

Ethical Importance Of *Brahmavihāra* In Buddhism

Bhupendra Chandra Das and Biplab Barik

Abstract: *Śīla*, *Samādhi* and *Prajñā* are the stages on the path to *nirvāṇa*. *Śīla* is the development of excellence of character and *Samādhi* is profound contemplation of truth. It is the concentration of mind on one object to the entire exclusion of all irrelevant matter. *Prajñā* is the penetrating insight or wisdom or valid deeper and higher knowledge. *Śīla* is the positive aspect of morality and the latter lies in the cultivation of four *Brahmavihāras*. 'Brahma' means divine state of mind. It means one greater than which nothing can be. Here the word 'Vihāra' signifies constant cultivation of four feelings mentioned below. According to Buddhism, there are four *Brahmavihāras* – *Maitrī* (disinterested friendship), *Karuṇā* (unrestrained compassion), *Muditā* (unreserved satisfaction) and *Upekṣā* (indifference). These are highly admirable for the purpose of right concentration (*Samyak Samādhi*) and they ultimately lead to emancipation (*nirvāṇa*). In case of *maitrī*, the practice of universal and unselfish friendship is necessary. It is ruination of enmity or ill-will of any type, because that is not humanizing. So we should help, love, enable not only oneself but also should extend it to the entire living beings in the world. After seeing the grief of others the trembling which arises in the hearts of gentle person is known as *karuṇā*. *Karuṇā* may even be extended to repentant criminals and enemies. *Muditā* means sincere joy at others happiness. Kindliness (*muditā*), is sharing someone else's joy. *Upekṣā* is the feeling of indifference to happiness and sorrow, etc. It is to overlook the errors of others. The aforesaid *Brahmavihāras* resembles with the four quoted in *Yogasūtra* – I .33. The four sublime states (*Brahmavihāras*) of mind are interconnected, complementary and yet independent. *Brahmavihāras* develop a proper linkage between *Prajñā* and *Śīla*. *Prajñā* without *Śīla* is empty and *Śīla* without *Prajñā* is barren. *Brahmavihāras* bridge the link between theory and practice, essence of humanity and essencelessness of personality. Therefore, we can conclude that Buddhism has a proper insight into the conception of man and his *Nirvāṇa* in which *Brahmavihāras* has a properly decisive role. According to the Buddha, works of a *sādhaka*, influenced by the thought of *maitrī* begets a plenty of good result. Malice (*dveṣa*), violence or hatred and the act of vengeance wither away respectively by *maitrī*, *karuṇā* and *upekṣā*. The feeling of disinterestedness of disinterested actions may come in the doer's mind if he continues to do the practice of *muditā*.

Key words: *śīla*, *samādhi*, *prajñā*, *nirvāṇa*, *brahmavihāra*, *muditā*, *maitrī*, *karuṇā*, *upekṣā*, purity, mind, *yama*, *niyama*.

Introduction: *Śīla*, *Samādhi* and *Prajñā* are the stages on the path to *nirvāṇa*. *Śīla* means the development of excellence of character in particular and morality in general. Morality is the first stage on the path to *nirvāṇa*. *Nirvāṇa* is the final extinction of the fire of lust, fire of hatred, fire of ignorance, fire of birth, old age, death, pain, lamentation, sorrow, grief and despair. To the Buddha, the whole world is in flames by the fire of lust, hatred, ignorance etc. He wanted a complete extinction of such fire. So he invented a path for attaining *nirvāṇa*.

Morality is the foundation on which the entire structure of *nirvāṇa* depends. If the foundation of a house remains weak at the time of its construction, the house cannot be built. Similarly, if morality is not observed, one cannot proceed in the way to *nirvāṇa*. Morality implies doing good deeds through bodily and vocal organs. Morality has two aspects: *positive and negative*. The negative aspect of morality consists in abstaining from causing injury to any living beings, refraining from sexual misconduct and stealing, avoiding false speech, harsh and forbidden drinks. The positive aspect of morality lies in cultivating *maitrī* (unselfish friendship), *karuṇā* (unrestrained compassion), *muditā* (unreserved satisfaction) and *upekṣā* (indifference or equanimity) which are the four pillars of *Brahmavihāras* or four sublime states.

