

## The Four Sublime States

The Buddha has taught four sublime states of mind (*Brahma-vihāra*):

1. Universal Love or Loving-kindness (*mettā*)
2. Compassion or Empathy (*karunā*)
3. Selfless Happiness (*muditā*)
4. Tranquility (*upekkhā*).

### *Brahma-vihāra*

This term means excellent or sublime states of mind; or god-like or divine mental states.

These four attitudes are said to be *excellent* or *sublime* because they are the right or ideal way of conduct towards living beings (*sattesu sammā patipatti*).

They provide, in fact, the answer to all situations arising from social contact.

They are the great removers of tension, the great peace-makers 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 selfishness.

The *Brahma-vihāras* are incompatible with a hating state of mind, and in that they are similar to *Brahma*, the divine ruler of the higher heavens in the traditional Buddhist picture of the universe.<sup>1</sup>

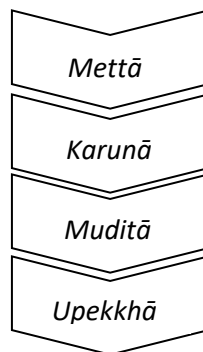
If the *Brahma-vihāra* becomes the dominant influence in one's mind, he/she will be reborn in heavenly worlds, the realms of *Brahma*. Therefore, these states of mind are called *God-like*, *Brahma-like*.

They are called residences (*vihāra*) 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 *Karaniya Metta Sutta* (Sn 1.8), the Song of Loving-kindness, says:

*When standing, walking, sitting, lying down,  
Whenever one feels free of tiredness  
Let one establish well this mindfulness —  
This, it is said, is the Divine Dwelling.<sup>1</sup>*

The four *Brahma-viharas* are four facets of the same mental state, which begins with *mettā* that deepens progressively until *upekkhā*. *Mettā* is the area dimension, which means it is a limitless concern for all beings, everywhere. When fully developed, *mettā* turns into *karunā*.<sup>3</sup> *Karunā* is when you do not make a distinction between oneself and others. *Karunā* is the depth dimension, meaning how deeply one is concerned with the welfare of all beings.<sup>2</sup>



*Mettā* and *karunā* are extended towards all beings and are non-exclusive and impartial, not bound by selective preferences or prejudices. The usual separation between "oneself" and "others" disappears. The Buddha has compared this to a mother's love for her only child, as seen when she shares her child's unhappiness or happiness as her own. Put another way, and this is called "oneness" with others – all beings – just as I want wellbeing, peace, and happiness and don't like pain, difficulties, and suffering, all other beings also want wellbeing, peace, and happiness and don't like pain, difficulties, and

suffering. Therefore since there's no difference between "myself" and "others," I want to relieve the suffering of others, as I would my own suffering. Just as a mother thinks of her own children, we spread goodwill towards all beings without exception. All beings are regarded as important as one-self. Then we lose ourselves in the interest in all beings. Just as a river, when it falls into the ocean, loses its identity, we lose ourselves in the interest in all beings.<sup>3</sup> This is practicing *karunā*. In this way, a mind that has attained the boundless levels of *mettā* and *karunā* will not distinguish between "oneself" and "others." Such a mind experiences the self-less happiness of *muditā*, which in turn advances to *upekkhā*, a state of inner peace and stillness.<sup>2</sup>

The practice of *mettā* and *karunā* enables us to step out of our habitual dwelling on our personal difficulties, worries, frustrations, sadness, and anger and think of the suffering in "all other beings," who may be suffering even more than us. We are indeed connected to other beings through the universal experience of suffering. This way of thinking broadly of the suffering of all beings leads to at least two realizations:

1. "I am not the only one who is suffering – all other beings experience suffering (*dukkha*) too." Suffering is universal – everywhere in the world. My private suffering (*dukkha*) is, therefore, insignificant. Just as a drop of water loses its identity upon entering the ocean, my sadness, frustrations, and worries become insignificant in comparison to the suffering of all beings everywhere.

2. "Focusing attention on my own difficulties and frustrations is self-centered." When I learn to look at the suffering in all beings, rather than being focused on my suffering, I become less self-centered. Thus the practice of *mettā* and *karunā*, which are not emotions but self-less states of mind decreases my suffering since all my suffering (*dukkha*) is self-centred.<sup>2</sup>

All four *Brahmavihāras* apply in the human relational world. They are essentially forms of love and a profound willingness to see, welcome, accept and resonate with others. They enable us to access the aspect of non-separateness in our experience of the world and the other.

