buddha places a lot of importance on the Brahmavaras. He does mention that they don’t take you all the way. They have as their goal union with Brahma, which is an inferior goal. But you can take the concentration that comes from them and use that concentration as a basis for discernment so that they can be part of the path, even though they’re not the whole path. The other thing that’s interesting is that the Buddha doesn’t give that many instructions. On specifically how you do it, with breath meditation he’s got the sixteen steps. But with goodwill there’s not much. There’s simply an image. Just as a conch horn player would send the sound of his horn in all directions all at once. You don’t want to make any exceptions for your goodwill, or your empathetic joy, or your compassion, or your equanimity. In other words, you try not to be partial. But the steps in doing that are not laid out. The Buddha gives some hints here and there. There’s that case where he says you’re being pinned down by some bandits and they’re going to saw you into little pieces. He says you have to have goodwill for them. In fact, you start with them, and then you spread the goodwill throughout the universe. You start with them because who knows how much longer you’re going to last. And you want to make sure that your last thought is not of ill will for them, because if it is, that might lead you to be reborn in some way, connected with them. And you don’t want that. You’re trying to get from them to the whole universe. That’s the way of getting out of that whole narrative. Then there are the places where the Buddha says that if you are angry at somebody, you’re trying to focus on that person’s good qualities. He gives a couple of analogies, one of which is, you’re a monk who’s looking for cloth. You want to make a robe. You come across a piece of cloth, part of which is dirty and part of which is clean. So you pull the clean part away from the dirty part, cut it off, take that, and leave the dirty part behind. In other words, you’re trying to focus on the good qualities of the people for whom you have goodwill, or for whom you’re trying to develop goodwill. And you’re not denying their bad qualities, but you don’t feed on them. You don’t make them your preoccupation. Because you realize you need the goodwill. It’s for your good that you’re doing this. And there are a couple of places where the Buddha recommends what might be called metta phrases, one of which is, “May these beings be happy, free from danger, free from oppression, and may they look after themselves with ease.” That, of course, reminds you that if they’re going to be happy, it has to depend on their actions. They have to be the ones who look after themselves. You’re not saying, “With your thoughts of goodwill, I’m going to be there for you.” You’re hoping, “May they be there for themselves.” And in whatever way you can help them, you’re happy. There’s a similar passage in the Karanametta Sutta that we chatted about. “May no one despise anyone or, through irritation, wish for anyone to suffer.” And you’re hoping that people will avoid the causes for unhappiness or for pain and suffering. So always keep in mind that happiness is something you wish for others, but they’re going to be the ones who have to be responsible for it. You’re on the sidelines. But you want to make sure that your sideline role is a good one. You don’t want to do anything to discourage them or get in the way of what would be for their true happiness. As for the other brahmavaras, the Buddha doesn’t have any specific phrases at all. The one image he has for compassion is of seeing someone who has no good qualities at all. In other words, to make a comparison with that piece of cloth, the monk sees that there’s a dirty piece of cloth. It’s all dirty. There’s nothing to take in terms of being clean. So he would leave that. But then the Buddha offers another analogy in which you don’t leave it, which is, you don’t know who they are, where they’re coming from, but you find them on the side of the road in a deserted place. And they’re sick. Obviously they’re going to need some help. And so regardless of the fact that you don’t know them, you want them to be helped. You feel sorry for them. That’s his image for compassion. So notice it’s not just for people who are already suffering. It’s for people who are doing things. It’s for people who are doing things that are going to lead to suffering. By extension, you would expand that to empathetic joy, mudita. In other words, you’re not only happy for people who are already happy, but you’re also happy for people who are doing things that will lead to happiness—being generous, being virtuous. You see people meditating, and you’re happy for them. With equanimity, the Buddha doesn’t give any explanations at all. That phrase we chant with a connection with equanimity, in other words, seeing it as related to just realizing the karma of beings, that doesn’t come in the suttas. It comes in a later text. In the suttas, the Buddha actually makes a distinction between developing equanimity and contemplating karma. So that’s kind of a mystery. But contemplating karma does help you put aside concern about issues over which you have no control. You realize that you have your karma, other people have theirs, and sometimes it’s just not possible for them to be happy. And there’s nothing you can do to help. This doesn’t mean that you totally abandon them. It simply means that, for the time being, you’ve got to put that issue aside, put it down, so you can focus on areas where you can be of help. The important thing is that you realize you’re doing this as a way of reminding yourself of the proper motivation as you go through the day. Everybody you deal with, you want to have goodwill. And if they’re suffering, they’re doing things that would lead to suffering, you want to have compassion for them. If they’re already happy or doing things that would lead to happiness, you want to develop empathetic joy. In prayers where you can’t help, that’s where you want to develop equanimity. But you also develop these attitudes as a way of developing concentration as you’re sitting here right now. Sometimes, as the Buddha says, when you’re focusing on the breath, there’s what he calls a fever in the body. In other words, it’s hard to focus on the body. Or there’s a fever in the mind. Something in the mind just doesn’t want to settle down. You might find that the Brahma-viharas are a good alternative. Start with goodwill and ask yourself, “Is there anybody out there for whom you’re not able to have goodwill?” And then there might be some people who come to mind, especially in cases where you feel that for justice to be done, this person should be punished, or you’d like to see them suffer. It’s funny, that kind of justice is not right for you. The world would be a better place if that person could see the error of his or her ways and then change. That would not make the karma that person has done go away, but it means that they’re not creating new karma or new bad karma. And that, as he said this morning, is compared by the Buddha to the moon at night, when suddenly the clouds go away and the moon lights up the landscape. So you think that about all the people in the world who are doing unskillful things right now. May they see the error of their ways. And if there’s anything I can do to help, I’m glad to help. That’s an attitude you can spread around without any hypocrisy. It can go all around the world and beyond. That’s why these are called Brahma-viharas. They’re not manusa-viharas. They’re not human attitudes. They’re higher than the ordinary human attitude. You want to be able to extend them to all beings everywhere, in which case you’re giving safety to them and you’re going to have a portion of that safety as well.

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