An Appropriate Response: The Brahmaviharas as a Roadmap of the Heart

Guy Armstrong · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Guy Armstrong · 1:01:14

The subject of the talk tonight is the Brahmaviharas.

A Zen master was asked one time, "What's the value of a lifetime of practice?" I was really curious what the Zen master was going to say because I expected something like: "Well, after a lifetime of practice, just before you die, you sit up in perfect zazen posture and you utter a spontaneous poem expressing your deepest realization, and then you go." He didn't say anything quite that idealistic. The Zen master said the value of a lifetime of practice is an appropriate response.

I thought this was beautiful because it points to the fact that after we've practiced, the way it shows up is how we respond in the moment over and over and over. The fruit of our practice is responding appropriately in each new moment. That's enough. As practitioners we recognize that anything can happen at any time.

One day a friend of ours had visited the Ramana Ashram in southern India and afterwards went for a vacation on a beach nearby. It happened to be December 26, 2004. If you remember, that was a catastrophic date in that part of the world. He was standing on the beach in front of his cottage, a beachfront cottage, practicing qigong. A big wave came up and knocked him over. But then it went back out and he was able to stand up. As he stood up, he saw this wave receding in a really unusual way. It was leaving a huge depression as it went back out—very abnormal wave formation. He said, "This doesn't look so good." So he hopped up onto a concrete wall and grabbed hold of a palm tree and then the second wave came in. That was the really devastating one that hit Thailand and India and Burma. But because he had grabbed hold of the palm tree and stood on the concrete wall, he was high enough and had enough of a grip that it washed in, washed out, and he was okay. This is one time when the practice of non-clinging was not advised. Clinging was very helpful to him.

Of course, lots of people didn't have a palm tree to cling to, and there were many lives lost in that tsunami. But you just never know. Fortunately, he had the mindfulness to look at what was happening and listen to his instincts. "Uh-oh." And he found a safe place, found a safe haven.

Life is going to keep presenting us with these situations, sometimes mild, sometimes intense. I was just talking with a friend today who had a very intense situation arise in her life and a friendship, someone she's very connected to, completely out of the blue, completely unexpected, and obviously somewhat shaken by it. But as these episodes of life affect us, it's easy to become despairing, hopeless, feel defeated,

or think "what's the point?" But if we move in that direction, that doesn't help the world. It doesn't help others and it doesn't help ourselves.

The Brahmaviharas show us that there's another way of responding to any situation on the scale from painful to very pleasurable. There's an awakened response that's possible. As we cultivate the Brahmaviharas, they become our allies in training the heart to an appropriate response in whatever situation comes up.

As we've said, loving kindness is the foundation, this basic sense of goodwill and care. When that tender heart meets the truth of suffering, the response naturally is compassion. When it meets a situation of happiness, the response is sympathetic joy or mudita. If no particular stimulus is coming in, the open heart can rest in equanimity, where it's balanced among the joys and sorrows that life can present.

I mentioned the other morning this question about: If we are trained to accept the moment as it is in our meditation practice, how can we have a wish for the suffering of the world to go away? It's through this quality of equanimity that we combine those two. When the Buddha looked out on the world, he saw a vast range of suffering. He also knew he had the key to unlock it for people, but it depended on their effort. So through his compassion, he wished to alleviate their pain. Through his equanimity, he understood they needed to do the work, and he couldn't do it for them. This is how we balance—the compassion and the loving kindness and the sympathetic joy are all held in this deep rest that equanimity brings to us.

We begin with loving kindness and on the easy end of the spectrum: self, benefactor, and friend as we've been practicing for these last few days. Sally talked a little this morning about the neutral person, bringing that person in for loving kindness. A neutral person is really a turning point in our practice of loving kindness because we find as we start to wish them well that we can care a lot about somebody that we don't really know.

I was teaching a daylong on metta once at a gathering in Marin County. A guy had come down from Sonoma and took the day and received instructions for all these categories including the neutral person. He went home and took as his neutral person a cashier in a supermarket near him. I saw him about a year later and he told me the story. He said, "I practiced metta for my neutral person every time I went into that supermarket. I got so fond of that person, I started to get nervous when I was checking out."