When these qualities of empathetic connection in one's mind and heart have been developed to maturity, they have become truly immeasurable and are referred to as boundless deliverance of the heart

(*appamānā cetovimutti*). They manifest the activity of an enlightened heart entirely free from all cognitive and affective impurities and represent the culmination of the Buddhist path.

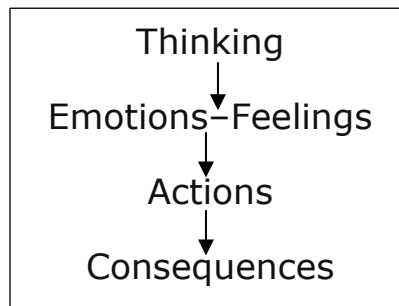
There are a number of ways to develop our *mettā* and *karunā*:

- Reflect on them daily – every moment and in every posture
- Do the *Brahma-vihāra* meditation (Loving-kindness meditation)
- Use them as the basis of our actions.

Regular *Brahma-vihāra* meditation will make these four qualities sink deep into the heart so that they become spontaneous attitudes not easily overthrown. A mind that has achieved these states will be pure, tranquil, firm, collected, and free of coarse selfishness.

Regular practice will help make the mind firmer and calmer in withstanding the numerous irritations in life that challenge us to maintain these four qualities in thoughts, words, and deeds.

**Let us first look at our normal thinking, emotions, and actions:**



“As we think, so we feel, as we feel, so we act, and so we reap the results of our actions.”

### **Thinking & Emotions**

1. Most of the time, thoughts come into our minds without our awareness (unconsciously).
2. Most of these thoughts are emotional.

3. There are three types of emotions that arise from emotional thinking, namely:
  - i. likes or desires (*lobha*)
  - ii. dislikes or hatreds (*dosa*), and
  - iii. "the sense of self" (*moha*) or a delusion.
4. The likes, dislikes, and the "sense of self" are called self-centered emotions.
5. We are often carried away by these emotions, which propel us (**E – Motion**) to get what we like or desire, run away from or destroy or harm what we don't like, and protect and defend the idea of "self."
6. When we cannot get what our emotions tell us (i.e., when we cannot satisfy our emotions), then we become frustrated, angry, anxious, sad, and unhappy. Our unhappiness spreads to others as well.
7. Therefore, most of the time, we think only about ourselves, "me and my problems," "what about me?" "I want .....", "I hate ...," "I am angry," "I will take revenge," "I am sad," "I am frustrated," etc.
8. Every thought has in it the idea of a "self" – "mine," "me" or "I," and "myself," which are the basis of all selfishness and narrow-mindedness.
9. Very little of our thinking is concerned about others, their problems, or how to help them.
10. We are self-centered. Our thinking is mostly self-centered and happens without our awareness.
11. The moment we become conscious of our emotional thoughts, they stop. This is because emotional thoughts can run only unconsciously, and they cannot continue consciously.

## **Actions**

1. If we think the wrong kind of thoughts (emotional), wrong actions will follow (and these bring us and others unhappiness):
  - i. Verbally (bad language, slander, gossip, idle chatter).

- ii. Physically (kill/harm, steal, sexual misconduct, taking intoxicants).
2. If we think good, calm, and rational thoughts, we will act in the right way.

## **Consequences**

1. Wrong actions will result in bad consequences. By acting calmly and rationally, we reap good results.

The Buddha teaches us that the way to happiness begins with right thinking.

This insight shows that the right way to live is to constantly watch our thoughts and continue to think only self-less thoughts and not selfish ones.

This means we make a serious decision to change our way of thinking and be willing to cultivate a new way of thinking by repeated practice.

The *Brahma-vihāras* are four self-less states of mind that we can constantly reflect upon, practice, and maintain to live a divine life.<sup>2</sup>

### **From self-centered thinking, feeling, and acting to self-less thinking, feeling, and acting**

## **Four sublime states of mind (*Brahma-vihāra*) meditation<sup>2</sup>**

1. Universal Love or Loving-kindness (*mettā*)
2. Compassion or Empathy (*karunā*)
3. Selfless Happiness (*muditā*)
4. Tranquility (*upekkhā*)

