

Brahmaviharas – Metta and Karuna

Last night we had one of our favorite speakers, Jennifer Block. Jennifer is a Buddhist chaplain who teaches end of life care to the general public in her role as Education Director at the San Francisco Zen Hospice www.ZenHospice.org

The subject of her talk last night was the *Brahmavihara's*, a Pali word meaning "Divine Abodes" or "Divine Shelters."

There are four Brahmavihara's:

- **Metta:** loving-kindness towards all; the hope that a person will be well; loving kindness is "the wish that all sentient beings, without any exception, be happy."
- **Karuna:** compassion; the hope that a person's sufferings will diminish; compassion is the "wish for all sentient beings to be free from suffering."
- **Mudita:** altruistic joy in the accomplishments of a person, oneself or other; sympathetic joy, "is the wholesome attitude of rejoicing in the happiness and virtues of all sentient beings."
- **Upekkha:** equanimity, or learning to accept both loss and gain, praise and blame, success and failure with detachment, equally, for oneself and for others; equanimity means "not to distinguish between friend, enemy or stranger, but regard every sentient being as equal. It is a clear-minded tranquil state of mind - not being overpowered by delusions, mental dullness or agitation."

The text below is adapted from http://www.vipassana.com/meditation/four_sublime_states.php)

The Brahmaviharas 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. In contrast to many other conceptions of deities, East and West, who by their own devotees are said to show anger, wrath, jealousy and "righteous indignation," 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 (brahma-samo). 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.

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. In other words, our minds should become thoroughly saturated by them. They should become our inseparable companions, and we should be mindful of them in all our common activities. 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.*

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. They should be non-exclusive and impartial, not bound by selective preferences or prejudices. A mind that has attained to that boundlessness of the Brahmaviharas will not harbor any national, racial, religious or class hatred.

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 and to avoid consistently any kind or degree of partiality. 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.

Metta

Love, without desire to possess, knowing well that in the ultimate sense there is no possession and no possessor: this is the highest love.

Love, without speaking and thinking of "I," knowing well that this so-called "I" is a mere delusion.

Love, without selecting and excluding, knowing well that to do so means to create love's own contrasts: dislike, aversion and hatred.

Love, embracing all beings: small and great, far and near, be it on earth, in the water or in the air.

Love, embracing impartially all sentient beings, and not only those who are useful, pleasing or amusing to us.

Love, embracing all beings, be they noble-minded or low-minded, good or evil. The noble and the good are embraced because Love is flowing to them spontaneously. The low-minded and evil-minded are included because they are those who are most in need of Love. In many of them the seed of goodness may have died merely because warmth was lacking for its growth, because it perished from cold in a loveless world.

Love, embracing all beings, knowing well that we all are fellow wayfarers through this round of existence -- that we all are overcome by the same law of suffering.

Love, but not the sensuous fire that burns, scorches and tortures, that inflicts more wounds than it cures -- flaring up now, at the next moment being extinguished, leaving behind more coldness and loneliness than was felt before.

Rather, Love that lies like a soft but firm hand on the ailing beings, ever unchanged in its sympathy, without wavering, unconcerned with any response it meets. Love that is comforting coolness to those who burn with the fire of suffering and passion; that is life-giving warmth to those abandoned in the cold desert of loneliness, to those who are shivering in the frost of a loveless world; to those whose hearts have become as if empty and dry by the repeated calls for help, by deepest despair.

Love, that is a sublime nobility of heart and intellect which knows, understands and is ready to help.

Love, that is strength and gives strength: this is the highest Love.

Love, which by the Enlightened One was named "the liberation of the heart," "the most sublime beauty": this is the highest Love.

And what is the highest manifestation of Love?

To show to the world the path leading to the end of suffering, the path pointed out, trodden, and realized to perfection by Him, the Exalted One, the Buddha.

Karuna

The world suffers. But most men have their eyes and ears closed. They do not see the unbroken stream of tears flowing through life; they do not hear the cry of distress continually pervading the world. Their own little grief or joy bars their sight, deafens their ears. Bound by selfishness, their hearts turn stiff and narrow. Being stiff and narrow, how should they be able to strive for any higher goal, to realize that only release from selfish craving will effect their own freedom from suffering?