Buddhism attempts to interpret *nirvāṇa* within the framework of main teachings of Bhagavān Buddha, namely, *duḥkha* (universal susceptibility to suffering), *anātmatā* (non-substantiality of everything) and *anityatā* (susceptibility to change).

An aspirant (a *sādhaka*) should acquire proper knowledge (*jñāna*) and adopt proper modes of action (*karma*) and should attempt to develop the excellence of character (*śīla*) for achieving his goal.

Śīla (development of excellence of character or morality), *Samādhi* (profound contemplation of truth) and *prajñā* (penetrating insight or wisdom or valid, deeper and higher knowledge) are related to each other.

Samādhi is the second stage on the path to *nirvāṇa*. It is single pointedness of the mind. It is concentration of the mind on one object to the entire exclusion of all irrelevant matter. But concentration of mind is necessary for committing wrong and harmful deeds also. Therefore, in the way to *nirvāṇa*, right concentration (*Samyak Samādhi*) is what is meant for.

Prajñā (wisdom or penetrating insight) is the third stage on the path to *nirvāṇa*. Though the first two stages i. e. *śīla* and *samādhi* are helpful to clear the path of its obstacles, e. g., sense-desire, hatred, restlessness etc, it is only *prajñā* which leads one to see things as they are. So *prajñā* enables a *sādhaka* (seeker of truth) to attain the ultimate truth by entirely destroying passions inhibited by *samādhi*. *Samādhi* cannot uproot the passions completely from the deepest layer of the mind. These are soothed to sleep temporarily. Passions may rise to the surface and may be harmful for everything. Hence, *prajñā* is required to uproot the passions completely from the deepest layer of the mind and enable oneself to be emancipated forever.

It has been mentioned earlier that positive aspect of morality lies in the cultivation of four *brahmavihāras* (sublime states). *Brahmavihāra* means a divine state of mind, perfect state, pious conduct, sublime occupations, good moods, highest condition etc. It seem to us that

'divine state of mind' is more satisfactory meaning of the term. In other words, by four *brahmavihāras* we may mean our four feelings or principles of mind, such as, *maitrī* (disinterested friendship), *karuṇā* (unrestrained compassion), *muditā* (unreserved satisfaction) and *upekṣā* (indifference or neutrality). The noble roaming or practice for development of these four feelings in our *citta* aiming at *nirvāṇa* is called *brahmavihāra*. These are the highest states of our consciousness. This result of the highest feelings is produced in the *Brahmaloka* (the abode of the sublimates) and through this the delightful state is attained. These states are the ultimate sources of the purity of mind. The man who continuously performs these four sublime states is desirous of welfare of all individuals. A sincere monk (*Bhikṣu*) can remove his mental impurities like sexual urge, hatred, jealousy etc. with the help of constant practice of these sublime states. Some say that *yoga* is the source of the welfare of oneself but the performance of the *Brahmavihāras* do well of others.

Maitrī, *Karuṇā*, *Muditā* and *Upekṣā* are the fundamental basis of personal happiness, good social relationship with others and the attainment of eternal peace. Again, it is said that practice of *Brahmavihāras* – *maitrī* (disinterested friendship or loving kindness), *karuṇā* (unrestrained compassion), *muditā* (unreserved satisfaction), *upekṣā* (indifference or neutrality) are highly admirable for the purpose of right concentration (*samyak samādhi*) and they ultimately lead to emancipation (*nirvāṇa*).

According to the Buddhists, '*Brahma*' implies 'ultimate truth' and '*vihāra*' means a state of noble roaming, a situation conducive to realization of emancipator truth in one's own life. This life can be that of an ordinary (*laukika*) or that of an extraordinary person like the Buddha or some of his great followers. These are the states of the width and depth of the level of salvation that one has realised in one's life.

Again, the term '*Brahma*' means one greater than which nothing can be. The word '*vihāra*' signifies noble roaming or constant cultivation with sincerity. So the meaning of the term '*Brahmavihāra*' is that it is the continuous practice of the above-quoted four feelings of mind, which lead to the ideal of *nirvāṇa*. As mentioned above, it implies meditational sense.

