

BEYOND BUDDHISM IN A NUTSHELL
THE DIVINE ABIDINGS or BRAHMA VIHARAS
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Introduction

1. In Pali, the language of the Buddhist scriptures, these four are known under the name of Brahma-vihara, a term which may be rendered as excellent, lofty, or sublime states of mind. **Brahma** in this case has been translated as divine or noble. The word, in the context of the path of purification, is meant in the sense of best and immaculate. This is because being best and immaculate is the best attitude towards beings and those who practise it have immaculate minds like those of the Brahma gods or divine abodes.
2. **Vihara** means abiding and living. And so those who practise these are said to be abiding or living in the divine or noble way.
3. The Four Brahma Viharas are
 - a. Metta: loving kindness
 - b. Karuna: compassion
 - c. Mudita: sympathetic joy
 - d. Upekkha: equanimity
4. These four are attitudes towards other beings. They are also favourable relationships.
5. In a way the first three are different shades of each other.
 - a. Compassion (karuna) and sympathetic joy (mudita) can overlap with Metta but not with each other.
 - b. Compassion sees into the suffering of beings while sympathetic joy sees into their happiness.
 - c. Metta can be applied to both situations.
 - d. Equanimity however differs in the sense of being a detached (yet with understanding) state.
 - e. The cultivation of the first 3 into absorptions has been described as similar and is attainable to the 4 lower rupa jhanas, while equanimity enters only in the 5th.
 - f. Hence the other three have to be cultivated before the absorption of equanimity can be reached.
6. These four attitudes are said to be excellent or sublime because they are the right or ideal way of conduct towards living beings.
 - a. They provide, in fact, the answer to all situations arising from social contact.
 - b. They are the great removers of tension, the great peace-makers in social conflict, and the great healers of wounds suffered in the struggle of existence.
 - c. They level social barriers, build harmonious communities, awaken slumbering magnanimity long forgotten, revive joy and hope long abandoned, and promote human brotherhood against the forces of egotism.
7. The Brahma-viharas are incompatible with a hating state of mind, and in that they are akin to Brahma - the divine but transient ruler of the higher heavens in the traditional Buddhist picture of the universe. A Brahma is free from hate; and one who assiduously develops these four

sublime states, by conduct and meditation, is said to become an equal of Brahma. If they become the dominant influence in his mind, he will be reborn in congenial worlds, the realms of Brahma. Therefore, these states of mind are called god-like, Brahma-like.

8. They are called abodes (vihara) because they should become the mind's constant dwelling-places where we feel "at home"; they should not remain merely places of rare and short visits, soon forgotten.
 - a. In other words, our minds should become thoroughly saturated by them.
 - b. They should become our inseparable companions, and we should be mindful of them in all our common activities.
 - c. As the Metta Sutta, the Song of Loving-kindness, says:
When standing, walking, sitting, lying down,
Whenever he feels free of tiredness,
Let him establish well this mindfulness -
This, it is said, is the Divine Abode.
9. These four - love, compassion, sympathetic joy and equanimity - are also known as the boundless states (appamanna), because, in their perfection and their true nature, they should not be narrowed by any limitation as to the range of beings towards whom they are extended.
 - a. They should be non-exclusive and impartial, not bound by selective preferences or prejudices.
 - b. A mind that has attained to that boundless-ness of the Brahma-viharas will not harbour any national, racial, religious or class hatred.
10. But unless rooted in a strong natural affinity with such a mental attitude, it will certainly not be easy for us to effect that boundless application by a deliberate effort of will.
 - a. To achieve that, in most cases, we shall have to use these four qualities not only as principles of conduct and objects of reflection but also as subjects of methodical meditation.
 - b. That meditation is called Brahma-vihara-bhavana, the meditative development of the sublime states.
 - c. The practical aim is to achieve, with the help of these sublime states, those high stages of mental concentration called jhana, "meditative absorption".
 - d. The meditations on love, compassion and sympathetic joy may each produce the attainment of the first three absorptions, while the meditation on equanimity will lead to the fourth jhana only, in which equanimity is the most significant factor.
11. Generally speaking, persistent meditative practice will have two crowning effects:
 - a. first, it will make these four qualities sink deep into the heart so that they become spontaneous attitudes not easily overthrown;
 - b. second, it will bring out and secure their boundless extension, the unfolding of their all-embracing range.
 - c. In fact, the detailed instructions given in the Buddhist scriptures for the practice of these four meditations are clearly intended to gradually unfold the boundlessness of the sublime states.
 - d. They systematically break down all barriers restricting their application to particular individuals or places.
12. In meditative exercises, the selection for people to whom thoughts of love, compassion or sympathetic joy are directed, proceeds from the easier to the more difficult.

