# The Brahma Viharas: Awakened States of Heart

By Heather Sundberg

What are the Brahma Viharas?

The Brahma Viharas, or Divine Abodes, are the naturally present sublime states of heart-mind, which can be accessed when the mind is not startled, frightened, or defended in any way. The word ‘Brahma’, refers to the “god-like” or divine quality of the heart, which like the god Brahma cannot hate another. (1) The word ‘Vihara’ translates as ‘abode’ – a place to settle in and live. Therefore, I think of the Brahma Viharas as the places our heart abides when conditions are ideal.

These four attitudes, or qualities of heart are the flavors of lovingkindness (metta), compassion (karuna), sympathetic joy (mudita), and equanimity (upekkah). When the heart is open, warm, and friendly in response to experience, lovingkindness is naturally present. When this same open, warm, friendly heart meets the experience of pain, it manifests as compassion. When it meets the experience of joy in another, it manifests as sympathetic joy. When this same open, warm, friendly heart rests settled in the midst of the changing conditions of the worldly winds of life (pleasure/pain; gain/loss; praise/blame; fame/disrepute), it manifests as equanimity.

How Does One Train Using the Brahma Viharas in Meditation?

Though the experience of the Brahma Viharas is naturally available, it can also be cultivated through traditional training. The Buddha first taught lovingkindness practice to a group of monks who had gone on Rains Retreat and become frightened by a group of devas (sometimes translated as angels) who were trying to force the monks to leave their forest by emitting horrible sounds and smells while the monks tried to meditate. The Buddha offered the monks the solution of practicing lovingkindness, which proved to be so successful the devas later became protectors of the monks. Interestingly, we do not know the mechanics of the lovingkindness practice the Buddha taught the frightened monks, or the meditation mechanics of the other flavors of the Brahma Viharas. The formal meditation techniques we use today were developed in the early 5th Century by the monk Ven. Buddhaghosa and laid out in Chapter 4 of the commentary text Vissudhimagga (The Path of Purification).

The technique for each flavor of the Brahma Viharas developed by Ven. Buddhaghosa involves the use of successive phrases, or intentions. These intentional phrases are used as a tool to settle and concentrate the mind, which allows to heart to begin to open into its’ natural radiance. The meditator begins the brahma vihara practice sending the phrases to someone easy, and progressively works through more difficult relationships, finally breaking through all dualities between self/other to radiate wishes towards all beings in all directions. The traditional categories are sending wishes to yourself, a benefactor (mentor/teacher), a good friend, a neutral person (familiar stranger), a difficult person (“the enemy”), and to all beings. Depending on the brahma vihara flavor one practices, the order of the categories changes. (2)

Whatever the flavor of Brahma Vihara I practice, focus on the following:

1. First, develop a set of phrases, which resonates for the meditator.
2. Get clear on the progression of categories of beings to one could send the wishes, depending on the brahma vihara.
3. Settle down in a comfortable posture. Visualize the person/being to whom you will send your wishes.
4. Begin sending this person/being your wishes through the phrases. Find your own pace of repeating the phrases.
5. Take a little time between each phrase (the space of a breath), and set of phrases to feel the resonance or “echo” of the phrases in the body. Bring an attitude of acceptance to whatever resonance (or lack of it) which arrives. The practice of the Brahma Viharas is a practice of purification. Therefore sometimes we send phrases and the opposite quality arises. We say “may I be protected and safe” and suddenly feel fearful. This is not a sign of doing the practice wrong. This is a sign of the practice working through your heart, revealing and untangling that which causes our hearts to not be open.
6. Have fun with your Brahma Vihara practice. Make it your own. Allow it to “sing” to your heart-mind. Drink in the sweetness of the sublime qualities it evokes.

A Daily Life Practice in the Brahma Viharas

What we have in terms of the Buddha’s direct words on the Brahma Viharas point to a possibility of an engaging practice in daily life. In the Metta Sutta, the Buddha first discusses the type of appropriate conduct one should aspire to when cultivating the heart of lovingkindness.

“Let them be able and upright, straightforward and gentle in speech, humble and not conceited, contented and easily satisfied, unburdened with duties and frugal in their ways, peaceful and calm and wise and skillful, not proud and demanding in nature.” (3)

These are all qualities we can endeavor to cultivate to support nurturing a more peaceful harmonious world. As stated by the late Theravadan monk, Nyanaponika Thera,

“These four attitudes (the brahma viharas) are said to be excellent or sublime because they are the right or ideal way of conduct towards living beings (sattesu samma patipatti). They provide, in fact, the answer to all situations arising from social contact. They are the great removers of tension, the great peacemakers in social conflict, and the great healers of wounds suffered in the struggle of existence. 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.*” (4)*

The Metta Sutta also encourages the practitioner to engage in the practice during all activities.

“Sitting or walking, seated or lying down…one should sustain this recollection, this is said to be the sublime abiding”. (5)

We can practice the Brahma Viharas as we drive, as we enter a store, by identifying suffering and training ourselves to internally say “I care” as a first response, and by taking a breath with our hardening heart which believes there might not be enough good fortune for all - to name a few ways to practice.

I encourage you to have a copy of the Metta Sutta in your meditation area at home, where it can be available for repeated recollection and inspiration. The basic passage from the Buddha on the Brahma Viharas is another wonderful sutta to have in your personal collection. (6) Both suttas can also be found in a form for chanting. (7)

I very much hope each of you finds your own creative ways of bringing the spirit and practice of the Divine Abodes into your life.

Heather’s Favorite Brahma Vihara Phrases:

Lovingkindness (metta):

May I be protected and safe.

May I be contented and pleased.

May my physical body support me with strength.

May my life unfold smoothly with ease.

Compassion (karuna):

I care.

I care about this pain.

Through the caring, may the pain be eased.

Sympathetic Joy (mudita):

May your happiness and good fortune continue.

May they increase!

Equanimity (upekkah):

All things arise and pass away.

May you hold your joys and sorrows in the heart of equanimity and balance.

Resources:

1. [www.accesstoinsight.org/lib/authors/nyanaponika/wheel006.html](http://www.accesstoinsight.org/lib/authors/nyanaponika/wheel006.html)
2. For greater detail on the technique of practicing the brahma viharas, visit the SIM website, under Resources [www.sactoinsight.org/res\_med\_instruction.shtml](http://www.sactoinsight.org/res_med_instruction.shtml)
3. [www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/kn/khp/khp.9.amar.html](http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/kn/khp/khp.9.amar.html)
4. [www.accesstoinsight.org/lib/authors/nyanaponika/wheel006.html](http://www.accesstoinsight.org/lib/authors/nyanaponika/wheel006.html)
5. See reference #3.
6. Digha Nikaya 13
7. [www.abhayagiri.org/book/chanting\_book/](http://www.abhayagiri.org/book/chanting_book/)
8. Boorstein, Sylvia. *It’s Easier Than You Think, The Buddhist Way of Happiness.*

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