We have mentioned earlier that '*Brahma*' means 'sublime state of mind'. Since the result of the feelings of *Brahmavihāras* is to be born in *Brahmaloka*, i. e., the world of the greatest and to enjoy the delighted things, therefore these are called *Brahmavihāras*. These are the supreme sources of the purification of mind. The Buddha laid much stress on the purity of mind, not of body only and for this one has to remove the mental impurities first because the mind is the fore-runner in all mental phenomena and activities. If a man has given up his mental impurities, he is regarded as taken bath even without taking physical bath. But he cannot be purified even if he takes bath in different rivers provided he has impurities in mind.

The person who practices the four greater or broader states of mind wishes the welfare of all beings.

An ascetic removes the impurities like the lust, jealousy, envy, hatred etc. by these sublime states of mind. According to some, Yoga is the source of self-welfare but *Brahmavihāras* do well of others also.

In this paper, an attempt will be made to explicate the nature of the four *Brahmavihāras* which lead to the path of *nirvāṇa*.

Nature of *Brahmavihāras*: Now we shall turn to the nature of four *Brahmavihāras* in the following:

***Maitri* (Unselfish Friendship):** *Maitrī* means disinterested friendship. It is not an ordinary human affection or love (*anurāga*). It is not an emotion and not a form of detachment (*virāga*) raised to its highest state, because in both the cases of *anurāga* and *virāga*, the feeling of grief is possible. But in case of *maitrī*, the practice of the universal and unselfish friendship is necessary. It is ruination of enmity or ill-will of any type, because that is not humanizing.¹ *Hīnayāna* Buddhism says that everyone should cultivate a habit of self-help in case of pain and trouble. This self-reliance and self-help which is a form of reflexive *maitrī* is beneficial in living truly as a human. Here holding someone else responsible for suffering is improper after Buddhism because it is contrary to the spirit of optimism and is unfavourable for liberation. Everyone has the potential to liberate, provided he knows, regulates and utilize one's dispositions, such as, self-help, self-respect, self-reliance etc. Essencelessness is required to be understood with regard to oneself, everything and everyone universally (*dharma-nairātmya*). So we should help, love, enable not only oneself but also should extend it to the entire living beings in the world. These attitudes have no intrinsic value instrumentally, but are worthy in themselves. Such attitudes enable one to develop the excellence of character and help him to proceed to the path of liberation. Extension of this type of *maitrī* to others and practice of it enables them to remove their obstacles and to adopt the path of *nirvāṇa*.

In the words of the Buddha, our attitudes in case of *maitrī* should be as follows:

Mātā yathā niyaṃ puttāṃ āyusā ekaputtāṃ anurakkhe I

Evaṃ pi sabbabhūtesu mānasā bhāvaya aparimāṇāṃ II²

Just as a mother would protect her only child at the risk of her own life, even so, let one cultivate a boundless heart towards all.

Therefore, loving kindness should be practised towards all, even to the tiniest creature that crawls at one's feet.

Enmity arises due to clash of interests, feeling of establishment of supremacy and the feeling of rivalry. Getting proper time, defeated person attacks and enmity arises again; therefore the Buddha says –

Na hi verena verāni sammant'īdha kudācanam I

*Averena ca sammanti, esa dhammo sanantano II*³

- Not at any time are enmities appeased here through enmity but they are appeased through non-enmity. This is the eternal law.

To get rid of enmity one should not have the feeling of victory and defeat. To establish peace in life one should keep in mind the following Buddha *vacana*:

Akkodhena jine kodham, asādhum sādhunā jine I

*Jine kadariyam dānena, saccena alikavādinam II*⁴

- Let a man overcome anger by non-anger (gentleness), let him overcome evil by good, let him overcome the miser by liberality; let him overcome the liar by truth.

Maitrī is to be followed reflexively, transitively, individually and collectively. *Karuṇā* is understood transitively. That is to say, the object of *maitrī* is oneself or other and that of *karuṇā* is basically someone else - individually or collectively. It should be cultivated no matter whether others seek or even deserve it. *Karuṇā* has a great role in one's emancipator enterprise.

