The Brahma Vihāras

THE classical vihāra, or ancient Buddhist temple, was built of red sandalwood. It had thirty-two chambers and was eight tala trees in height. The tala tree is the palmyra palm, seventy or eighty feet tall, so the classical vihāra would have been as high as 640 feet. It was surrounded by beautiful landscaping with a bathing pool and had promenades for walking meditation. All creature comforts were provided in the furnishings, including stores of food, clothing, bedding, and medicine.

Though the classical vihāras were splendid temples, the Brahma Vihāras are far higher and richer. "Brahma" means "pure," and the Pure Vihāras can be understood as the Buddha realms of the noblest attitudes and conduct. The first of these Vihāras is ***maitrī***, boundless kindliness; the second is ***karunā***, boundless compassion; the third is ***muditā***, boundless delight in the liberation of others; and the fourth is ***upekshā***, boundless equanimity.[1]

Notice that "boundless" is the operant qualifier of these noble abodes. "Boundless" has come to mean "infinite," but its primary meaning is "without constraints." Boundless kindliness, compassion, goodwill, and equanimity are the noble qualities of the one who is no longer caged by individuality and has entered the spacious, multicentered universe.

Most of us, however, cannot readily find that open, inclusive space. We live without giving love easily, because openness and giving seem to endanger the precious self we cultivated as children. The

Buddha assures us, "We are all in this together. Let's trust one another, work through our fears, and build our Vihāras together."

It might seem to you that before you build your Brahma Vihāras, you should prepare your foundation—that is, sit hard, experience no-self—and then go on to apply your experience in daily life. But these are not ordinary temples. You prepare the ground at the same time that you build. Building is preparing; preparing is building. When you practice kindliness, you are also practicing no-self.

Kindliness is an attitude of pleasantness, interest in the other, encouragement. The kindly person is not worried about giving away personal power. In fact, when you are kindly, you are cultivating Buddha power, the power of decency that brings your interrelationship with all beings into clear focus.

A step beyond kindliness, compassion is the personal experience and practice of interbeing. We live our short lives not merely in interdependence but as a single great organism of many dynamic elements. What happens to you happens to me; what happens to me happens to you—at the same moment with the same intensity. If your behavior seems strange, it is because I am not yet well acquainted with your side of my psyche. I hear painful bondage in your angry words. I want to understand how it could have developed. I want you to hear my story too. Let's get together and share, and your part of me will become more clear—my part of you will become more clear.

Delight in the joy of others is still another step, more difficult to realize even than compassion. Each of us has a seed of personal potential, formed by a mysterious process of cause and affinity with ancestors and environment extending to unknown reaches of time and space. We visualize that seed maturing and bearing fruit, and when someone's attainment, however small, steals our thunder, we find ways to violate the Seventh Precept by praising ourselves and abusing the other.[2] Can the runner-up wholeheartedly congratulate the winner? That is the great test.

The final abode, equanimity, contains all the others, of course. Kindliness, compassion, and goodwill all rest and come forth here. Is it all right to be mortal? Is it all right to be homely? Is it all right to be weak in mathematics or grammar? Is it all right to be deaf to good

music or blind to good art? Is it all right to be neurotic? Is it all right for others to have such egregious faults? Really all right—to the very bottom? Well, if so, then congratulations! "Golden-haired lion!" as Yün-men would exclaim. Please take my seat and be my teacher—be the Buddha's teacher.

I suspect, rather, that no one can answer in the affirmative and rightfully claim such broad, serene acceptance of self and others. The abode of equanimity stands vacant; nobody lives there, though some live right next door—the Buddha, Kuan-yin, the Dalai Lama (who stresses equanimity in his teaching and personifies it in his life). Yet in your practice the Buddha is sitting on your cushions and counting your breaths. Kuan-yin hears the sounds of suffering with no one's ears but your own and reaches out to help. These are not abstract figures but names and forms of yourself. In your own Brahma Vihāra, just as it is, you restore your equanimity and find energy to engage in the world with its beings.

The self is still present—but it is not self-preoccupied. It washes the dishes and puts them away. Even the ego is there, with a clear understanding of who this Buddha is and how she or he is engaged: crying the wail of others, laughing their laugh, and doing their work with them. You as your own Buddha can do this, quite short of any deep realization, *as if* you were doing it from your heart, for your heart is not just the little organ beating in your chest.

Thich Nhat Hanh has said that you are like a TV. If you want a peaceful channel, you can turn to a peaceful channel. If you want some other kind of channel, you can turn to that. Easier said than done, perhaps. My suggestion that you simply *be* compassionate and peaceful is also easier said than done sometimes. Perhaps you will need to search out conventional psychotherapy or to practice Theravada or Vajrayana exercises of self-assurance and loving-kindness. Treat these needs as you would your needs for the right food and plenty of exercise for good health.

A healthful regimen should not be regarded simply as a path to well-being, though one may become fit. The way of kindliness *as if* you were kindly is likewise not merely self-development, though the self does become more decent as you persevere. These skillful means are practice, but "practice" also is becoming a worn-out expression.

It is not merely practice to prepare oneself through study, zazen, and therapy to help others by suffering with them, delighting in them, and finding peace with them. At every step, at every point in your breath-by-breath return to your task, you are pursuing the Buddha's own noble, completely fulfilling work.