And he never really knew that person well, and yet he had this big reservoir of care about her and connection to her.

So the neutral person opens us up to the possibility that we can care for the seven billion people on the planet whom we haven't yet met and therefore have no reason to dislike. That's kind of a nice situation, right? So it's said that metta becomes, as it extends to all beings, like a gentle rain that falls everywhere without exception. That's what gives it this universal or boundless quality.

The Buddha made a reflection about this that I find really interesting—sort of why we might choose to care about the people that we run into. He said, given all the many lives that we have all spent in this realm of samsara, it's not easy to find a being who at some point has not been your mother, your father, your brother, your sister, your son, or your daughter.

Now you may or may not hold this view of rebirth that the Buddha taught often and referred to many times in his discourses. But what if it was true? What if we all have been, especially those of us in this room who seem to be connected in a way that a lot of people in the world may not be—what if we have been that close to one another in the past? Could be many times in the past. It would make us feel differently about each other, wouldn't it? We would start to care more. Of course, that might depend on how you feel about your family of origin, so I don't know. But it makes us closer than we would have thought we were, and it really can open up our metta practice to all of life, all human beings.

So just as we've been reading in the Metta Sutta, "Just as a mother protects with her life her child, her only child, so with a boundless heart should one cherish all living beings." This is our instruction. And as Sally said, it doesn't mean we have to like people, but we can care about them. We can wish them happiness. We can wish them well. And as we meditate with these reflections of loving-kindness, we understand every being that lives wants the same things we want. Every being wants safety, happiness, health, and ease. So in that, we're all alike.

So as we open up to the welfare of beings in the world, we also discover there's a lot of suffering around us, some suffering inside us. How do we relate to that? Sometimes not easy.

Classically, it's said that the hardest of the Brahmaviharas to practice is mudita, because the factor of envy comes up so easily and so readily. It's hard for us to be joyful about someone else's happiness because the envy is so nearby.

But that's not what I found. In one six-week period of retreat, I spent ten days doing intensive practice of each of the four Brahmaviharas. It was a wonderful experience to really get into the depth of each one. And each of them can be practiced for concentration as well as for the heart quality that it brings.

So for me the hardest to practice was not mudita. Mudita was actually the most joyful. I just found it really uplifting to be with happiness all day. The hardest for me was practicing compassion because it was about staying with suffering all day long—eighteen hours a day in me and all the other people that I brought to mind.

I find it difficult—I think most of us find it difficult—to be right up against suffering. So we've found ways to avoid doing that. We have lots of different defenses to keep from having that experience. Carl Jung, the psychologist, said that neurosis is basically a refusal to confront suffering. Well, that's a strong statement. Because we don't want to face suffering directly, we find these suspect ways to avoid it that are our neuroses.

So take a look at the relationship of the world to suffering. We avoid it, we turn away, we deny it. Often we try to fix it. If we find a friend is suffering, we really go quickly—at least, I think it's a male pattern—we go quickly to fixing. I think women are a little better at just being with a friend in suffering. We might tend to blame it on someone else. If it's our suffering, they made me suffer. It was my mother, it was the society, or it was capitalism. We judge it as wrong. This suffering shouldn't be happening.

We judge ourselves as wrong. If I was an okay person, this suffering wouldn't be happening. Or we turn to something pleasurable. The Buddha pointed to this really directly in one sutta. He said, for the ordinary untrained person, the only escape from painful sensation is to turn to a source of pleasure.

So this is the beginning of addiction. We look at all the pleasurable outlets that the world offers, and there are many, and we become addicted as a way of avoiding the pain. Or if it's suffering with other people, we tell ourselves stories about it. We rationalize it. It's not my problem. It's their karma. It's those kinds of people.

But suffering is the proximate cause for compassion to arise. If we want this quality of compassion to develop, we need to touch the suffering in ourselves and in others really directly. So in our meditation, can we touch it, be close to it, and just feel it without having to make it go away or fix it or avoid it? Can we just feel the suffering in ourselves and in another?

If we open to that, then we find the compassion can come through. And the more we can expand the compassion for our own suffering, the more we'll be able to be with the suffering of the world. The less we're able to be with our own, the less we can be with others. It's really the same dynamic.