Karuṇā (Unrestrained compassion): After seeing the grief of others the trembling which arises in the hearts of gentle persons is known as *karuṇā*. *Karuṇā* means compassion – proper comprehension of the innocent and helpless sufferers, sharing their experience of pain and suffering with due respect for them and co-operating and helping them to overcome their distress not only verbally, physically or emotionally, but even at the cost of one's own existence. According to *Mahāyāna* Buddhism, compassion is sympathetic understanding universally. Even at the cost of suspension of one's own liberation, Bodhisattvas are ready to help others because of *karuṇā*. *Karuṇā* may even be extended to repentant criminals. Thus helping others to remove their troubles, cultivate courage and assist in striving for liberation does not amount to making them lazy, cowardly, incompetent, taking advantage of their situation, exploiting their dignity but making them courageous and able to confront situations.⁵

Being softened by compassion a Buddha devotee thinks as follows:

When I and others feel equally fear and grief unpleasant, then what is the special thing in me that I should save myself, not others?

Yadā mama parecāṃ cabhayam dukkham ca na priyam I

Tadātmāna ko viśeṣo yat taṃ rakṣāmi netaram II

Muditā (unreserved satisfaction): *Muditā* means joy or delight. It is the cultivation of cheerfulness, contentment and satisfaction even when one is apparently suffering. It does not indicate that one should become thick-skinned towards pain and suffering of one's own or that of others. Kindliness (*muditā*) is sharing someone else's joy. It is significant in overcoming envy and jealousy. Here we feel ourselves delighted in helping others in distress to overcome their misery patiently and courageously. The person who practises *muditā* (kindliness) becomes happy when he finds others' prosperity. He has no feeling of hatred and jealousy towards anybody. Perceiving the wealth and merits of others, he does not feel enmity and jealousy. *Muditā* overcomes discontent. There is a lack of *muditā* (kindliness) in the joy of a common man, it evolves from affection.

Upekṣā (Indifference or Neutrality): The existence of the feeling of indifference towards all beings is called *upekṣā* (neutrality or equanimity). Cultivation of *upekṣā* and other *vihāra* requires full control over mind. According to the Buddha, our mental determinations or thoughts control our actions. The influence of thought on human life and actions is great. All that we are is the result of what we have thought. By changing our thoughts we can change our life and actions. So it is our first duty to control over our mind. Therefore, the Buddha says:

*manopubbāṅgamā dharmā manosemīthā manomayā,
manasā ce padutthena bhāsati vā karoti vā
tato naṃ dukkhāṃ anveti cakkam va vahato padam.⁶*

The mental natures are the result of what we have thought, are made up of our thoughts. If a man speaks or acts with an evil thought, sorrow follows him as a consequence even as the wheel follows the foot of the drawer i.e. the ox which draws the cart.

Upekṣā signifies that one should have the same behaviour towards all creatures or beings. That is to say, in the state of neutrality (*upekṣā*) the mental state (consciousness) of a person remains indifferent. The man who cultivates *upekṣā* should not differentiate between a friend and an enemy. He does not behave favourably or unfavourably with anybody. Anybody attains knowledge with the practice of neutrality. Any person is dependent on his deeds and according to his deeds, he gets pleasure, becomes free from suffering or he does not fall from prosperity. Such *dharmas* or merits bear a striking resemblance to those associated with a *sthitaprajñā* as depicted in the *Bhagavad-Gītā*.

It is said that anybody can attain *nirvāna* if he practices even one of the four *Brahmavihāras* (sublime states) sincerely. It is supported by the *Dhammapada*, verse no. 368 in the following:

Mettāvihāri yo bhikkhu pasanno buddhasāsane

*Adhigacche padam santam saṅkhārupasamaṃ sukham.*⁷

That is to say, the mendicant who lives in friendliness and calm has faith in the doctrine of the Buddha; he will attain the tranquillity, blessed place where bodily existence is at rest.