> As the World-Honored One was walking with his followers, he pointed to the ground and said, "This spot is good for building a sanctuary."
>
> Indra, the Emperor of the Gods, took a blade of grass, stuck it in the ground, and said, "The sanctuary is built."
>
> The World-Honored One smiled.[3]

Simple for Indra, and thus simple for us. But just as Indra established a sanctuary in present place and time—just as the lotus flower blooms in the mud—so Brahma Vihāras rise in the midst of pain, anguish, affliction, and distress; of greed, hatred, and ignorance. Māra, the destroyer, usually considered to be the Buddha's opposite number, dwells there in the four ignoble abodes of suspicion, antipathy, jealousy, and restlessness. Māra is not, of course, merely an outside influence. He is really quite ordinary looking, tall, getting a little soft around the tummy, with rather unkempt hair and a white goatee. However, I vow to cut off the Three Poisons of greed, hatred, and ignorance; that is, I vow to follow my Buddha tendencies of kindliness, compassion, goodwill, and peace, rather than to follow my Māra tendencies.

It is, as Indra showed, quite easy. It is also quite difficult. You must cut off the mind road, as Wu-men says. Otherwise, "You are like a ghost, clinging to bushes and grasses."[4] Yet you and I know from experience that the mind road can't be cut off by even the strongest, sharpest power of the will. In fact, the more energy you devote to confronting your mental chatter, the noisier it becomes.

Don't misdirect yourself. Attend scrupulously to your task, and respond as appropriately as you can to its demands. Though your thoughts are importunate, on your cushions your task is the kōan Mu, and its requirements are devotion and the utmost spirit of inquiry. When you doubt that you are giving Mu enough devotion and

inquiry, then indeed you are not. Settle into Mu and forget about your inadequacies. If the Buddha had been adequate in his zazen, he would not have had to practice so long. Inadequacy, like the Three Poisons, is your field of noble endeavor. Without inadequacy, there is no Buddha Way.

In daily life, your noble endeavor is likewise attention and response. Listening to the sounds of the world, you find that your very skin is a sensory organ rather than some kind of outer bulwark. "Inside and outside become one, and you are like a mute person who has had a dream."[5] It is then that the thrush sings and the earth is shaken. You find yourself an organ of interbeing, and turning the wheel of the Dharma becomes a matter of waving hello to your neighbor when you pick up the morning paper. Your concern about an illness in your neighbor's family is in that wave. Your pleasure at her purchase of a cabin in the country is in that wave. Your peace of mind is in that wave.

This is the great peace of equanimity. Once you see into the vast and fathomless emptiness of the universe, you find there is no mind road to cut off and no abiding self to protect. The Three Poisons are wiped away, and although they can appear again, at least you have learned how to turn the switch. You know clearly for yourself the royal ease of Kuan-yin.

Kuan-yin must nonetheless be served with food, clothing, bedding, medicine, and love. Otherwise he or she cannot lift a hand to wave. Māra too demands service; otherwise he or she cannot be suspicious, antagonistic, jealous, and restless. The Buddha, Kuan-yin, and Māra are useful archetypes, but I am the one who must take responsibility. If I meet most of my needs and allow others to help me to meet them, then I can be of service. If I meet most of my self-centered desires and allow others to help me to meet them, then I will get bloated and everybody else had better watch out.

Ordinary law is at work here. If you follow this law as Buddha, then it is clearly the Buddha's law. If you follow it as Māra, it is still the Buddha's law but not so evidently, for it is misused. The law is, of course, karma. *This* happens because *that* happens. *This* is because *that* is.

The misuse of karma is not its denial. The most hardened criminal knows that one thing leads to another. Misuse lies in the attempt to manipulate and exploit karma for self-centered purposes. When parents are too preoccupied to care for their children, then the children tend to neglect themselves and their responsibilities in turn. Schools are disrupted, hospitals are filled with victims of accidents and addictions, and prisons are crowded with violators of progressively more severe laws.

On the world stage, when agricultural syndicates buy up the land of peasants for sugarcane or bananas, then the restless peasants will have to be neutralized somehow, and the insects and diseases that come with specializing in a single crop will have to be dealt with. The problems that inevitably come with neutralizing the peasants and with dealing with insects and plant diseases will have to be addressed in turn, using ever more draconian measures.

The synergy of draconian misuse becomes overwhelming and can only be dealt with by the radical transformation of the individual self from an isolated being to a multicentered being and by leadership from that position, which speaks to the needs of the family, community, and the universal organism. Gary Snyder wrote an article more than twenty years ago entitled "Buddhism and the Coming Revolution."[6] It was based on the Hua-yen model of the Net of Indra and showed clearly how the Mahayana Buddhist, faithful to the intimate interdependence of all beings, resists the ordinary self-aggrandizing tendencies of states, institutions, and individuals. It was a seminal essay, and we are challenged to bring its thought into reality in our practice.

This practice is all of a piece. The tendencies of some governments to torture political dissidents and destroy the rain forests are my own tendencies and yours—to neglect our children, say, or to squander our physical health. The results are felt all of a piece too. My Māra permeates the world, and world Māra permeates me. Likewise when I conduct myself with kindliness, compassion, goodwill, and equanimity, all beings are enlightened.

The path is practical, not metaphysical, though archetypes show through the mist to guide us. I cannot be content just to seek peace of mind with concepts. After all, the Buddha's teachings were concerned with noble conduct, and the ancient sanghas were organized as noble social structures. How should we as modern Buddhists apply the teaching and sangha models in the context of pervasive systems that are ignoble and destructive? It is up to us, it seems to me, to conspire with our families and friends and establish practical alternatives that are true to our understanding, here in our own time.

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Also by Robert Aitken

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