So it's wonderful to be in a sangha because you see these amazing examples of compassion. I was teaching a retreat, a month-long retreat one year at Spirit Rock. And there was a meditator who worked in the kitchen who had an illness that had attacked his kidneys. Both his kidneys were failing. So if he went back from the retreat, he was going to need to be on dialysis perhaps for a long, perhaps for the rest of his life, because waiting for a kidney transplant can be a long process. It depends on the need, the availability, and lots of different factors.

One of the other meditators happened to overhear a conversation in the kitchen about this. This other meditator had no relationship to the yogi who was ill, and she formed the intent during that retreat to offer the meditator a kidney if they were a match. And she held to it. Going through the retreat, obviously she probably went through a lot of ups and downs and questions, but she came out of the retreat, she held to it, she approached the person, offered the kidney. The person accepted the offer, they went into testing, it took some time, but ended up that she donated a kidney to this other yogi whom she had never met before. It's a beautiful act of compassion and wanting to help someone else in a situation of suffering.

Suffering can really affect us, can change us. There's a quite interesting story, a moving story about King Ashoka. He lived in the third century BCE in India, and he was probably the first emperor of India to unify

almost all of that subcontinent. How does a king unify a subcontinent? It's not by loving-kindness. He doesn't just say, come on, give up your own ruler and come under my government. It's by wars. He battled fiercely many other rulers on that subcontinent, battle after battle, war after war. In one of the last ones, it's said that 100,000 people died in the war with this one ruler.

It culminated in one particular battle. Afterwards, the king was surveying the battlefield and the carnage that was just laid out in front of him—thousands and thousands of corpses from both sides, dead on the battlefield. And as he watched, he saw a Buddhist monk walking across the battlefield in a state of great serenity and peace and calm. And he was looking at the ruins and thinking, what have I done? Is this worth it? I'm responsible for all these people dying. And he watched the Buddhist monk walking across in a state of complete calm and peace. And he thought, this person has nothing. I have all the wealth of what he knew as his world. I could do anything. He's at peace and I'm tormented.

What is his secret?

At this time, Buddhism was not anything like a hugely widespread religion in India. But Ashoka became so interested that he pursued the teachings and changed his rule completely. He followed the Buddha's teachings. He gave up war. He assured all the rulers around him that he'd given up his aims of expansion and conquering more territory. He encouraged everyone in his kingdom to respect all religions, not to fight over religion any longer. He distributed food widely so that poverty essentially became a non-issue in the kingdom. He outlawed animal sacrifices, having compassion for all creatures. And then he put up edicts throughout the country proclaiming Dharma principles—the principles he wanted people to abide by.

So it was a huge transformation that came out of a moment of compassion—an hour or a day of seeing the effects of war, the devastation of war. And he changed the history of India from that point forward.

Here we have a formal practice to develop compassion that can transform our relationship to suffering. I remember some time ago I was at home when a student I'd been working with for a couple of years called me in a great state of fear. The student said, "I'm going through this intense fear and I've tried working with vipassana and it's just not letting up. I'm really in the grip of it and it's really painful."

I could hear the panic in her voice because it was an overwhelmed situation. I said, "Okay, you've already tried vipassana, let's try something different." So I gave her the instruction for the compassion phrase, which she hadn't worked with before. I said, "Just hold yourself, feel the fear and repeat this to yourself over and over—at least twenty minutes, at least thirty minutes, longer if you can. And then let me know what happens."

About an hour later, she called back and said, "That completely changed. The compassion phrase just let me be with the experience. And then the panic went out because I knew I could be with the experience. As the panic went out, the fear went way down and became really manageable."

So compassion has this kind of ability. I remember in my own experience when I started working with the compassion practice and applying it during retreat when I was in some state of pain and suffering. I can't remember what it was, but I felt this different voice coming alive inside me. It was like I was channeling Kuan Yin. The pain was still there, but this other voice was coming in that was very mature, adult, balanced, confident. And with that, I knew I could be with whatever experience was going on. It completely changed it for me.