It is compassion that removes the heavy bar, opens the door to freedom, makes the narrow heart as wide as the world. Compassion takes away from the heart the inert weight, the paralyzing heaviness; it gives wings to those who cling to the lowlands of self.

Through compassion the fact of suffering remains vividly present to our mind, even at times when we personally are free from it. It gives us the rich experience of suffering, thus strengthening us to meet it prepared, when it does befall us.

Compassion reconciles us to our own destiny by showing us the life of others, often much harder than ours.

Behold the endless caravan of beings, men and beasts, burdened with sorrow and pain! The burden of every one of them, we also have carried in bygone times during the unfathomable sequence of repeated births. Behold this, and open your heart to compassion!

And this misery may well be our own destiny again! He who is without compassion now, will one day cry for it. If sympathy with others is lacking, it will have to be acquired through one's own long and painful experience. This is the great law of life. Knowing this, keep guard over yourself!

Beings, sunk in ignorance, lost in delusion, hasten from one state of suffering to another, not knowing the real cause, not knowing the escape from it. This insight into the general law of suffering is the real foundation of our compassion, not any isolated fact of suffering.

Hence our compassion will also include those who at the moment may be happy, but act with an evil and deluded mind. In their present deeds we shall foresee their future state of distress, and compassion will arise.

The compassion of the wise man does not render him a victim of suffering. His thoughts, words and deeds are full of pity. But his heart does not waver; unchanged it remains, serene and calm. How else should he be able to help?

May such compassion arise in our hearts! Compassion that is sublime nobility of heart and intellect which knows, understands and is ready to help.

Compassion that is strength and gives strength: this is highest compassion.

And what is the highest manifestation of compassion?

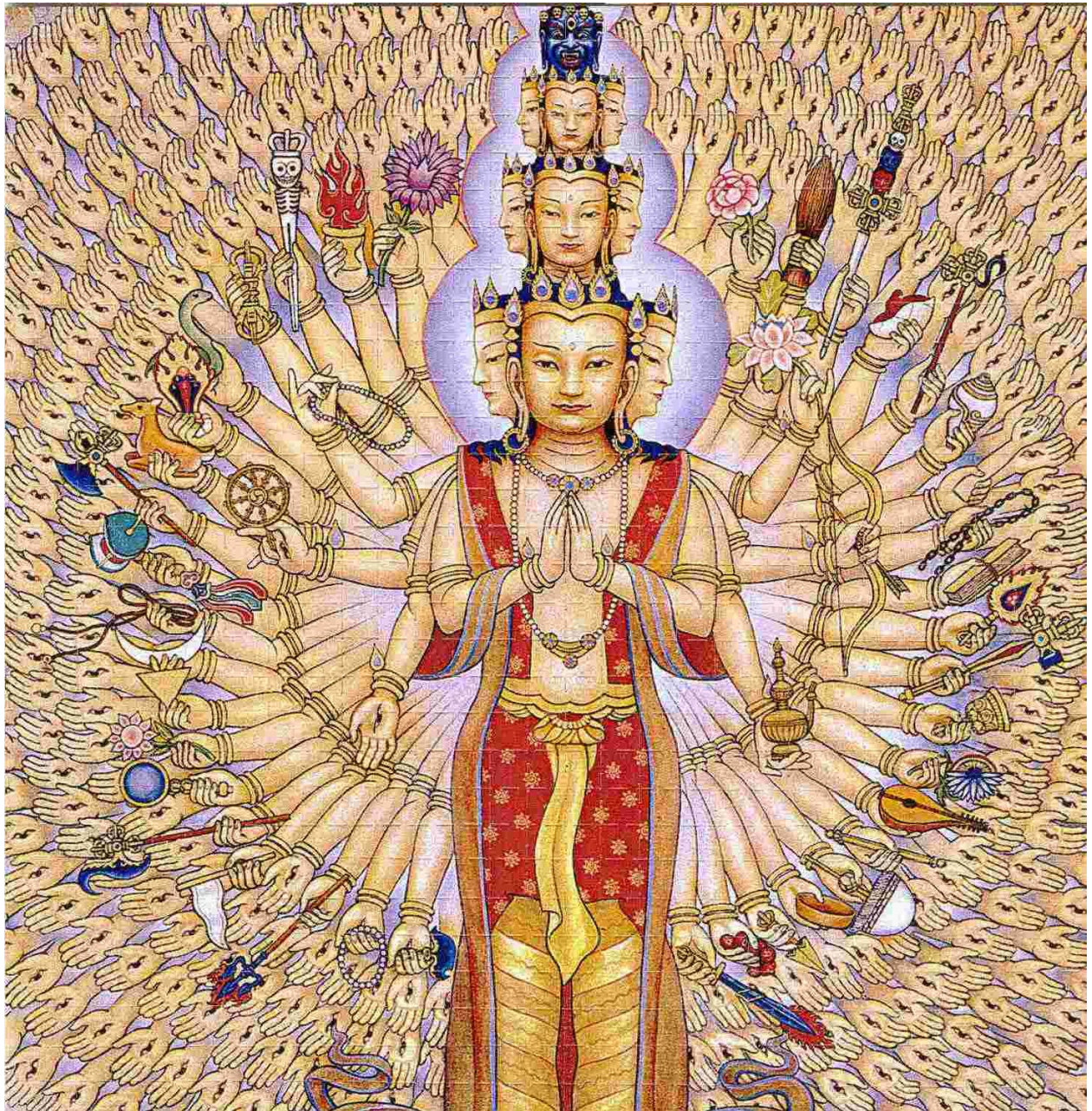
To show to the world the path leading to the end of suffering, the path pointed out, trodden and realized to perfection by Him, the Exalted One, the Buddha.