Brahmavihāras and Ethics of Yoga: Now we can show some kind of similarities between *Brahmavihāras* and some aspects of Yoga ethics. The four *Brahmavihāras-Maitrī* (friendliness), *Karuṇā* (compassion), *Muditā* (sincere joy at others' happiness) and *Upekṣā* (equanimity in delight and sorrow, etc.) entirely resembles with the four quoted in *Yogasūtra*-I.33. This YS points out that the mind becomes purified by the cultivation of feelings of friendliness, compassion, pure joy, indifference respectively towards happy, miserable, virtuous and sinful creatures.⁸ This is the method of cleansing the mind.

When a person in whom we are not interested is found to be leading a sinful life we become cruel towards him. Such feelings of enmity, cruelty, bad wishes disturb the mind and prevent its attaining concentration. On the other hand, if we cultivate the feelings of friendship, compassion, joy and neutrality, the *citta* can be pleasant and happy, free from any disturbing element, then our *citta* can be one-pointed and tranquilized. A *sādhaka* should think of it in the same way. Generally we become happy when we find that our friends are happy. Through the cultivation of our feeling mentioned above we may feel equally happy when we find our enemies happy, whose happiness we now cannot tolerate. In the like manner, when we express our joy at the sorrow of our enemies, we can remember how we would take compassion when our near relatives are in trouble and we can feel equally and be compassionate towards our enemies. We can practice repeatedly such behaviour forming as a habit. Sincere joy at others' happiness is *muditā*. Neutrality (*upekṣā*) is the feeling of indifference to happiness and sorrow, heat and cold, etc. It is to overlook the errors of others. According to the Buddhism, these four practices are known as *Brahmavihāras*.

In the *Yogasūtra* 11.29, Patañjali says, *yama, niyama, āsana, prāṇāyāma, pratyāhāra, dhāraṇā, dhyāna* and *Samādhi* are the eight accessories or means of attaining yoga.⁹

We know that *yama* and *niyama* are the ethics of *yoga*. Regarding *yama* Patañjali says, *ahiṃsā* (not injuring or killing any being), *satya* (truth in every way in life), *asteya* (abstention from stealing), *brahmacarya* (disciplined life of self-restrained, especially in matters of sex) and *aparigraha* (non-receiving and possessing and not accumulating of things) are the *yamas*.¹⁰ These are the accessories of *yama*.

Here *ahiṃsā* is to refrain from injuring or killing any being, at any time and in any manner. In case of *karuṇā*, the second pillar of *Brahmavihāra* also we find that a compassionate person neither kills any being nor tolerates the grief of others. Again *maitrī*, the first pillar of

Brahmavihāra is unselfish friendship and disinterested love towards any being. On the other hand, it is the positive aspect of *ahimsā* of Pātañjala yoga. Again meaning of *muditā* is no feeling of hatred and jealousy towards anybody. It is also an indirect meaning of *ahimsā*. The meaning of *steya* is unlawfully taking things belonging to others and *asteya* is abstention from such tendencies even in one's mind. The feeling of *Brahmavihāra* does not accept *steya*. There are ten *niśedhas* in Buddhism. *Asteya* is one of these ten *niśedhas*. *Brahmacarya* is controlling the urge of the sexual organ and of activities of other organs leading to it. Inner meaning of *Brahmacarya* is to maintain the purity of mind, which is the presupposition or the basis of *Brahmavihāra*. *Brahmacarya* should be treated as a life properly disciplined for spiritual progress and realisation of ultimate reality (Brahma). *Aparigraha* signifies to refrain from coveting or taking unnecessary things because if we get them, then those involve trouble; for, they are subject to decay, association with them causes harm or misery and they bring malice. According to the Buddha, this malice withers away with the cultivation of *maitrī*. According to ten forbidden principles (*niśedhas*) of Buddhism mentioned above, a *bhikṣu* or a sincere religious person should not use (8th *niśedha*) ornaments or perfume (9th) luxury beds and (10th) gold and silver.

