

Triratna Dharma Training Course for Mitras

Year Three – Teachers’ Notes

Module 5: Freedom of Heart – Exploring the Brahma-vihāras

Introduction

This is a six week meditation course. In preparing the course structure I have made an assumption which is important for study leaders to know about – I have assumed that, by this stage in the course – Year Three – the mitras taking this module will have an established practice of the mettābhāvanā using the traditional five stages. I made this assumption in order to be able to cover the material in six weeks. If you find yourself with people who don’t have such an established practice then I think it will be necessary to spend some time on mettābhāvanā before moving on to this module. (There is a series of talks by Padmavajra on the five stages of the mettābhāvanā on Free Buddhist Audio.)

Other assumptions are:

- That you have two hours each week when the group meets.
- That the group know one another and have done some study together already. If that isn’t the case then you might have to include some extra time for general reporting-in together. If the group have particular rituals to start and end the evening then I assume you’ll include those. And although I think this course will ‘fit into’ a weekly two hour class, it is a module which would be great to do by taking your group off on a weekend retreat or arranging two or three separate day retreats. As I’m sure you know, there are Brahma-vihāras retreats that your mitras could go on, maybe after they’ve done this module with you.

I have suggested a structure for the course over six weeks and suggested sources of material to help you. However this is a meditation course and involves you leading through meditations. So while it’s helpful to listen to other people leading through the Brahma-vihāras, you will no doubt find your own way of doing it and be confident in that. Having said that, I think that any study leader would benefit from attending or supporting a Brahma-vihāras retreat themselves before leading this material.

Are the Brahma-vihāras done for oneself or for others?

The first stage in each of the four Brahma-vihāra practices is mettā for oneself and the first evening of the course focuses on that stage. It’s where some people come a bit adrift because of lack of confidence, self-worth or just because it goes against their received views. So it’s important to stress the importance of mettā for oneself but without discouraging people who find it hard going. There are ways of leading through that help avoid discouragement and there are examples of led

practices available on Free Buddhist Audio. On retreat, it definitely helps to start with a short body scan but you may not have time to do that.

I don't say to people that the Brahma-vihāras are done 'for others'. My teaching approach emphasises doing them as practices that act directly for the benefit of the meditator and indirectly for the benefit of other beings. I say that the Brahma-vihāras are other-regarding but I don't say they are done 'for others.' I've come across too many instances where people undermine themselves because they think they're doing the practice for others; even that they are directly 'in contact' with others whilst doing the BVs – or at least they think they are meant to be in some sort of direct contact. The undermining comes in when they find that they are actually feeling other things (like dislike, resistance, jealousy) and then think they're 'bad meditators' or even worse 'bad people'. That may sound extreme. My point is that it's not uncommon and I think it's very important when teaching the Brahma-vihāras to put the emphasis on the meditator himself and his mental states and the positive effects that emerge for the person himself. Doing the practices necessitates cultivating an other-regarding approach of course and is part of the process of broadening out from one's own more limited mental pre-occupations in order to see things from a wider perspective. And there are the further effects of the practices, off the cushion, which are of direct benefit to others - friendliness, sensitivity, etc.

But it's also important not to understate the 'other-regarding' aspect. I've had some conversations with Satyaraja and Vajratara about this module and I think my approach may run the risk of that sort of under-statement. So I want to balance what I've said above with encouraging you to help mitras make as imaginatively vivid a connection as they can with the people they choose for the stages of the practices. Vajratara tells me that she sometimes asks people in a meditation class just to bring friend, neutral person, enemy to mind without trying to feel anything in particular towards them. Just as a way of experiencing a stronger sense of connection. On retreat workshops, I tend to get people to work in pairs and experience that more vivid connection that way. However you do it, please bear that in mind.

A key moment

What follows from the above approach is an emphasis on mindfulness of feeling (vedanā) as the key moment when we can activate a choice for ourselves. This sort of approach should be pretty familiar to your mitras from previous study on the nidāna chain and Mind Reactive and Creative. It's just applying 'dwelling in the gap' to the Brahma-vihāras. When a pleasant, unpleasant or neutral feeling (vedanā) arises, what happens? Do we try to respond to that feeling from within the Brahma-vihāras range of emotions – kindness, patience, empathy, joy, etc? All of which need some understanding of our own patterns, fears, preferences etc. and also the ability to put ourselves in someone else's shoes. Or do we fall into other responses, such as anxiety, envy, sentimentality, etc? These being some of the near enemies of the Brahma-vihāras.