Jennifer also spoke of Avalokiteshvara (Avah-lo-kee-TESH-varah), the Bodhisattva of Compassion.

Avalokiteshvara Bodhisattva is depicted as male in Tibet and India, but in China and other East Asian countries, Avalokiteshvara Bodhisattva is depicted as female. Avalokiteshvara is the bodhisattva most

widely revered among Buddhists; this is especially true considering her/his variety of forms: Guan Yin (Chinese), Kannon (Japanese), and Chenrezi (Tibetan). Often associated with great love and compassion, her name means "**she who hears the cries of the world**". S/he is often shown holding a vase containing the waters of compassion, the lotus flower of enlightenment, or the jewel of the three treasures.

Avalokitesvara is a Bodhisattva who has made a great vow to listen to the prayers of all sentient beings in times of difficulty, and to postpone his or her own Buddhahood until s/he has helped every being on Earth achieve enlightenment. A dominant feature in the description of Avalokiteshvara is the capacity to "see" the suffering of others. Avalokiteshvara is often depicted as having multiple heads and "a thousand hands" each with an eye in the palm, so she can feel and see all the world's suffering.



Balancing

Unbounded *love* guards *compassion* against turning into partiality, prevents it from making discriminations by selecting and excluding and thus protects it from falling into partiality or aversion against the excluded side.

Part 2

Next week, Oct 29, we continue the Brahmavisara talks with Jim Bronson, who will discuss *Joy for Others* and *Equanimity*.

Other Dhamma talks by Jennifer are available as audio recordings at:

Jennifer Block Practicing Awareness with Life and Death - Introduction - (1 of 6)	07/21/07	[Download]
Jennifer Block Practicing Awareness with Life and Death - Welcome - (2 of 6)	07/21/07	[Download]
Jennifer Block Practicing Awareness with Life and Death - Contemplating Death - (3 of 6)	07/21/07	[Download]
Jennifer Block Practicing Awareness with Life and Death - Caring for the Dying - (4 of 6)	07/21/07	[Download]
Jennifer Block Practicing Awareness with Life and Death - Hospice Precepts - (5 of 6)	07/21/07	[Download]
Jennifer Block Practicing Awareness with Life and Death - Wrap Up - (6 of 6)	07/21/07	[Download]

I have always known that at last I would take this road,
but yesterday I did not know it would be today.

- Narihara