

BRAHMA VIHARA

Goodwill, compassion, empathetic joy, equanimity.

Metta bhavana, karuna bhavana, mudita bhavana, upekkha bhavana.

Bhavana - mental development (literally, calling into existence, producing).

Brahma vihara: vihara – a dwelling place. Brahma - a being who lives in the higher heavens dwelling in unlimited attitudes of goodwill etc.

Divine abodes, divine abiding, four immeasurable, sublime attitudes.

They are unlimited in that you apply them to all beings and they can be applied to all situations, as appropriate. These unlimited mind states can be developed from the more limited versions that we normally experience. To develop them fully requires time and effort; there is usually no ‘quick fix’ for our negative habits.

They are an essential, though not sufficient, part of the path e.g. Right intention – free from sensuality, ill-will, cruelty; Right concentration – four jhanas – the brahma viharas can be the objects of jhana. The motivation for Right speech, action, livelihood, effort and mindfulness is your own good and that of others.

Because happiness has a cause – skilful action – your wish for happiness has to focus on the cause, otherwise it will have no effect. This applies both when directed to yourself and others. You are wishing for yourself and others to find ‘true’ happiness i.e. a happiness that does not depend on external circumstances and that does not require that you adversely impact the happiness of others.

Goodwill – for yourself means being determined to act skilfully; for others means hoping they will understand the causes of true happiness and act in line with that understanding. Goodwill is the most fundamental of the four attitudes.

Compassion – not only for people who are suffering but also for people are acting in ways that will create more suffering. Compassion is what grows out of goodwill when you see suffering.

Empathetic joy – applies not only to people who are happy but also to people who are acting in ways that will lead to true happiness. If you have goodwill and you encounter true happiness, you want that happiness to continue.

Equanimity – applies not only to sufferings that are beyond your control but also to actions you can’t prevent. It is an essential part of the set. When you encounter suffering that you can’t stop, you need equanimity to avoid creating additional suffering and to channel your energies to areas where you can be of help. You also need equanimity to strengthen your endurance when meeting difficulties or making sacrifices in the course of your practice.

Brahmavihara	Near Enemy	Far Enemy
Goodwill	Sentimental attachment	Hatred
Compassion	Sentimental pity	Cruelty
Empathetic Joy	Affectation	Envy
Equanimity	Neutrality	Indifference

Misunderstandings

1. The practice of the brahmaviharas is a form of prayer.
2. Metta is best expressed by acts of uncritical tenderness.
3. The brahmaviharas are purely ‘heart’ qualities, needing no input from the analytical mind.
4. Practising the brahmaviharas is a weakness and will make you a ‘doormat’.
5. Practising the brahmaviharas means always putting your needs last.

Using the Brahmaviharas in Meditation

Start from where you are emotionally. Get in touch with your current mental state.

Spend some time fully relaxing your body and mind. This is an important preliminary. It can also be useful to bring to mind a beautiful place, real or imagined, where you feel safe, content and at ease.

Begin with goodwill. Set an intention to increase any goodwill that you currently feel for yourself and others or to bring it into being if it is absent. Remember that you are wishing *true* happiness i.e. a happiness that does not involve taking anything from anyone else.

Remind yourself that: 1. When you feel goodwill you are the first to benefit. 2. Happiness is a choice. 3. You are trying to change yourself, not others.

Develop goodwill for yourself and in yourself. It is essential that you generate the feeling / emotion of goodwill and that the practice is not just done as a mantra – “May I be well, may I be happy.” If you find this step difficult, then bring to mind a good friend or mentor and generate goodwill for them. Once you have generated this goodwill, remember that they have the same goodwill for you and think of them sending it to you. It can also be useful to experiment with different translations of ‘metta’ e.g. ‘kindness’.

Investigate different methods for promoting the feeling of goodwill to find which works best for you. You must be interested in the practice because we don't pay attention to boring things. When you learn how to create good positive feelings that you like, you'll want to return to them often and learn how to create them at will.

Realize that you may have to change the meditation subject if negative feelings threaten to overwhelm you. This can mean either changing the person(s) you are currently trying to feel goodwill for or changing to a different meditation e.g. one of the other Brahma Viharas or mindfulness of breathing.

At the end of the session, be aware of any goodwill that you have developed and try to carry it into your daily life as appropriate.

Using the Brahmaviharas in Daily Life

First, have goodwill for yourself. Give yourself the conditions that promote feelings of well-being and goodwill. Remember the 'Four Requisites' - food, clothing, shelter, medicine; but check need against greed. Make sure that you get enough sleep. Reduce the unnecessary stress in your life (if you find that you are always too busy, ask yourself who took on all these activities).

The more that you can develop joy and goodwill in daily life, the lighter your mind becomes and the easier it is to see the drawbacks of negative states of mind. You start to see your patterns and you can begin to work with them, using goodwill, compassion, empathetic joy or equanimity, as appropriate.

Have the intention of goodwill rather than the idea. Every morning set the intention to be kind and have goodwill, then monitor your actions throughout the day. Keep reminding yourself that you get good at what you practice.

Investigate the causes of any resistance to goodwill.

Investigate the triggers for ill will.

Regard ill will as an affliction – both in yourself and others.

Practise different techniques.

Put things in perspective.

Reference and recommended reading: The Sublime Attitudes by Thanissaro Bhikkhu.
Available for free download at dhammatalks.org