

The Brahma Vihara Meditation
Venerable Namgyal Rinpoche
April 4, 1974

In the Buddhist Theravadin teaching there are forty classical meditations. Key amongst these is the Brahma Vihara, sometimes called the Divine Abidings, to which the 4 Brahma-Vihara belong. Brahma is the Pali (and Sanskrit) word for god or gods and Vihara basically means to live. Thus, Brahma Vihara suggests a living with the gods, or living in a god-like state. (The phrase is sometimes translated as the divine or sublime abodes of the spirit). In Pali with English translation they are the meditations on; metta, love or all-embracing friendliness; karuna, compassion; mudita, sympathetic joy; and upekkha, detachment. Usually these four are practiced in that specific order, just as it is considered that they unfold in life in this order as well.

The meditation on metta is concerned with the development of an all-embracing friendliness rather than love of a sexual nature or “falling in love.” The word metta comes from “mitta” which means friend. One of the first prerequisites of the spiritual path according to the Buddha is “Kalyana mitta”, suitable friends. One must distinguish the quality of friendship from that of passionate love of a more overly sexual character, which is generally associated with feelings of possessiveness, exclusiveness, and overwhelming states. Friendliness is something lighter, less directional and more embracive. It is worn with more ease than is passionate love.

Some eastern teachers have pointed out that metta is basically a very cool, passive state somewhat like a basic feeling of ease. It should not be thought of as something that is particularly active or directed, but rather as a foundation, comfortably rotund. It is a state of wishing well to everyone you meet in the course of the day. This sense is the first prerequisite for those who wish to walk the holy path. The goal of the meditation on metta is to become equally friendly to all sentient beings. In such a state there could not be any anxiety in one’s meeting with new or old acquaintances or situations. Once metta has been established in one’s being one of the results is that a greater knowing develops. From this point you can go on to explore the two active qualities: karuna and mudita.

In the exploration of your world you will begin to notice that all beings go through strong emotional uprisings, the strongest of which is suffering. By identification with the suffering one develops compassion. Compassion cannot be maintained in a hysterical reaction, it rests on coolness of being. You cannot talk about compassion separate from a quality of calm and clarity as well as an active application of skill-in-means. Feeling no identification with the suffering of others can’t lead to effective action unless you are able to avoid being overwhelmed by the situation. For example, by ego-identifying with the soldier in the fields whose guts are hanging from his body there is little chance that one could go beyond hysterical weeping or fainting from fear, which really doesn’t help the wounded person at all. However if an army surgeon comes along, someone who has had great experience with human suffering, he would not allow an emotional reaction to overwhelm his consciousness. He might suture the wound in a cold-minded way, thus his intervention would be effective. This is the central understanding of the mantra OM MANI PADME HUM. Mani is the compassionate mind which is clear, still and centered. It is a jewel. Padme is the moving part, the flowing energy which knows what to do and how to do it.

If you have a friend gravely ill in hospital and you wish to think of that being in a compassionate way, it would seem (according to the understanding of that mantra) that you ought to do something active. Since you cannot actually perform an operation yourself except in the direst of emergencies maybe the only thing left for you to do is send waves of metta, envelop the person in a healing ray through meditation. Certainly you wouldn't visit beings in a hospital and weep hysterically at their bedsides, adding further to their discomfort! Give support through loving words, a friendly greeting, or the gift of joy, or a toy. It is always skillful not to be dramatic, not to have the big solution to everyone's problems, including your own. (In fact to have all your own answers is simply masochistic.) Sometimes a mediocre but well-meaning doctor has more success through friendliness than the most brilliant technician. There are other planes of healing beyond the obvious ones.

The brahma vihara that is largely neglected by Buddhists is mudita. This is usually rather awkwardly translated as "sympathetic joy". I say awkwardly because for many people the word "sympathetic" has connotations of illness or disaster, whereas what is meant here is more like empathetic joy or shared joy, being happy because someone else is happy. This is a most important meditation, especially because so many people seem to want to go overboard on compassion. If you only look for suffering, constantly only seeking and dealing with suffering you begin to think that that is all there is and soon there is no hope of anything else existing. In reality, the aim of compassion is to overcome suffering, to break through to joy.

Occasionally a spontaneous bubbling occurs in beings, a laughter arises which is very liberating. Occasionally the bird gets out of its cage and flies freely. When you hear the laughter of children and enter into that, or when you see a young couple's love for one another, or an elder person's constructive discoveries and you share their joy, your life becomes richer. Whenever you appreciate another beings' happiness, or someone's serene satisfaction at seeing something beautiful, there is a growing of the spirit in your being. This is an extremely important state and by fostering it you will develop much more quickly towards the enlightened understanding.

Many beings spontaneously move towards entering into the joy of another but then defilements arise to hold them back from this and they are sidetracked into such unfortunate states as envy or criticism. Joy is not something you have to deserve; it is something that bubbles up unsummoned. It is a gift. You should be happy that for a moment someone has been able to escape from their suffering when you see pleasure in another. It should delight you when your "enemies" experience joy. If you could see your enemies as human beings, suffering and in need, you would have no enemies. You have to understand that the bad in beings is usually caused by forces beyond their control. There must be more than an outward turning of the cheek while clinging to bitterness within if you are sincere about liberation. There must be seeing with depth compassion.