13. The ultimate aim of attaining the jhanas on the Brahmaviharas is to produce a state of mind that can serve as a firm basis for the liberating insight into the true nature of all phenomena, as being impermanent, liable to suffering and unsubstantial. A mind that has achieved meditative absorption induced by the sublime states will be pure, tranquil, firm, collected and free of coarse selfishness. It will thus be well prepared for the final work of deliverance which can be completed only by insight.

Loving-Kindness (Metta)

14. Metta is exemplified by the bond between a mother and her newborn child.
- a. Metta is likened to a soft rain that penetrates the heart relaxing the defense mechanisms associated with fear and ill will.
 - b. As the heart inclines towards metta it begins to feel a fondness for oneself and others that can be expanded to include everyone.
 - c. With an active metta practice we find ourselves attending to day to day: life with greater gentleness and thoroughness.
 - d. A sense of lightness accompanies the process of thought, speech and general movements of the body.
 - e. There is less of the dense burdened feeling associated with ill will.
15. Selfish affection is metta's near enemy (that which masquerades as the quality).
- a. Moments of pleasure can spin dreams that turn to nightmares.
 - b. We can easily lose our way.
 - c. Even with those with whom we experience our most sacred moments we can find ourselves manifesting fear and ill will.
 - d. Metta practice helps to navigate around potential pitfalls associated causing harm. Metta can protect us from the confusions associated with love seeking pleasure and fascination.
 - e. With time, metta finds its way to its more mature expression of devotion.
16. Painful ill will is the far enemy (the opposing quality) of metta.
- a. It takes many forms including self judgment. It can strike at any moment for it lives in the same heart as metta.
 - b. When metta is cultivated it helps us in our day to day life to stop our automatic impulsive reaction of ill-will or anger.
 - c. For eg: Story – driving someone, asked to wait in the car. A very distinct feeling of ill will arose with the impulse to say something like, "what is wrong with you – I've got an important appointment to get to". Instead the saving grace of metta arose spontaneously. It softened the reactionary impulse associated with the mental agitation. As a result warmth and care were expressed from the practice of metta.
17. To practice meditating on loving-kindness, one starts with an aspiration for one's own well-being, using it as a point of reference for gradual extension:

"Just as I wish to be happy and free from suffering, so may that being ... may all beings be happy and free from suffering!" Then one extends the thought of loving-kindness to a person for whom one has a loving respect, as, for instance, a teacher; then to dearly beloved people, to indifferent ones, and finally to enemies, if any, or those disliked. Since this meditation is concerned with the welfare of the living, one should not choose people who have died; one should also avoid choosing people towards whom one may have feelings of sexual attraction.

18. After one has been able to cope with the hardest task, to direct one's thoughts of loving-kindness to disagreeable people, one should now "break down the barriers". Without making any discrimination between those four types of people, one should extend one's loving-kindness to them equally.

Compassion (Karuna)