Essentially what compassion does as we grow it is let us hold the experience in a bigger frame—what I would say is a bigger heart. It's a little bit like the title of Sharon Salzberg's book, *A Heart as Wide as the World*. We find we can accommodate the pain of the world as we grow that heart. We can still be overwhelmed, but we can come back to that as a baseline, as a foundation.

Because compassion is in touch with suffering, it's not an exuberant state. You feel the suffering that you're in touch with. One of my teachers said that it's like the mood at sunset. There's a beauty and there's also this kind of wistful poignancy that's there—a touch of sadness because of the suffering that's present. But there's also a sublime feeling that's a kind of beauty as the compassion is pure.

Now we've talked about the fact that compassion can easily tip over into a near enemy. One of them is overwhelming grief. We feel the suffering is too much to bear, whether it's ours or another's, and we feel too burdened down. We can't find the strength, we can't find the equanimity to hold it with balance. That's one possibility, that's a near enemy. In a situation like that, it's maybe more helpful to turn to some subject that will bring uplift—turn to someone like a benefactor or friend, a child or a pet, or turn to *mudita*, focus on the wholesome, the positive, and let the heart be picked up from this place of overwhelm.

The other near enemy is an element of pity—not *piti*, but the old English pity—where we feel sorry for the person, but it involves a looking down on them. It's, "Oh, too bad about your suffering, but I'm not feeling that."

So I'm in an okay place, so it doesn't really touch me. What's going on with pity is that we're kind of looking down on someone from above, and there's an element of conceit in that. We're in a superior position because we're not suffering currently. But of course, if we reflect, it could be the other way around at any time.

Compassion shows us that we're really all in the same boat in terms of our vulnerability. We may be temporarily away from suffering, but things could change and we could be feeling that. It's something that connects us to everyone. It's universal.

This is from a poem called "Kindness" by Naomi Shihab Nye, a Palestinian American poet: "Before you know what kindness really is, you must lose things. Feel the future dissolve in a moment, like salt in a weakened broth. Before you know the tender gravity of kindness, you must travel where the Indian in a white poncho lies dead by the side of the road. You must see how this could be you, how he too was

someone who journeyed through the night with plans, and the simple breath that kept him alive. Before you know kindness is the deepest thing inside, you must know sorrow as the other deepest thing."

So compassion opens us up to this universality of sorrow, our own vulnerability to suffering, and connects us to all things that live.

The far enemy of compassion is cruelty, which is enjoying someone else's suffering. We talked about this a little bit the other night. Most of us don't think of ourselves as cruel people. But if you look closely at anger, you might find within it an element of ill will—which is wanting someone else to hurt, to suffer. And that's just a step away from cruelty. So it may not be that far away for us.

Sometimes we're in the midst of very complicated situations where there could be blame on many sides—a family situation, a situation at work with lots of colleagues—and you can see everybody's piece of contributing to it. You may not be able to see a clear way to resolve the situation, but one thing you can always take as a refuge is compassion for everyone involved, without needing to judge right and wrong. Just to see the shared suffering in the situation.

Compassion also lends itself to seeing the potential for suffering for all beings and therefore the wish for all beings to be free from suffering. So both loving kindness and compassion can grow into this feeling for all beings everywhere—that's when they become boundless.

And then there's something else interesting that happens when metta and compassion grow up to become boundless. I want to pose this to you as practitioners: If you feel metta for all beings, you want all beings to be happy. What's the most complete way for all beings to be happy? It's for them to awaken, isn't it? The most complete form of happiness is their own awakening, their own liberation. So that wish starts to come in.

And as compassion grows up, you really want all beings to be free from suffering. What's the most complete way for a being to be free from suffering? It's also to awaken, isn't it?

So when metta and compassion grow up in this really boundless way as a Dharma practitioner, you want all beings to find happiness and to be free from suffering through awakening. What's the best way for you to help toward this goal? It's to awaken yourself, isn't it? Can you help bring beings out of suffering altogether if you haven't awakened yourself? Not so likely. But once we have awakened, then we have the possibility of bringing others out of suffering completely.

