THE FOUR BRAHMA VIHARAS

A key element of the Noble Eightfold Path is Right Intention, which, when properly coordinated with Right Understanding, comprises the essence of Buddhist Wisdom. Right Understanding focuses on cultivating a clear awareness of the transitory, completely conditioned nature of subjective experience, while Right Intention focuses on how important it is to foster self-state organizing processes that promote kindness, compassion, and empathetic generosity in a way that is balanced, without bias or any action that is harmful to self or others.

These notes are intended to provide an overview of Right Intention in the context of the *Brahma Viharas* (brah-mah vee-hah-rahs), which express the above-mentioned categories—*Metta* (meh-tah), *Karuna* (kah-roo-nah), *Mudita* (moo-dee-tah), and *Upekkha* (oo-peh-kah). Metta is translated as Lovingkindness, Karuna as Compassion, Mudita as Empathetic or Sympathetic Joy and Upekkha as Equanimity. *Brahma* is the Vedic word for the ultimate Higher Power and was the dominant spiritual norm at the time of the Buddha, and *Vihara* is translated as a dwelling or an abiding. Before the onset of Buddhism, the Brahma Viharas were already part of the spiritual socio-cultural norms in that part of the world, so the Buddha is not considered the originator of these contemplations. Subsequent meetings will focus on each of these qualities of focused attention in more detail, while this talk will review the importance and overall effectiveness of these strategies for good mental well-being and harmonious social relations.

There has been much contemporary psychological research on the benefits of meditation and particularly the sort of meditation that is intended to cultivate awareness of one’s affective response to internal conditions and how this affects relationship dynamics. Part of what sets humans apart from other creatures is a highly developed empathetic attunement. Empathy exists in other animals such as canines, apes, whales, dolphins and probably others. Any animals that cooperate within some sort of group interactions, in packs or other social circumstances are better equipped to survive and empathy supports this cooperation through pack cohesion, the ability to sense and respond to hierarchical organization, the ability to gather and share food equitably and to protect each other when threats appear. In these ways empathy enabled proto humans to survive in hostile and otherwise insecure environments, supporting the development of tribal culture.

Humans developed this empathetic ability to a very high degree of complexity and sophistication. This empathy is expressed multiple ways even now—before humans had language, interpersonal messaging was conveyed through body language—facial expressions, vocalization, gestures, etc.—much like our genetically close relatives, the apes, and even now, grunts and tone-of-voice utterances between people involves empathy. Somewhere, somehow, humans acquired language, an evolutionary turning point, and language played a very important role in communicating empathy; this provided members of tribe intergenerational sharing of information that was more favorable to the discovery of fire and beneficial cultural protocols. However, mental and behavioral responses to empathy is always conditional, derived from previous experience, primarily in the socializing process of early familial and social acculturation. We are genetically predisposed to empathy, but also to greed, hatred and ignorance, the “three poisons” that Buddhism is intended to provide principles and practices for evolving beyond, and this evolution is developed through the cultivation of Right Understanding and Right Intention, along with other functions of the Noble Eightfold Path.

Some thousands of years ago, cultural evolution created enough food stability, social cohesion and other circumstances that supported the development of the ethical norms that are common among all the faith traditions in the world as we know it. Kindness, compassion, sharing resources and the ability to tolerate diverse personalities in a community are all fostered in Hinduism, Judaism, Buddhism, Christianity, Islam and other forms of spirituality. The Buddhist rendering of these norms are the Four Brahma Viharas.

Another core aspect of the great faith traditions involves what Buddhism calls interdependence or interbeing. This is a direct experiential realization of unity, oneness, even as there is awareness of diversity. The sense of a separate, autonomous and enduring self is known as a fundamental misperception of reality. This misperception, at its base, operates as if there is a subject experiencing an object—this conditioned separation creates the circumstances that cause the distress and confusion of life. The goal of Buddhist practice is to relinquish this misperception, and this is at the heart of Right Understanding and Right Intention. Deeply contemplating the Brahma Viharas dissolves this separation leading to a realization of how important it is to be kind, compassionate, generous and accepting of diversity. This unity goes far beyond the social cohesion and includes cultivating Right Intention about the environment, which is of crucial importance in our time.