19. Karuna Bhavana is the cultivation of compassion. In the cultivation it can be brought into concentration and absorption just like Metta Bhavana. The benefits of the practice are similar to the 11 benefits described for Metta Bhavana.
20. In Karuna Bhavana, however, compassion is aroused instead of loving kindness. It is actually a more specific type of Metta that is applied or arises when one is able to see the suffering of another. It is an emotion that arises when we see someone suffering, then feel sorry for him and have a strong wish to relieve him of his suffering.
21. Whilst Metta must not be mistaken for attachment, Karuna must be distinguished from sadness or grief. The thing that makes us sure is a strong and firm mindfulness that keeps the quaking mind strong and determined.
- a. So here we will find a heavier yet stronger emotion.
 - b. And to balance it and make it lighter, we ought to remember to nurture softer and lighter tones of mental states while we are developing the concentration of Karuna.
22. The direct enemy of Metta is anger, and that of Karuna is cruelty and so the ways of removing it are similar to that for removing anger.
23. The general steps of the cultivation can be similar, i.e.
- a. contemplation of dangers of anger or cruelty
 - b. contemplations of benefits of compassion
 - c. growing compassion for a suffering being
24. The object of compassion is a suffering being and so we have to see the suffering of a being.
25. For a start, it should not be anyone too close which could cause grief. It should not be a hostile one that we could even be glad about it! The opposite sex and the dead are also not suitable. We are advised not to consider whether the person is dear, neutral or hostile. Instead we ought to choose one who we can clearly see as suffering.
26. Suffering can be in three ways. Suffering as
- a. physical and mental pain
 - b. suffering because of defilements
 - c. suffering of samsara
27. In a way we have to know exactly how the person feels. Sometimes we may even have to think hard and be with him and listen to him often to know him better.
28. When compassion arises we can thus keep it flowing on and deepening the concentration in the process.

29. However traditionally the aspiration is – may he or she be free from suffering. It is clear that the degree and quality of compassion comes with the degree of understanding of what suffering is.
30. An example is tow wish the following:
- a. May he be free from mental suffering
 - b. May he be free from physical suffering
 - c. May he be free from samsaric suffering
31. Samsaric suffering also includes sufferings in woeful states like hell.
32. Another example is:
- a. May he or she be free from suffering today
 - b. May he or she be free from suffering tomorrow
 - c. May he or she be free from suffering presently.
33. Then one can the same to onseself, to a dear person, neutral person, disagreeable person and the hostile person.
34. Karuna in daily life involves welfare work – ranging from old folks to spastic children, and kindness to animals to transference of merits to unhappy spirits (petas). It would be most applicable in hospitals and welfare services, where there are suffering beings. Sasana work which involves spiritual education and helps to relieve daily sufferings and samsaric sufferings also needs compassion. Even in educational institutions like schools compassion is applicable. However compared to Metta it may not be so widely applicable because one may not see any obvious suffering and people too don't like to be seen as suffering either. Therefore it does not arise as often in daily life.

Sympathetic Joy (Mudita)

35. Mudita means sympathetic joy or rejoicing at others' happiness and prosperity. It is the opposite of jealousy or envy, and therefore it is suitable for one wishing to overcome it.
36. The object and near cause of sympathetic joy is the prospering or happy being.
- a. So one who wishes to develop mudita should select such a person who is doing well spiritually and materially.
 - b. Preference will of course be given to spiritual happiness as it is a more true and lasting type.
 - c. Material gains may include good wealth, good health or good looks and so on.
37. Usually it is not easy for this state of mind to arise, especially when one sees another doing better than oneself.
- a. It is often easier to feel indifferent or even jealous!
 - b. For a lot of people it has to be cultivated. So for a start one is advised to do it to a very intimate person.
 - c. One is more likely to rejoice in his or her happiness owing to the closeness.
 - d. Anyone lesser may be more difficult.
 - e. The opposite sex and the dead are also not suitable for the beginner for the very same reasons as given in the section on Metta.