So this can become a real wish for us: "May I awaken myself in order to help bring others out of their suffering and into real happiness." This wish is called bodhicitta, sometimes translated as the awakening heart. And this wish can be fed back as a motivation in our practice. We can form the wish to practice, the wish to become awakened as the way that we can help others to achieve real happiness and a true end of suffering.

So this is the source—the quality of bodhicitta really grows out of the maturing of boundless metta and boundless compassion. This is expressed in a really nice way in one of the quotes in the study guide. It's short—you don't need to look it up now. A quote on the back page, number 80. "Crossing" is a word used in the Buddha's teachings for crossing the flood of the kilesas, the taints, whatever.

It means crossing over to the other shore, becoming awakened. "Crossed, I would cross others. Freed, I would free others. Tamed, I would tame. Calmed, I would calm. Comforted, I would comfort. Attained to nibbana, I would lead to nibbana."

This is the expression of that quality of bodhicitta—what I deeply wish for myself and the world: to come to awakening and help bring others to awakening. This was written by a fifth-century teacher from Sri Lanka named Dhammapala.

If you resonate with this sense of bodhicitta, you might like to bring it in at the start of sittings. I do this when I sit both in daily life and on retreat. I just say a few lines to myself: "By the merit of generosity and other virtuous actions, may I come to awakening for the benefit of all sentient beings." It renews my motivation at the beginning of each sitting period.

This is the quality of bodhicitta. The Dalai Lama is a great advocate of this practice—one we have to remind ourselves of because it's very easy for it to get lost in the wake of our self-centeredness. Even the Dalai Lama, who's one of the great practitioners of our day, says, "I cannot pretend that I am really able to practice bodhicitta, but it does give me tremendous inspiration. Deep inside me, I realize how valuable and beneficial it is. That is all."

We don't have to imagine that we're going to become great bodhisattvas or saviors of the world. But we can plant this motivation and it can inspire us. It can help broaden our vision and keep connecting us to all of life.

As we're connecting to the world, we also notice how much joy there is. This leads us into the practice of mudita—the response of the heart to happiness, taking joy in another's happiness. I remember once calling a friend on the other side of the country. I needed to talk about some business, and I started by asking, "How are you doing?" She said enthusiastically, "I'm wonderful!" Her answer just picked me up. I said, "I'm wonderful too." That was the contagious nature of happiness—such a delight to hear from her.

Mudita gives us a double dose of happiness. It doesn't have to come from big things. Think about your lives as yogis here on this retreat. There are so many moments in the day that have little bits of happiness with them: getting out of bed when it's a little cool in your room, but you get to have a hot shower; after a day of rain, walking outside to find the sky is blue; catching sight of a deer in a meadow or off the road as you're walking; a cardinal flying by on the driveway; when the sky is clear, watching the moon rise a little later at night; or one of my favorite times of the day—lying down to go to bed. Such relief after practicing and working hard all day. It feels so good for the head to hit the pillow. Unfortunately for me, that never

lasts very long because I go to sleep, wake up, and start practicing again. But it's a few nice moments.

We are so fortunate here to have the beautiful nature surrounding us. Nature is so sustaining and uplifting. One of the hardest retreats I ever did was as a fairly new monk in Thailand. I practiced in a forest monastery up north, outside of Chiang Mai, where the teacher didn't speak English and there were no other English-speaking monks I could talk to. I went for three months in real silence, apart from the chants around meal time. I didn't hear any dharma talks—we didn't have MP3 players back then—and I didn't have any interviews with the teacher.

I was just practicing completely on my own for three months in a new country, new culture. And it was difficult. It was very difficult at times. But what sustained me was the beauty of nature. The monastery was out in the forest. There was a creek that ran through the center of it. My little cottage was right next to the creek, so I could see that and hear the running water. The sun would come up most days. It was very beautiful. Trees all around. So I felt the beauty of nature really sustained me through that time because there wasn't a lot else. The nature was always there.

And practicing in Asia, there are always these opportunities for joy. Practicing in cultures where the Dharma has been embedded for so long. I went to Burma to be ordained for a second time some years ago. A student knew that I was going and wanted to offer some support, so she gave me some money to take to offer to the monastery. She said, "Take this gift and offer it. Use it in the way that it would seem most beneficial." It was a few hundred dollars, which in Asia can go quite a way.