It's important to be clear what the various words used here mean in this context. Feeling as a translation of *vedanā* is not a synonym for 'emotion'. It's not the same usage as in, "I feel afraid." Feeling/*vedanā*, arises in dependence on contact and is somewhere on the spectrum of pleasant, neutral or unpleasant. Perhaps feeling-tone is a more helpful way of translating *vedanā*. The term emotion in this context is more like *saṃskāra*, i.e. something that we make happen. It involves willingness and motivation. And our ability to cultivate the Brahma-vihāra emotions is going to be affected by whatever other habitual behaviour we have built up previously and this will have been influenced by our wishes, our impulses, our mental habits, our willingness to make an effort, our moods, our faith, our inspiration, our receptivity.

So when leading through Brahma-vihāras meditations, although we ask the meditators to bring other people to mind and to do it in quite a detailed empathetic way, the purpose of that calling to mind is to create a series of events in the meditator's mind: contact (by mentally calling someone to mind), *vedanā*/feeling-tone (pleasant, unpleasant, neutral), and mindfulness of that *vedanā*. That mindfulness is already quite an achievement and if nothing else it serves to insert a pause in the proceedings, it particularly introduces a pause before we slide into some variety of craving or aversion, or just drift vaguely along in deludedness.

The pause, or key moment, is a rather mysterious moment to try to describe. It's not as if compassion and the other Brahma-vihāras just automatically arise. We all know that doesn't happen! But it does seem to be true that if we have enough of a reservoir, or capacity, for *mettā* within us at that key moment then *mettā* does begin to take on aspects of the other Brahma-vihāras more and more strongly - until it actually *is* compassion, joy or equanimity. So it's important to stress the first stage of the practices, i.e. *mettā* for oneself, as offering a way of deepening that reservoir of kindness and of embodying a sense of ease in ourselves. Once people have that well established and can dwell in it, then perhaps the first stage need be less of an active 'development' mode and counteracting of old unhelpful tendencies, and instead become more of a 'letting go' or 'unfolding' mode of experience.

However in emphasizing the ability to feel *mettā* for ourselves and hence cultivate a sense of inner ease with ourselves, I am not suggesting a merely psychological approach to these meditations. I'm just saying that we need start with where we are and that is often about becoming kinder and more at ease with ourselves. From there the realm of the Brahma-vihāras beckons and we find ourselves more and more able to 'hear' the suffering in the world without distress arising in us, to be glad in response to the joy in the world, and to really see the conditioned nature of the world. Certainly all that will free us up from dependency on pleasure and fear of pain. It also establishes us more and more firmly in the realm of the Brahma-vihāras where the true nature of things becomes more and more apparent.

Near and far enemies of the Brahma-vihāras

Knowing about the near enemies of the Brahma-vihāras can throw up some very practical indicators for people as to where their own less helpful samskaric patterning takes them. For example people can find the muditābhāvanā practice hard going because it highlights an inner tendency to envy, jealousy and often an underlying lack of confidence in themselves. Or because it puts them in touch with a tendency to live their life through other people's lives, even living a bit 'leech-like', drawing their own satisfaction from another person. Though, more simply and objectively, they can also find it hard going because it highlights an objective lack of richness and emotional support in their own life which puts them in touch with a measure of grief about that.

The near enemies help clarify the meaning of words like mettā, pity, sentimentality and vicariousness with respect to the Brahma-vihāras. Having some understanding of these will then help peoples' actual practice of the meditations. Kamalashila has a section on the mettābhāvanā (pp. 25-36) and on the Brahma-vihāras (pp. 192-206). In the Brahma-vihāras section he includes the near and far enemies.

Neutrality, a lukewarm lack of interest, is the traditional way of describing upekkhā's near enemy and people need to know about it. Kamalashila has a brief section on it. On Brahma-vihāra retreats I've found that people sometimes experience a measure of turbulent emotion in response to the upekkhābhāvanā. The upekkhābhāvanā is basically a reflection on conditionality and impermanence so it never surprises me when people get a turbulent reaction to doing it. I think another nearish enemy to upekkhā can be fear. It may help you to look out for these with your group. But the traditional and foremost near enemy is neutrality.