I personally believe that the development of these empathic norms in the form of spiritually designated ethics represents an evolutionary turning point in the course of human history. As mentioned above, somehow, somewhere, sometime, the vocal cords and function of the tongue, combined with certain areas of the brain, created the conditions supportive of articulating words and sentences, with enormously important consequences, both interpersonally as well as in our internal self-organizing processes. However, without empathic input, social and intrapersonal cohesion is easily distorted, as is painfully evident in contemporary cultural conflicts.

There are parts of the brain that are called mirror neurons, as their function is to provide a way for the brain to understand and mimic the behaviors of others. The two I find most easily online relate to observing and then mimicking the actions of others, and to being empathically stimulated by witnessing the pain of others. It is easy to understand how these responses would contribute significantly to group understanding and cohesion as well as stimulating kindness, compassion, sympathy, generosity.

Our ability to empathize is disrupted and distorted by fear. When others in the group or from outside the group behave in ways that seem to threaten one’s safety or social status, fear and perhaps aggression can arise. From a Buddhist perspective, the Brahma Viharas are the antidote for one of the Five Hindrances, the conditioned experience of fear and aggression. A fundamental driving aspect of life is the desire for pleasant experience to be ever-present and reliably enduring and for unpleasant experience to always be avoided and eliminated when it occurs. Additionally, much of what we regard as pleasurable or painful is culturally created—consider consumer marketing practices that tell viewers that happiness depends on a product or service, for example, or how dysfunctional family of origin rules of behavior created confusion and conflict in other relationships. Because of these conditioning circumstances, we experience fear that we will not be able to get what we want or be able to protect it when we have it, or not be able to avoid or control circumstances that are emotionally painful.

Currently, humanity is undergoing what is arguably the most rapidly changing and complex transitions in history—global warming is driving those whose homeland has been devastated by climatic changes and the political upheaval that occurs as a result of these stresses. We are being adversely affected by the pandemic and the disruptions in commercial and other cultural norms that are disrupted. Contemporary media is aggravating these stresses, creating doubt and uncertainty about what is true and real. I believe that the cultivation of the Noble Eightfold Path concepts and practices provides a valuable way of being resilient and adaptive to these stressors.

The human brain is fundamentally organized to promote survival of the individual and the species. Our nervous system radiates out from the brain through the body; the largest of these nerves is called the vagus nerve, which connects the base of the brain with the throat, heart, lungs, stomach and intestines. The word *vagus* comes from Latin and is translated as *wandering*, and the nerve is widely dispersed throughout the torso. It transmits signals from the brain out into the body and another branch sends signals from the body back to the brain. Posted on the Psychology Today website in May 2017, in an article titled “Kindness Towards Oneself and Others”, by Christopher Bergland, we read:

In 2010, Barbara Frederickson of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and [Bethany Kok](https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=1&cad=rja&uact=8&ved=0ahUKEwjGh4-ytJfUAhWK4iYKHeT5AwcQFggoMAA&url=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.bethanykok.com%2F&usg=AFQjCNEiEnN3aOFdB4o8mDWt_eXNNvV7iQ&sig2=Ou4XKoZInrv16kOfV4BIqw) of the Max Planck Institute for Human Cognitive and Brain Sciences published their landmark study, "[Upward Spirals of the Heart: Autonomic Flexibility, as Indexed by Vagal Tone, Reciprocally, and Prospectively Predicts Positive Emotions and Social Connectedness](https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/20851735)," in the journal Biological [*Psychiatry*](https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/basics/psychiatry).

Fredrickson and Kok hypothesized that having a higher vagal tone might be part of an “upward spiral” that was part of a multi-directional feedback loop that could be accessed from various points of entry. Interestingly, they found people with higher vagal tone have better overall heart health, lower levels of inflammation, stronger social bonds, and tend to exhibit better [emotion regulation](https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/basics/emotion-regulation).