So I got to the monastery, way out in the country in southeast Burma, far from the capital. At that time, there were 750 people practicing in the monastery—something like 450 monks, 150 nuns, and the rest were laypeople. I thought, "Maybe I could take this money and on behalf of the student, sponsor a lunch for everybody in the monastery. Offer a dana on her behalf to everyone who was practicing there."

I was still a layperson—I hadn't yet ordained—so I could still handle cash. I went to the clerk of the monastery and said, "I have this gift from a friend overseas. Could I sponsor a lunch for everyone?" Burma is a poor country, and what wealth they have has been siphoned off by the leaders. I thought there would be a real welcoming of this gift.

The clerk told me, "Oh, all the lunches for the next three months have already been offered." And I thought that was so beautiful. In one of the poorer countries on the face of the earth, people had already come along to offer meals to feed all 750 people who were sitting. This kind of practice is what gives rise to our meal dana, which we see the notices of every day at lunch.

So we arranged to provide two special breakfasts—really tasty, extra food for everyone. On the day of the meal, you'd go down and the name of the person or family or village who donated the funds for that meal would be put up on a big whiteboard, both in Burmese, which I couldn't read, and in English. You'd walk in and see whose generosity had made possible the meal for that day. So for the breakfast, her name was

up there.

But for the lunch, the people who had offered the meal would usually come to the monastery. They would watch the monks go through the line and fill their bowls from the funds that they had donated. They would be sitting off to the side, typically villagers from nearby. Usually it might take a whole family or several families to make the money to offer lunch to everyone who was there. They would be sitting off to the side, watching people go through the meal line, dressed in their best clothes. This was a very special day for them, a very special outing.

You could just see the happiness in their faces. The first monk to go through was Paok Sayadaw—he had something like fifty-some years as a monk. He was the most senior monk, a teacher, so he went through first. And they were just beaming with being able to offer to Paok Sayadaw, all the other accomplished practitioners, the monks, the nuns, and then the laypeople.

So it was a very joyful thing for them to be able to do that, to offer that. So this is sometimes translated as sympathetic joy because our hearts would really resonate with theirs. We'd pick up on their joy and it was just delightful.

And sometimes it's translated as appreciative joy. This is from Ajahn Sumedho, the American monk who was a student of Ajahn Chah. Sometimes in Theravada Buddhism, one gets the impression that you shouldn't enjoy beauty. If you see a beautiful flower, you should contemplate its decay. Or if you see a beautiful woman, you should contemplate her as a rotting corpse. That's a good reflection on anicca, dukkha, and anatta, but it can leave the impression that beauty is only to be reflected on in terms of these three characteristics, rather than in terms of the experience of beauty. This is the joy of mudita, being able to appreciate the beauty in the things around us. So we encourage this joy with beauty, this appreciation of what is around us.

As we direct the meditation on appreciative joy to self, it often comes through as gratitude. And gratitude is a really beautiful state of mind because it undercuts both greed and aversion. When there's gratitude, we appreciate what we have so we don't crave for more. And when we feel gratitude, we appreciate what we have so we don't dislike our situation. We don't give in to discontent. We're happy where we are.

We have a friend who has kids and grandkids who's also a wise practitioner and teacher and takes the opportunity to teach when possible. She was talking to one of her granddaughters on Christmas Day, talking on the phone because they were a long way away. And the granddaughter had just gone through the list of presents she'd gotten for Christmas, which of course made her very happy.

So our friend said, "When you get lots of presents, do you feel thankful for what you have? Or does it make you want more?" And the little girl, who was about eight at this time, said, "Oh Nana, I want more." And so our friend said, "Oh, that's too bad." And the little girl was listening and said, "What do you mean?" And our friend said, "Well, haven't you noticed that when you're thankful for what you have, you feel good?

And when you're wanting more, it doesn't feel as good?" And the little girl said, "Oh, Nana, you're right." That was a teaching on gratitude.