The mandala of the Brahma-vihāras

There is a way in which the four practices form a circle with its own internal feedback system that can be very helpful to know about. How it works is that you counter the near enemy of any given Brahma-vihāra by bringing the next Brahma-vihāra to bear on that near enemy. So:

- Mettā's near enemy of sentimental attachment is countered with compassion.
- Compassion's near enemy of horrified anxiety is countered with gladness / sympathetic joy.
- Gladness's near enemy of vicarious satisfaction is countered with equanimity.
- Equanimity's near enemy of neutrality is countered with mettā.

If you think about it, what happens when we fall into a near enemy is that we don't manage to hold fast to the key moment but instead slide into an older pattern that

will be based either in attachment or aversion. It can be quiet subtle. In the mettābhāvanā we're reflecting on things pleasant and we tend to slide into a subtle kind of attachment. We can counter that by reflecting that not everything is pleasant and bringing compassion to bear. With karuṇābhāvanā, we are reflecting on things unpleasant and tend to fall into aversion to that. And we can counter that by reflecting that not everything is unpleasant and bringing gladness in.

The Brahma-vihāras and Insight

In six weeks, you may not have enough time to do much on this topic. It would be a very good follow-on topic for another evening or a day retreat. If your group is already familiar with the Brahma-vihāras then you could decide to make some space for it, perhaps by condensing Weeks 1 and 2, as outlined in the course module below. Kamalashila touches on this topic in *Meditation*, pp. 201-204. Tejananda writes about it at the end of his Brahma-vihāras retreat notes available from the Vajraloka website.

Your background reading for the module

Living with Kindness. Very good background reading for this module. I'm recommending this to the mitras as background reading:

<http://www.windhorsepublications.com/CartV2/Details.asp?ProductID=693>

Meditation by Kamalashila especially pp.192 - 206 for near and far enemies of the Brahma-vihāras:

<http://www.windhorsepublications.com/CartV2/Details.asp?ProductID=342>

Online version: <http://www.kamalashila.co.uk/page7/page7.html>

Notes on the Brahma-vihāras by Tejananda are available on the Vajraloka website:

<http://www.vajraloka.org/articles.html>

Notes on workshops on the Brahma-vihāras are available on the Taraloka website:

http://www.taraloka.org.uk/?page_id=1061

Some are recorded and also available on *Free Buddhist Audio*:

<http://tinyurl.com/yzky8nh>

The Four Sublime States by Nyanaponika Thera are available from the *Access to Insight* website:

<http://www.accesstoinsight.org/lib/authors/nyanaponika/wheel006.html>

Material about the WBO system of meditation. I haven't included anything about the Brahma-vihāras' place in the WBO system of meditation as part of the module. There isn't time in six weeks. But I think it would be useful background reading for group leaders.

- *A System of Meditation Revisited* by Cittapala, available from his website – <http://www.cittapala.org/>.
- *Whatever this Moment Contains – Meditation on the Buddhist Path* edited by Dayanandi and Vidyadevi. This book starts with an edited version of Bhante's lecture on the *System of Meditation*. The remaining chapters are transcripts of a series of talks on the System of Meditation given on the 2003 Order Convention. Chapter 2 is *The Alchemy of Happiness* by Kulaprabha on positive emotion and the Brahma-vihāras. She also provides a second talk, *The System of Meditation Revisited*:

NB. This book is not yet available in its entirety online. we hope to add it in early 2010. You can read some of the talks online at Free Buddhist Audio:

A System of Meditation: <http://tinyurl.com/355yhj>

The Alchemy of Happiness: <http://tinyurl.com/ybq4cff>

The System of Meditation Revisited: <http://tinyurl.com/yfrk4mr>

Your audio material for the module

Mettā Bhavana – Introduction and Basic Tools by Kamalashila. Good listening for a recap of the practice.

<http://www.freebuddhistaudio.com/talks/details?num=M11A>

Brahma-Vihāras and the Key Moment talk by Kulaprabha available from Free Buddhist Audio.

<http://www.freebuddhistaudio.com/talks/details?num=LOC99>

Led meditations available on *Free Buddhist Audio*:

Mettā Introduction by Kamalashila, a full lead through of the practice

<http://www.freebuddhistaudio.com/talks/details?num=M11B>

Brahma-vihāras series of meditation lead-throughs and workshops by Kulaprabha:

<http://tinyurl.com/6gaedls>

What's required from the group

A commitment to:

- A regular meditation practice over the course, the aim being a daily practice of at least 30 minutes and some days a 50 minutes sit.
- Keeping a meditation diary for the six weeks. This is an outline of what practice someone did, when and for how long; to what extent they were concentrated and how that felt; to what extent they were distracted and what the nature of that distraction was. It's up to them how much detail they include. Some people construct a chart that they fill in. Other people prefer to write more extensively. For the Brahma-vihāras they could make a note of who they put into the various stages.