For example, genuine wholehearted micro-moments of social connectedness between two individuals appeared to instantaneously trigger a parasympathetic (“tend-and-befriend”) response that improved vagal tone for both parties involved. The positive visceral and psychological feedback of these warm-hearted exchanges led people to expand social networks in a way that spread positive emotions and prosocial behaviors. From an evolutionary standpoint, one could speculate that this biological response became hardwired as part of a survival mechanism that nurtured cooperative human bonds and alliances that benefitted both the individual and the collective…

The vagus nerve helps to regulate heart rate and is also a key player in our social engagement systems. Long before modern-day researchers were studying the science of human emotion and loving-kindness as being linked to the vagus nerve, scientists were interested in how vagal tone affected the physiology of the heart. When you inhale, heart rate speeds up a bit and when you exhale, the release of acetylcholine—which was originally referred to as vagusstoff (German for "vagus substance”)—slows your heart rate down and prepares your body to "rest-and-digest." A healthy heart is also marked by a high rate of variability (HRV) as you breathe in and out.

In 2013, Fredrickson and colleagues conducted another groundbreaking [study](https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/23649562) that looked at the role that practicing loving-kindness [meditation](https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/basics/meditation) (LKM) played in making the upward spiral dynamic between vagal tone, positive emotions, close-knit human bonds, and physical health more robust.

The key ingredient to turbo-charging this upward spiral of improved vagal tone appeared to be sending loving-kindness towards oneself and towards others—including loved ones...but also rivals, enemies, a nemesis, or anyone you hold a grudge against. The foundation of LKM echoes the [wisdom](https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/basics/wisdom) of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow who famously said, “If we could read the secret history of our enemies, we should find in each man's life sorrow and suffering enough to disarm all hostility."

Another important consideration regarding how the empathetic process operates includes the interactive and mutually reinforcing dynamic of internal verbalization-in the case of the Brahma Viharas—the repetition of mantras—specifically related to the practice of metta, which is the vanguard of karuna and mudita. I know from my career as a psychotherapist that our internal commentary plays a crucial role in our mental well-being. One of the functions of the vagal system involves speech regulation. It is often the case that when a person is sufficiently frightened, the ability to speak is significantly impaired, and this is associated with the disruption of the interactions between the emotionally activated parts of the brain and the parts of the brain associated with speech. I have often counseled clients who were so anxious that he or she felt a constriction in the throat that impaired the ability to speak, and this is directly related to the vagal nerve system.

Each word that is created by the brain has a systemic, blended interaction with various emotions that are stored away in the unconscious memory systems of the brain. When helping people understand how the metta mantra operates, I ask them to associate the word “safe”, part of the mantra, with other associated words or beliefs such as “secure”, “protected”, “relaxed”, and so on. These associations all have emotional connotations, and if sufficient eeg or fmri telemetry was involved while contemplating these words, there would be evidence that the neural patterns activated in recalling the words are neurologically linked with other parts of the brain associated with emotions and emotional regulation. Of course, the opposite is true—when a person silently repeats words or contemplates memories that are painful, the words are neurologically linked to the parts of the brain that activate anxiety and agitation.

I encourage focusing on the center of the chest while repeating the mantras. Before I knew about the existence and function of the vagus nerve, I encouraged this practice to “embody” the repetition of the phrase, as a way to reduce the likelihood of distraction. After learning about the existence and function of the vagus nerve, I realized that this focused attention likely serves to increase the beneficial toning of the vagus nerves functions also.

Training the heart and the mind through meditation is not mysterious but can be difficult to master. The same challenges are involved mastering any craft—singing, playing a musical instrument, even typing on the keyboard of a computer! We must be persistently and frequently train the mind to higher levels of discipline and awareness—a professional musician must practice diligently and wisely to be able to perform at a high level in order to be successful—what if you consider yourself as a professional human being—are you willing to practice mindfulness and lovingkindness meditation diligently enough to master the art of living?