At one retreat, I went into the retreat at the start of November. It was here. And you probably know the start of November in New England is not a particularly uplifting time for weather. So it was rainy, it was gray, it was already cold, it was windy. And as I was getting into the retreat, the weather was kind of weighing on me. I thought, oh gosh, am I going to get really gloomy with this weather? So I decided to do some gratitude reflection and I wrote down on a piece of paper all the things in my life that I was grateful for. Just wrote down as many as I could think, the big things and the little things. It ended up filling a whole page.

And then every morning in the retreat, I would read through that list and remember how lucky I was. To be practicing was one thing I was grateful for, but there were lots of others. So it really served to dispel this sense of gloominess or sadness about my situation.

Sally and I, some years ago, were teaching a group of senior students, and we were talking about gratitude. And one member in the group said to another, "Hey, let's email each other every night before we go to bed one thing we were grateful for that day." And so two of them started doing it, and then other people in our group started doing it. And as far as I know, that's where the daily email gratitude practice came from, was that group of senior students. It's a good practice if you have a dharma buddy to do it with.

So it's very helpful to have things in your mind, things in your life that you can call to mind to bring up this sense of uplift. Later in that retreat, when I'd ordained and I was sitting in Burma with Paok Sayadaw, I hit some difficult patches. So I was in robes. I hadn't been in robes for years. The practice was very narrow because it was just keeping the attention at the upper lip, basically eighteen hours a day, no other focus. The schedule was demanding. The shortest sit was an hour and a half. Longest sit was two hours. And I happened to join and get ordained right at the start of the rains retreat. And I should have known the rains retreat was so called for a reason. It started raining and I didn't see the sun for about three weeks.

I read the rainfall figures later—it was raining about three inches a day. It was a real tropical experience for those three weeks. I was eating one meal a day, and as I looked back at the end of the retreat, I had lost close to half a pound a day on that diet of one meal, which had very little protein.

I remember it all came together one lunchtime as I was walking back to my kuti, my little hut. It was raining, of course. I had a bowl, which was hot, with the hot food. I had a little bit of dessert in the bowl lid, which was upturned on top. I was cradling it in my left arm, holding an umbrella in my right, and my robes, which I had not quite learned to tie well again, were sliding off my left shoulder.

As I was walking along in this precarious situation in the rain, a group of Burmese laypeople on the

muddy path, running with water, moved off to the side, knelt down, and bowed to me. I was just hoping I wouldn't come completely unclothed in front of them. I managed to get back to my kuti and enjoy my lunch, put my umbrella away, and get dry. But it marked a low point in my whole journey.

I was feeling at the end of my rope, very challenged and down in spirits. All these things were coming together, and I really didn't know what to do because I didn't have a good friend there. I didn't know who to talk to about this. Sayadaw was not exactly on the emotional end of the spectrum.

I had brought along a photograph of the Dalai Lama with a very inspirational quote from Shantideva—a bodhisattva kind of quote. So I turned to the Dalai Lama in a great mood of sincere supplication and humility. I said, "Your Holiness, do you have any advice for me?"

Immediately there was this very clear response in his voice, his Indian-accented English voice: "Stay cheerful, optimistic, and confident. A positive attitude is the best support." Then the transmission ended. That was it.

Stay cheerful, optimistic, and confident. A positive attitude is the best support. I thought that was brilliant advice. Because if I could remember what cheerful felt like, I could sort of put myself there, and it really helped. When would we not want to be cheerful, optimistic, and confident? This is one of the things that mudita opens up to us—an ally to bring in cheer and confidence. That's a teaching I've relied on many, many times. Stay cheerful, optimistic, and confident. Remember what that feels like.

The Dalai Lama himself manifests this in a beautiful way. He has probably seen as much suffering as anyone I can think of, because he kept hearing reports of genocide after he fled Tibet in 1959. Something like a million people were killed in the decade following, and most of the monasteries and nunneries were wiped out. And yet he has this huge pool of happiness.

A few years ago there was a gathering in Dharamsala, where he lives—a gathering of scientists, because he's really into science and lining Buddhism up with science and doing research to prove meditation. One of the scientists, over an informal gathering, asked him, "What was the happiest time of your life?"

I thought it would be when he was living back in the Potala and Tibetan culture was all intact, when he was under the supervision of his tutors and many, many monks and nuns were practicing all over the country. I thought it would be that kind of time he would point to.