People in the group might want to pair up as 'meditation buddies', i.e. they meet up, phone or email each other at some point in the week and talk about their meditation experience.

Week by Week Programme

Week one – Mettābhāvāna 1

- Mettābhāvāna / 30 mins.
- Tea break / 15 mins.
- Workshop on mettā / 30mins. There is a lead through of the workshop on mettā that I use on Free Buddhist Audio. It involves people working in pairs. People gain a direct experience of developing mettā for themselves, bringing to mind their partner and developing mettā towards them, whilst knowing that their partner is reciprocating. At some points with eyes are closed, other times with eyes open looking at each other. They may like or dislike their partner so the workshop moves the experience into the later stages of the practice as well as focussing on mettā for oneself. However you could use a workshop of your own for this.
- Discussion / report back on that / 45 mins.
- Study homework: listen to a talk on the Brahma-vihāras. Not everyone in the group needs to listen to the same talk. Or you could decide on one talk that everyone listens to. Options on Free Buddhist Audio are:
 - Mettābhāvāna – Introduction and Basic Tools by Kamalashila.
 - Brahma Viharas and the Key Moment by Kulaprabha.
 - Introducing the Great Love by Padmavajra.
 - Meditation practice for coming week: mettābhāvāna.

Week two – Mettābhāvanā 2

- Discussion on mettābhāvanā / 25 mins. Possible discussion points:
 - Self-regarding and other-regarding and the difference between spheres of concern and spheres of influence in meditation.
 - Working with mindfulness of feeling.
 - Being in the gap between feeling and craving / aversion.
 - Significance of the friend, neutral person and enemy.
 - Mettā as the ground of the other Brahma-vihāras.
 - Breaking down the boundaries between self and other, likes and dislikes.
 - Or you could have an open question and discussion session.
- Tea break / 15 mins
- Introduction to the near enemies of mettā using Meditation p. 192 / 20mins.
- Mettābhāvanā / 35 mins.
- Meditation practice for coming week: mettābhāvanā, mindfulness of breathing.

Week three – Karuṇābhāvanā

- Karuṇā workshop / 20 mins... (from audio material on FBA).
- Reporting-in on their experience in that and introduction of the near and far enemies of karuṇā, p197 in *Meditation* / 40 mins.
- Tea break / 15 mins.
- Lead through of karuṇābhāvanā / 45 mins.
- Meditation practice for the coming week: mindfulness of breathing, mettābhāvanā and karuṇābhāvanā.

Week four – Muditābhāvanā

- Muditā workshop / 20 mins... (from audio material on FBA).
- Reporting-in on their experience in that and introduction to near and far enemies of muditā, p. 200 in *Meditation* / 40 mins.
- Tea break / 15 mins.

- Lead through of muditābhāvanā / 45 mins.
- Meditation practice for the coming week: mindfulness of breathing, mettābhāvanā, muditābhāvanā.

Week five – Upekkhābhāvanā

- Upekkhā workshop / 20 min.
- Report back on that and introduce near and far enemies of upekkhā, p. 202 in *Meditation* /40 mins.
- Tea break.
- Lead through of upekkhābhāvanā / 45 mins.
- Meditation practice for the coming week: mindfulness of breathing, mettābhāvanā and upekkhābhāvanā.

Week six – conclusion and pūjā

- Report back: on their experience of the benefits and challenges of the Brahma-vihāras /45 mins.
- Tea break / 15 mins.
- Either the Upekkhābhāvanā or an open Brahma-vihāra practice / 35 mins.
- Brahma-vihāras Pūjā featuring Brahma-vihāras readings / 40 mins.

Feedback on the Dharma Training Course

Once you've finished the module, please consider leaving feedback on the DTC on-line forum - a dedicated place for mitra group leaders to make comments, suggestions, and corrections to the new mitra course. This will have two big benefits:

- 1) It collects ideas and information needed to improve the course over time
- 2) It will also be a place where group leaders can find out how others have led or approached a particular module, share good ideas, and so on.

Each group leader needs to get their own username and password to access the forum. If you are a mitra group leader and would like to participate, please e-mail Vajrashura (who has kindly set up the forum) he'll set up an account for you, usually within a day or two. His e-mail is: vajrashura@gmail.com, and the URL of the forum is www.dublinbuddhistcentre.org/DTCforum.