38. One can arouse the Mudita for the very close person by feeling how happy and prosperous he is. When one sees one's very good friend happy, one rejoices as well. Then one urges more of such states to arise, develop them and be concentrated.
39. One makes use of the wish:
- May he not cease from having whatever material gains acquired.
 - May he not cease from having whatever spiritual happiness attained.
40. We may also extend it in the more positive sense:
- May he continue to have whatever material gains acquired and may he gain even more.
 - May he continue to have whatever spiritual happiness attained and may he gain even more.
41. In another suggestion, a person gives the aspiration with reference to the 4 favourable worldly conditions, i.e.
- gains or prosperity
 - glory or fame
 - honour or praise
 - happiness
42. Hence it will be as follows:
- May he not lose whatever gains acquired.
 - May he not lose whatever glory/fame acquired.
 - May he not lose whatever honour/praise acquired.
 - May he not lose whatever happiness acquired.
43. A more positive translation of the above may also be rendered as the following:
- May he continue to have whatever gains he has acquired.
 - May he continue to have whatever fame he has acquired.
 - May he continue to have whatever praise he has acquired.
 - May he continue to have whatever happiness he has acquired.
44. As one radiates mudita to the close companion one will eventually also deepen in concentration to arrive at the 1st absorption. Then one can follow up to reach the 4th absorption but stop short of the 5th in the same way as in Metta Bhavana. Then one can do the same to the dear person, neutral person, disagreeable person and the hostile person.
45. One cannot help but notice the fact that Mudita is a lighter emotion than the previous two. In fact it is like a high pitch or fine clouds that lift one up high and quickly.
46. As such it may not be so clear at the start and would require a lot of exertion.
- One has to be patient or else frustration may set in.
 - When aroused plentifully one can notice its distinct feeling, usually described as more blissful compared to the previous two.
47. In mudita one should be careful that one does not fall into joyful attachment to and satisfaction with worldly things.
- One has to remember one's mindfulness and keep the mind in control and detached.
 - Otherwise it is very easy to fall prey to such attachments. Keeping the wishes more to spiritual happiness is playing safe.

48. Envy on the other hand is its direct enemy.
- One has to make sure it does not arise to obstruct development of mudita.
 - One should then reflect on the demerits of envy if it should arise.
 - Its demerits can be similar to that of anger but special reference can be made with regards to lack of friends, attendants and helpers because one regards anyone who can do better than oneself as one's own enemy.
49. Comparatively, the occurrence of Mudita in daily life is even less common.
- One condition is that one has to be among people who are doing well spiritually or materially. It is not easy to be good in both.
 - Moreover one needs to be very good natured, with closeness to many, and unselfish to have spontaneous and easy mudita.
 - When we meet such people we see them so uplifted that they seem to be floating.
50. It is therefore advisable to frequent places where there are good people around or where meritorious actions are done or virtues practised.
- They serve as a source of inspiration as well as rejoicing.
 - For example when we hear of or see someone doing charity no matter how small the sum we ought to rejoice fully instead of commenting that he could have given more.
 - When we see someone meditating strenuously we rejoice at his diligence.
 - When people come to listen to dhamma talks we rejoice at their interest.
 - Rejoicing helps us to see even the least significant of anyone's good qualities.
 - At home we can rejoice as long as anyone is happy.
 - Even when we ask "How did you sleep last night?" and when we find that he slept well, we can rejoice at that.
 - Rejoicing adds happiness upon happiness until it becomes really blissful.
51. All this rejoicing is normally not done but can be cultivated.
- Please remember to do that if you are practising mudita, snatch at the smallest opportunity.
 - Rejoicing or sympathetic joy has much to do with gratefulness, humility, wholesomeness and loyalty.
 - It gives us a good emotional attitude towards those who are doing well or better than us.

Equanimity (Upekkha)

52. The fourth divine abiding is equanimity which is a balanced and even state of mind that arises on seeing that all beings will reap the results of their good and bad actions.
53. Therefore for more effective practice, one would need to study and understand what Kamma is, and how these actions can bring about their results.
54. Comparatively this state of mind is far more detached, and also often misunderstood as being cold.
- Usually it is more suitable to apply the other 3 divine abidings first and when they fail or when it is unwise to do so, one will then resort to equanimity.
 - For example, when it is too difficult to change a wicked man's heart, it is best to keep a distance and save the effort for someone else where it can work better.

- c. In another case it may be someone who cannot escape death. Here we can use compassion and then maintain an equanimous state when he dies.
- d. Equanimity also occurs frequently when much detachment is summoned when one devotes effort to one's own purification first.

55. In the practice of Upekkha Bhavana one first selects the neutral person.

- a. Bearing him or her in mind one reflects that he is the owner of his own Kamma.
- b. The understanding factor will play an important part e.g. in the beginning because it is very easy to be caught by its close enemy – mere dullness, indifference, where one may just be reciting mentally "all beings have Kamma as true property" like a parrot. When one does so with understanding, the even state of mind with regard to the person arises.