They asked, "What was the happiest time of your life?" And he said, "I think right now." I thought that was so great—the best possible answer.

With mudita, the near enemy is, as we've talked about, elation or over-exuberance, when there's an attachment to the happiness and we overthink it and claim it as our own and project it into the future. Of course that will undermine it and eventually chase it away. And the far enemy is envy—as though if somebody else has happiness, it's going to take away from ours.

After I graduated from college, I went into the Peace Corps. In going into the Peace Corps, I left a relationship...

I left a girlfriend at that time to go off. I taught school in Malaysia for two years, which is where I first had contact with Thailand and fell in love with the culture. So I'd left my girlfriend—I still had feelings for her, but I wanted to do this teaching in Asia. Not long after I got settled at my school in Malaysia, I got a letter from my best friend who told me that he'd just gotten together with my girlfriend in a relationship.

Mudita was not the first response that came to mind at that point. So I had to work with that envy and jealousy. But we have a tool, and one of the beauties of mudita is that it's said to dispel envy. We become very skillful in situations like that.

The last of the Brahmaviharas is this quality of equanimity, and I think I'll save this for another night. The Pali word is *upekkha*. It is this fundamental balance of mind that's not thrown off by the alternating pleasure and pain of life, both internally and externally. Within the Brahmaviharas, it's the balance that holds all the joys and all the sorrows of the world and ourselves without getting disturbed about it.

Equanimity is an extremely high value in the Buddhist teachings. It's the last of the Brahmaviharas. It's the last of the factors of enlightenment. In the meditation system of Mahasi Sayadaw, it is the last development before awakening happens. So it's a very powerful and desirable state, and we'll talk about it more another time.

I want to close with some reflection on how the Brahmaviharas in their totality make a kind of road map of the heart and its relationship to the world. The Brahmaviharas themselves shouldn't be taken for granted. You shouldn't just assume, "Oh, I ought to be having metta. I ought to be having pure compassion. I ought to be having mudita. I ought to be having equanimity." These are high states. They are what I would call the awakened response to the circumstances of life. So we're imitating the awakened ones when we find ourselves in these states.

You shouldn't expect this to be your normal way of operating. These are elevated states of being. Our normal, self-centered way of operating is described by the near enemies. That's essentially where the near enemy comes from—normal self-centered mind states. Affection with attachment, pity and looking down, envy and looking up, or agitation instead of equanimity—this is the way the untrained mind tends to respond to changing circumstances.

The far enemies are essentially the really unwholesome responses to life circumstances, and we definitely want to avoid those—the responses of ill will, cruelty, envy, or agitation.

Taken together, we have four Brahmaviharas by three qualities: the Brahmavihara, the near enemy, the far enemy. This gives us a map of twelve responses to the world. As you start to practice with these, you really see how they describe or outline most of the range of possible responses that we will make to life situations. Using the Brahmaviharas as tools, we learn more and more how to move ourselves from the

suffering places into the really wholesome and awakened places.

This whole system of the Brahmaviharas with their near and far enemies provides a wonderful roadmap to the responses to life's conditions. We can look at ourselves through this map almost any time.

Let me close with one other version of the Brahmavihara phrases. This is the standard Tibetan expression of the four Brahmaviharas. They have them also—I haven't heard of the practices being quite like ours, but they have the concept of the Brahmaviharas.

So I'll close with reading these qualities from the Tibetan point of view:

May all beings have happiness and the cause of happiness, which is virtue.

May all beings be free from sorrow and the cause of sorrow, which is non-virtue.

May all beings remain unseparated from the sacred happiness, which is free from sorrow.

May all beings come to rest in the great equanimity beyond attachment to those near and far.

So let's just sit together for a minute.

Crossed, I would cross others. Freed, I would free. Tamed, I would tame. Calmed, I would calm. Comforted, I would comfort. Attained to nibbana, I would lead to nibbana.

So thank you for your attention. We have about thirty minutes for walking meditation, and then we will return to practice a new chant—the last of the four pages of chanting on pervading loving-kindness.

Thank you for listening.

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