## **Universal Love or Loving-kindness (*mettā*)<sup>2</sup>**

- Universal love (sometimes called universal benevolence) or loving-kindness is thoughts of selfless interest in the welfare of all beings. In simple terminology, *mettā* means friendliness.
- It is a longing for the welfare of all beings without making any distinction between oneself and others. It is losing one's self in the interest of all beings.
- Just as a drop of water that enters the ocean loses its identity by merging with the waters of the ocean; in the same way, self-interest is lost in the interest of all beings by extending the self-interest to include all beings in one's interest.
- Interest in others is not opposed to self-interest. It is an extension of one's interest that was originally narrowly concerned only with oneself. Universal love or loving-kindness is broad-mindedness.<sup>2</sup>
- We begin the practice of *mettā* by being friendly to ourselves. In a practical sense, it is difficult to be friendly to others unless we are friendly to ourselves. *Mettā* enables us to be our best friend and also to be a friend to others. Sometimes we do not realize that we can be our own worst enemy. For example, we can have self-hatred when we see ourselves in the mirror. We can be very critical and hard on ourselves. When we have these negative mental habits, it is easy for us to have a similar attitude to others. With *mettā*, we learn to see more and more positive qualities in ourselves and others.
- Through the practice of *mettā*, we learn to rejoice in our own good qualities – seeing more the positive side in us – by leading a harmless, skillful, and wholesome life (living a life of integrity)<sup>5</sup>, not creating suffering for ourselves and others. This can bring joy and lightness to us and help us move away from being our worst enemy.<sup>4</sup>
- Another common way we become our own enemy is when we hold on to past “wounds.” Wounds are created by what we have done to others and what others have done to us. When we keep repenting what we have done to others, guilt and remorse are the destructive emotions that we live with. On the other hand, when we keep reminding what others have done to us, hatred, ill will, and desire for revenge are the emotions that dominate us. These unhealed

“wounds” can cause psychosomatic illnesses, disrupt comfortable sleep and even disturb us at the moment of death. Meditation on *mettā* can help us heal these wounds. We learn to forgive ourselves and others. When we let go of the past and lay down our burden, we can truly experience joy, peace, and compassion for ourselves and others.<sup>4</sup>

- In all our social settings, we have experienced pain from living with others, be it family, neighborhood, workplace, playground, or other circumstances. In these settings, there is no doubt that someone has hurt another in a small or big way, and it caused pain, which is both immediate and recurring in the form of anger, bitterness, and resentment. Holding on to anger makes one think of **revenge**, which is never healthy. Living in a chronic state of anger and resentfulness can increase stress and lead to negative effects on the immune system, digestion, sleep, and cardiovascular health.<sup>6</sup> Excess anger can negatively impact decision-making ability. Sometimes we hold on to our pains or grudges till the end of our lives. Forgiving everyone who has hurt us is one of the most powerful actions we can take. We have the power to release ourselves from that prison of pain and dis-ease. The key is **forgiveness**, which is a choice we make even when we feel the need to hold on to our pain until justice or revenge. Verses 3 -6 in the *Dhammapada* say:

“He abused me, he struck me, he overpowered me, he robbed me.” Those who harbor such thoughts do not still their hatred.

“He abused me, he struck me, he overpowered me, he robbed me.” Those who do not harbor such thoughts still their hatred.

Hatred is never appeased by hatred in this world. By non-hatred alone is hatred appeased. **This is an eternal law.**

There are those who do not realize that we all must die one day. But those who do realize this settle their quarrels.

Forgiveness is very healing, and it can be done by recalling each hurtful person and the setting in which it happened and saying, ‘I choose to forgive you. May you be well, peaceful, and happy. May



you forgive me for any wrong I may have done to you.’ With practice, our feelings start to change. It turns out to be easier to forgive, and it becomes natural the more we do it. We reap immediate benefits by shifting from fight or flight to the rest and digest mode<sup>6</sup> and entering a state of peace and happiness.

Suggestion: For an excellent discussion and practice of forgiveness, please watch Jack Kornfield - The Ancient Heart of Forgiveness: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yiRP-Q4mMtk>

- Addressing a group of monks, the Buddha once said that if they practice *mettā* even for a brief moment it takes to snap the fingers, they are worthy of being monks.

### **Cultivation of Universal Love or Loving-kindness (*mettā*)<sup>2</sup>:**

- We begin by cultivating the feeling of happiness and wellbeing towards ourselves. We are all self-centered to start with. It is these self-centered wishes that we expand to include all beings. This is how we begin to broaden the mind.
- It is important to see yourself as your best friend and really feel it - feel it in every part of your body, your whole being. Forgive yourself for any mistakes you have made in the past, and say to yourself with feeling<sup>4</sup>...the words in step 1 (below)<sup>2</sup>.
- It is important to think in the following way with feeling instead of merely repeating words:
- Step 1: “May I be well, peaceful and happy. Free from worries, anxieties, and unhappiness.”
- Step 2: “Just as I should be well, peaceful and happy, may all beings in this room be well, peaceful and happy (without making any distinction between oneself and others).”

“May all beings in this room, whether human or non-human, small or large, far or near, visible or invisible, known or unknown, be

free from worries, anxieties, and unhappiness.” (Keep repeating these thoughts as long as you can.)