56. Traditionally the words used are:

- a. He is the owner of his own Kamma, or
- b. All beings have Kamma as true property.
- c. One repeats this to continue the state of equanimity.
- d. Whilst doing so the concentration will develop. When the mind does so sufficiently it will enter into absorption.
- e. However equanimity meditation enters only into the 5th form of absorption owing to its indifferent feeling and so on.
- f. Hence it is possible only when the other three divine abidings have been mastered.
- g. If one has not, one will at most reach access concentration. Nevertheless it can also help us balance our minds in our daily lives.

57. To bring the mind over to equanimity from the other divine abidings one has to reflect on the peacefulness and quietness of equanimity first as it will serve as a motivation to detach oneself from the joyful states and then move higher to the more peaceful 5th absorption.

58. Equanimity has always been thought of as being cold and unfeeling and so many people turn away from it. In actuality it is a very nice state – peaceful, subtle, soft and so on.

- a. All the other pure and beautiful mental factors such as lightness, softness, quietness, flexibility, and rectitude become very obvious.
- b. So too with faith, detachment, acceptance and so on. If one can think of it as such, one will want to have such a state of mind more often.
- c. With such a balanced state one can definitely carry out one's work more efficiently.

59. When one has done so successfully with the neutral person, one can proceed to the dear one and the rest in the same way.

Conclusion

60. As we can see, the Four Divine Abidings are different attitudes towards beings, and although each is different with its own unique characteristics, they are also very good attitudes and strike blameless, favourable or balanced relationships with others.

61. They can bring much peace and happiness in the troubled world we live in, which are torn by ignorance, pride, jealousy, stinginess, suspicions, greed, anger and so on.

62. Once the Deva king Sakka asked the Buddha, "Why do beings who wish to be free from anger and ill-will, who do not want to quarrel and be ill-treated, who pray for happiness, peace and freedom, are yet not free from danger and suffering?"
63. The Buddha's answer was that all these conflicts, hatred, dangers and suffering are because of envy and miserliness.
64. One who is envious is one who wants to be happier than another but cannot. People like that also cannot stand others who are happier than themselves. Miserliness also does not want another to have a share in one's happiness and does not want another to be as happy as oneself. The result is a lot of fighting and quarrelling. These have their roots in anger and anger stems from greed and ignorance.
65. The Four Brahma Viharas are the immediate answer to ease such conflicts.
66. The Dhammapada (Dhpd. 5) says –
- Hatred is not overcome by hatred
 - It is overcome by Love
 - This is the eternal Law.
67. When we see the different elements of brahma vihara we can say that although they are all good attitudes, one of them may be more suitably applied to a certain situation. If we are clear as to which one we can call up strongly so that the state fits well in the situation, we get to do what we wish for effectively.
68. For example, when there is jealousy around, we produce a lot of sympathetic joy. This should give a good example to offset this negative tendency prevailing.
69. When there is stinginess we practise generosity with Metta and karuna. Hence the Dhammapada (Dhpd. 223) says –
- Conquer anger by love
 - Conquer evil by good
 - Conquer the miser by liberality
 - Conquer the liar by truth.
70. The same would be most applicable if such defilements do arise within ourselves. One important point here is that to overcome stronger anger one will need stronger love and so too between jealousy and sympathy, stinginess and liberality, cruelty and compassion. If one is unable to, one may need to resort to strong equanimity or detachment and understanding.
71. In another sutta one is advised that when one meets with a really hostile person and Metta does not work, one resorts to compassion. If that too fails, one is advised to have equanimity.
72. Likewise we can try switching likewise with different types of individuals. And with each aspiration one may choose to enter a certain type of chosen divine abiding and absorption. Such skill in mind control needs training but definitely it brings much happiness and peace to oneself.
73. Such a practice brings strong positive emotions at anytime whenever we wish for them and also gives us the flexibility of mind and relationships. Truly, people can change, and can change very

quickly. If we do not adapt we can become very hurt or shocked. When practised properly, it can give us flexibility and favourable attitudes towards beings or people in any situation.

74. Meditative development of the sublime states will be aided by repeated reflection upon their qualities, the benefits they bestow and the dangers from their opposites. As the Buddha says, "What a person considers and reflects upon for a long time, to that his mind will bend and incline."

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