

The *Brahma-vihāras*: Strengths and Limitations

This overview table attempts to briefly indicate the strengths and limitations of the *brahama-vihāras* in terms of their contributing to the overall goals of Buddhism.

Strengths

- The four immeasurable qualities (loving-kindness [*mettā*], compassion [*karunā*], empathetic joy [*muditā*], and equanimity [*upekkhā*]) have a mind-expanding and heart-transforming quality.
- The four *brahama-vihāra* states of mind aid in diminishing defilements and uprooting hindrances along the path of purification towards liberation (Poh Chiok Tang).
- The *brahama-vihāras* are positive characteristics or states of mind established through *shamatha* meditation by a person desiring to replace self-interest with a determination to accomplish the well-being of other beings (Clifford Lenton).
- The strength of the *brahama-vihāras* rests in their ability to produce a state of mind that creates harmony and happiness among beings, as well as peace in a chaotic and cruel world of immense suffering, both important Buddhist goals (Clifford Lenton).
- In our practice, ideally the whole day needs to be imbued with mindfulness – for this the four immeasurable qualities are essential because we will inevitably meet with conditions that will otherwise trigger or activate our mental afflictions.
- With the four "immeasurables", we have a certain buoyancy not to be perturbed by the *kleshas* (Skt.; *kilesa*, Pali) that manifest in unwholesome actions.
- Without the four immeasurable qualities, the desire to isolate oneself from negative circumstances in daily life to "protect" our practice can occur.
- The four *brahama-vihāras* represent the most beautiful and hopeful aspects of our human nature – they are mindfulness practices that protect the mind from falling into habitual patterns of reactivity which belie our best intentions (www.brahmaviharas.org).
- Also referred to as mind-liberating practices, the four *brahama-vihāras* awaken powerful healing energies which brighten and lift the mind to increasing levels of clarity – as a result, the boundless states of loving-kindness, compassion, appreciative joy and equanimity manifest as forces of purification transforming the turbulent heart into a refuge of calm, focused awareness (www.brahmaviharas.org).

Limitations

- In terms of Buddhism's greater goal, full Awakening, the four *brahama-vihāras* by themselves are not sufficient to achieve Awakening – for example, even after the deepest *jhana*, loving-kindness, compassion, empathetic joy, and equanimity can recede, and unhealthy factors that lead to self-interest can re-establish themselves (Clifford Lenton).
- It is only when a meditator relinquishes the effort to concentrate on any and all conditioned phenomena, including the four *brahama-vihāras*, that they will achieve the "total cessation of mental processes" that is Nirvana (Clifford Lenton).
- Of, and by themselves, the four *brahama-vihāras* are not able to take the mind all the way to liberation. This is supported by the fact that the *brahama-vihāras* are not included in the various sets of spiritual qualities that make up the 37 'factors conducive to awakening' (*bodhipakkhiya-dhammas*) (From class notes for *Buddhist Meditation and Psychology*).
- While the Divine Abidings regenerate the beauty and mercy inherent in this existence (*mettā* is the capacity for love; *karunā* is the capacity to remain present in the face of pain and suffering; *muditā* is the capacity for boundless, appreciative joy and gratitude; and *upekkhā* is the capacity to be with things as they are, in truth [www.brahmaviharas.org]), they fall short of the "*Unborn, Unoriginated, Uncreated, Unconditioned. If that Unborn, Unoriginated, Uncreated, Unconditioned were not, there could be no escape from this that is born, originated, created, conditioned. But because there is That which is Unborn, Unoriginated, Uncreated, Unconditioned, an escape from this that is born, originated, created, conditioned can be proclaimed*" (Khuddaka-Nikaya, Udana, 80ff.).

Sources:

- Comments have been drawn on from members of the *Buddhist Meditation and Psychology* module in the MA in Buddhist Studies programme offered by the University of South Wales: namely, Poh Chiok Tang, Clifford Lenton.
- Website – <http://www.brahmaviharas.org/> was accessed (October 10, 2015).
- Class notes for *Buddhist Meditation and Psychology* ("5. Developing the 'Immeasurable' Emotions") in the MA in Buddhist Studies offered by the University of South Wales.