- Step 3: Keep extending this wish (repeat same formula as above) outwards in ever-expanding circles, moving from the room to the house/building, neighborhood, city, province/state, country, continent, earth, solar system, galaxy, clusters of galaxies, the whole universe and even beyond the universe to all spheres of existence known and unknown, without limits, without bounds, to infinity without excluding anyone. (Keep doing this as long as you can in each of the stages described above.)
- Step 4: Remain in the final stage of universal love or loving-kindness to all beings without exception, as long as possible.<sup>2</sup>

### **Compassion or Empathy (*karunā*)<sup>2</sup>**

- To be in tune with the sorrows and the happiness of others as if it were one's own.
- It may be called sympathy or empathy, where one's heart vibrates in unison with that of others and is able to comprehend the others' points of view and feels it.
- We can put *karunā* into action on a daily basis, even in small ways, when we see suffering in others. This may include even talking or smiling in a friendly way with others. When we develop this quality, we are bound to see opportunities to express our *karunā* everywhere. When you see that whatever *karunā* you have shown others is having the desired effect, you can become happy.<sup>4</sup>
- One should also learn to have *karunā* for oneself. When one is suffering, having *karunā* for oneself is trying to do something about the suffering rather than letting it continue. This develops self-confidence. Much happiness can arise since you have found a way to deal with your own suffering, and in a similar way, you find ways to eliminate suffering in others.<sup>4</sup>
- Empathy can be directed at five levels of discomfort (*dukkha*)<sup>2</sup>:

1. Empathy for those who are worrying or repenting for their misdeeds.
  2. Empathy for those who have lost what they possessed (persons -- through death; things – through theft; natural disasters, etc.) and for those who are unable to get what they want due to inability.
  3. Empathy for those who have lost their self-identity (loss of position in society, suffering from an inferiority complex, ego challenged, etc.).
  4. Empathy for beings in the human world (in prisons, hospitals, refugee camps, and those subject to starvation, suppression, etc.).
  5. Empathy for other less privileged beings (animals, ghosts, beings in hells) that you may not even know about.
- Empathy can be directed at five levels of comfort (*sukha*)<sup>2</sup>:
    1. Empathy for those who have gained many things they wished for.
    2. Empathy for those who have gained their self-identity.
    3. Empathy for those in the human world who are privileged, comfortable, and happy.
    4. Empathy for heavenly beings.
    5. Empathy for those who are enjoying the freedom from guilt and the benefits of being good and pure in mind.

### **Cultivation of Compassion or Empathy (*karunā*)<sup>2</sup>:**

Think of all those beings who are suffering, here in the human world, in the animal world, and even in the worlds of ghosts and hells. Try to put yourself in their shoes and feel their suffering as if it is your own. Wish that these beings be free from all suffering as soon as possible. Wish that they find happiness soon.

Wish that they be free from pain, worries, anxieties, and unhappiness. May they all be happy and tranquil.

Now think of all beings in pleasant conditions here in this human world as well as outside, in the heavenly pleasure worlds and the peaceful higher worlds. Try to imagine their enjoyment in those pleasant states and feel happy about their happiness. Wish that their happiness lasts long. Wish that they be free from desires, hatreds, confusion, and free from unhappiness, and wish that they be happy and tranquil.<sup>2</sup>

### **Cultivation of Selfless Happiness (*muditā*)<sup>2</sup>:**

With the cultivation of loving-kindness (*mettā*) and empathy (*karunā*), self-consciousness has extended beyond its limits to become the consciousness of all beings. Self-consciousness has been transformed into universal consciousness. This loss of self-consciousness brings all unhappiness to an end. What is left is the experience of happiness, which is sometimes called rapture. This is the happiness of selflessness. Cultivate this happiness by thinking, “may all beings be well and happy.” Try to remain in this selfless state of happiness as long as possible without self-consciousness. This happiness of selflessness is not an emotional excitement. It is perfect tranquility of mind (equanimity). This perfect tranquility is turned inwards. It does not seek happiness outside. The mind at this stage is not disturbed by the changing vicissitudes of life: gain and loss, fame and ill fame, praise and blame, pleasure, and pain.<sup>3</sup>

The self-less happiness or *mudita* progresses to *upekkhā*.<sup>2</sup>

### **Cultivation of Tranquility (*upekkhā*)<sup>2</sup>:**

The happiness of selflessness is not excitement. It is a state of tranquility. Try to maintain this calmness or stillness of mind as long as you can. Observe the calmness of the breathing. Maintain the calmness by keeping the breathing calm. Notice that when happiness is experienced within, attention stays within, without running to external objects. When the attention is focused within, the mind remains undisturbed by changing external circumstances. This is called *upekkhā*

(apperception). Remain in this healthy, calm, tranquil, peaceful state for as long as possible.