From the motivation to good and friendliness that develops through these first three of the four great meditations you become a well-wisher to mankind. The wishing well fulfills your life wish to awaken. Once set in motion this state of being cannot be hindered. There is a continuous dialogue between the compassion of Chenresi and the joy of Vajrasattva. The great work consists of raising compassion to joy and through this work 'upekkha', detachment, comes into being. Perhaps we might define this as holy indifference rather than detachment: indifference with serenity. There are two

approaches one can have to life situations: hedonism or involvement in openness, sharing. If you are essentially a defensive being you hate anyone who interferes with you. You aren't interested in whether others are happy or unhappy, are born or die. This is hedonistic indifference, forced detachment. But there is a second type of indifference that manifests as a serene presence through all manifestations of life, a constant awareness through all ups and downs.

Holy serenity comes from awareness. It is the detachment of a saint who moves equally unhindered through the noise and music of life. This gives freedom to adapt, change, alter and direct all beings and all things to the awakening. It is the state of absolute non-fear. The Bodhisattva pledges to enter all states of consciousness, to bring all beings through to awakening. He must be equally capable of sporting himself in heaven and bearing the torments of hell. A true Bodhisattva is serene when dealing with a schizophrenic just as he is joining in with the bubbling laughter of the rishis who (it is said) always fly through the heavens with matted hair—such is their nature!

Mudita often turns into defensiveness when it is practiced. Beings unfortunately find this quality hard to develop, just as they find it difficult to practice sympathetic joy over another's good fortune without falling prey to greed. The reason for this is that people don't understand that momentary well-being is just that, momentary and transient, based on objects that can only give temporal satisfaction. An object that gives joy can only hint at the far greater joy that is the birthright of every human being. The successes of life give momentary glory, they should be considered only as a sign of what is to come. If one sees clearly one must know that only a permanent God can give permanent satisfaction.

If you so choose you can turn any situation into a moment of humour and good will. You can utilise all the negatives you encounter as a challenge, turn difficult situations around to your advantage. Why do so many people do the opposite? Why turn an opportunity for sympathetic joy into envy? Jealousy arises basically when beings don't see the possibilities of their own good and so they become involved in fighting for the transient rather than for the eternal.

Mudita is active in the sense of willing oneself to identify, to enter into another's joy. The best medicine for the alleviating of human suffering is to bring beings to a state of joy. Freudian analysis is not enough insofar as it emphasises the removing of illness. When the illness is removed, however, there is a natural tendency for the force of joy to take over, and this should be augmented by conscious direction of the mind to joyousness. When you perform compassionate acts you bring about joy, and joy is of itself the most active of forces. It is a scattering of seeds, it is unfolding. The colour of joy is yellow. It is a sort of gravitational thing, like a marble rolling down a hill. With joy many things can be accomplished very easily. It is hardly something you have to make effort to practice except for the effort of maintaining awareness, to notice joy in others and to enter into it. You can attain great strength from joy. It is not compassionate to yourself to remain totally obsessed with your problems. Don't you begin to understand how limited your existence has become?

All beings should be raised to victory, to glory and joy. Great mistakes have been made by beings that have identified with the goal of their own ego, or their nation's destiny rather than seeing the goal as God. Certainly in any world religion there must be a note of fascism: enthusiasm is needed to embark on a victorious march. There must be a

vista which makes demands on you, which brings out the heroism in your being. In the opera "Siegfried" by Wagner there is a beautiful description of the hero's dialogue with the anima. Siegfried confronts the woman who has all knowledge and all strength except the strength to dare. Later in the "Gotterdammerung", when both have been united and consumed by fire, the Rhine overflows, revealing its treasure, and all is golden. There has to be this victory motif, along with a communal sharing of sympathy for others: Gentleness and loving, and the Elysian fields of joy. Fascism, democracy, and communism must all be present (and well-balanced) in the religious life. There is no point in making demands on students unless they want to respond, unless they want to bring forth from their being a kind of spiritual professionalism. You can only touch beings who want to succeed, who think in terms of victory. Will you give up at the slightest difficulty or will you triumph over all!

Somewhere in every being there is a steely hardness. Where are you applying that in your life? There is an imperial will in every being, an obstinacy that even the most hedonic person has. How else could some of you keep your masks on for so long? Apply this principle for your profit; not for profit or power over others, but for triumph over the weakness of your own being and for the problems of life.

There is nothing so discouraging for a teacher as to be met with a student who wants to be a perpetual failure. Beings like that have such ego-difficulties! They think that the world owes them a living and if they don't get it how they weep and wail, and gnash their teeth as if they had been cast into outer darkness. You must practice the path of righteousness. And you will fail, so you practice again and fail again, but you will learn to bear the mantle of life with goodwill through this process. And then one day, surprisingly you will find that you have succeeded.

Here, in the relationship with the guru, what you are embarked upon is the most difficult task on earth. Billions of years have gone into making this undertaking possible. Not billions of years of your effort, but of the effort of nature. It is not a snap. It is a conquest over the self, over the problems of life, over the very structure of mind. Fortunately you have the talent to succeed. Every human being has the talent to awaken. What remains is hard work. Like the parable told by Christ, every being must negotiate with his talents, invest them. Some will study science and get back ten talents for the one they had, some will get back one hundred. In this teaching you are asked to bring your talent back a thousand-fold. So it is a hard task.

Every time you fail in meditation just wipe your nappies and carry on. The first sign of ego weaklings is that they conduct their spiritual life in spurts. They do prostrations like an orgasm, with no continuum of stability. Stability is really the greatest requirement of the spiritual life. Pay attention to details, day by day, and the big problems will solve themselves.

First edited by Cecilie Kwiat

Re-edited by K Senge Gyaltzen, Sakya Shasanadhara, (Wesley Knapp),

For the Sakya Namgyal Archive – Markham, March 2005

For Olivier, Michael, Juniper, Micah and Radhi

May this work benefit them and through them, all other beings.