Tranquility is produced by focusing attention on the experience within and is accompanied by the comfortable feeling of relaxation. It is a resting of the mind due to the absence of emotions and relaxation of the body. It is not concentration but the stillness of mind. The experience of selfless happiness is not excitement. It is a state of tranquility (*upekkhā*).

In the state of *upekkhā*, one sees fully that there is no separation between "myself" and "others." This happens when attention that is normally placed on the outer experience (perception) is turned inwards to observe the inner experience (**apperception**). When the mind is focused within, the attention becomes focused on the process of perception rather than the object perceived. When this occurs, one becomes aware of the process of perception in detail. This way, one becomes able to analyze the process of perception and becomes aware of the constituents of the process of perception (*pancakkhanda*). When one is aware of the analytical parts as they appear and disappear, one begins to see that the "world" we are aware of and the "self" we are aware of are only like a cinematographic movie. What is perceived is seen as a series of fast-moving pictures.

This results in making a distinction between reality and appearance, thus losing the attraction to the objects perceived. The reality of the subjective process of seeing (identified as the "self") as well as the reality of the cinematographic "object" seen (identified as a real object) begins to appear as unreal. Consequently, all emotional bonds to the object seen and the subject that sees are broken. This way, one Awakens from the dream of existence. Then no more is existence and then no more is death. Thus ends the problem of existence. When existence is no more, the problem is no more. The problem is ultimately solved by understanding the process of perception and how it creates delusion. Thus terminates the process of evolution, and this eradicates all suffering. Thus runs the Buddhist psychotherapy for normal people, which makes them Supernormal through the development of *METTĀ*.<sup>3</sup>

In other words, introspection results in a paradigm shift from existence (existence of subject and object) to experience. Existence is seen only as an illusion – there is only experience and no subjective (“myself”) and objective (“other,” “outer world”) existence. When the illusion of subjective existence is seen, the concept of “myself” ceases. The distinction between the “self” and the “other” disappears. The emotional relationship between subject-object also disappears. This is the Awakening from the dream of existence.<sup>2</sup>

Regular cultivation of the *Brahma-vihāra* meditation enables us to think, feel, and act selflessly, bringing much happiness to ourselves and others. As the Buddha says, “What a person considers and reflects upon for a long time, to that his mind will bend and incline.”

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#### Notes:

There are many variations of the *Brahma-vihāra* meditations taught by meditation teachers. What matters is not the technique but the underlying thinking, feelings, and actions. This meditation need not be associated with any religious concept.

(Revised April 2023, by Mahendra Wijayasinghe, Ph.D.)

**“May all beings be well, peaceful, and happy!”**

## **THE SUTTA ON UNIVERSAL BENEVOLENCE**

*Karaniya Metta Sutta* (Sn 1.8): The Buddha’s Words on Loving-Kindness  
Translated from the Pali by Venerable Mahathera Madawela Punnaji

### **Aspiration**

Whoever wishes to attain the **Sublime State of Peace**  
Must be competent in their practice.

### **Qualification**

One must be able, upright, and extremely honest  
Courteous in speech, humble, and not conceited  
One must be contented and simple, with light duties and few obligations  
One must have calm senses, be intelligent, modest, and not caste-conscious or class-conscious.

### **Benevolence**

One must never be angry but be courteous in conduct, doing nothing that is  
Blame-worthy and constantly longing for the weal and welfare of all beings,  
Wishing they be comfortable, happy, and free from fear.

### **Universal**

Whoever living beings there be, weak or strong, long, broad, medium or short;  
Small or large, visible or invisible, far or near, born or being born,  
May they all be well and happy.

### **Peace**

May none harass others or over-conceited be  
May none threaten others  
May none wish ill towards none.

### **Intensity of concern**

Just as a mother would guard her only son, even at the risk of her life  
Even so, one should bear a caring attitude towards all that lives,  
Beyond all limits and discriminations  
One should cultivate a mind full of universal benevolence that is boundless,  
Above, below, and all around, with no exceptions, anger or enmity.

### **Maintenance**

All through one’s waking life,  
Whether standing, walking, sitting, or lying down  
One should maintain such a watchful mind  
This is called -- **Living the divine life.**

### **Freedom**

Free from dogmatic views and courteous in conduct,  
Clearly aware of one’s inner experience

Free from greed for sensual pleasure  
One is never born in a mother's womb.