Interconnection: We explained briefly the nature of four *Brahmavihāras* and their relation with *yoga* ethics. Now, after analysis, we find that the four sublime states (*Brahmavihāra*) are interconnected, complementary and yet independent. Nobody rejects their importance in *Samādhi*. Practice of each one of them is very essential for the development of excellence of character. A person achieves excellence of character gradually by the development of them. So it is said that they are unmeasured in scope and depth.

Necessity of *Brahmavihāra*: Now the question is: what is the necessity of the *Brahmavihāras*? In reply, it can be said that the main significance of the Buddha's teaching can be understood or realised through *samādhi* or profound contemplation which is conducive to *nirvāṇa*. There are two aspects of such contemplation: (1) development of insight (*prajñā*) of truth and (2) excellence of character (*śīla*). *Brahmavihāras* develop a proper linkage between *prajñā* and *śīla*. We can assert that *prajñā* without *śīla* is empty and *śīla* without *prajñā* is barren. This linkage saves *prajñā* alone from lapsing into pure conceptualization without *śīla*, whereas *śīla* into mere dry rituals without *prajñā*.

In like manner, *Brahmavihāras* bridge the link between theory and practice, ideals and facts, essence of humanity and absence of essence of personality and egoism. Therefore, we can conclude that Buddhism has a proper insight into the conception of man and his *nirvāṇa*, in which *Brahmavihāras* has a properly decisive role.

According to the Buddha, the works done by the aspirant (*sādhaka*) and influenced by the thought of *maitrī*, begets a plenty of good result. Therefore, a great fruit can be obtained with

the performance of these types of works. Again the Buddha points out that malice (*dveṣa*) vanishes through the cultivation or practice of *maitrī* and hatred vanishes through the application of *karuṇā* in one's life. Someone may have the feeling of disinterestedness out of disinterested action (*niṣkāma karma* of the *Bhagavad-Gītā*) done by himself provided that he continues to do the practice of *muditā*. The act of vengeance withers away when one is in the thought or feeling of *upekṣā* or indifference.¹¹

The great men extinguish the fire of aversion (*dveṣa*) with the help of *maitrī*. The fire of dilemma or indecision (*mohāgni*) withers away with the help of wisdom (*prajñā*).¹²

"Therefore, the Buddha says that a *bhikṣu* surely attains spiritual peace cultivating *maitrī*, *karuṇā* etc. The *kṣatriyakula* (warrior), *brāhmankula*, *vaiśyakula* or *śūdrakula* or any *kula* leads us through a substratum (*āgāra*) and non-substratum (*anāgāra*) to a dispassionate state and thus the aspirants practice *brahmavihāras* like *maitrī*, *karuṇā*, *muditā* and *upekṣā* which begets spiritual peace..."¹³

Notes and References

1. Buddhaghosa, *Viśuddhimāgga with Dharmapala's Paramavtha Mañjusātikā*, Vol. II, Badrinath Shukla (Ed.), Varanasiya Sanskrit Visvavidyalaya, Varanasi, 1969, pp. 627-65.
2. *Suttanipāta*, Verse 149.
3. *The Dhammapada*, Yamakavaggo, Verse 5.
4. *The Dhammapada*, Kodhavaggo, Verse 223.
5. *Dīgha-Nikāya*, P. L. Vaidya (Ed.), Nava Nalanda Mahavihara, Patna, iii – 248, Buddhaghosa; *Viśuddhimāgga with Dharmapala's Paramatha Manjusātikā*, Vol. II, pp. 669-71. Asanga, Māhayāna – Sūtrālaṅkāra, pp. 118-27.
6. *The Dhammapada*, Yamakavaggo, Verse 1.
7. *The Dhammapada*, Bhikkhuvaggo, Verse 368.
8. *Maitrī-karuṇā-muditopekṣāṇāṃ sukha-duḥkha-puṇyāpuṇya-vicayāṇāṃ bhāvanātaścittaprasādanam – Yogasūtra – I:33*
9. *Yama-niyamāsana-prāṇāyāma-pratyāhāra-dhāraṇā-dhyāna-samādhayo' ṣṭāvaṅgāṇi - Yogasūtra – II.29*
10. *Ahimsā-satyāsteya-brahmacaryāparigrahāyamāh - Yogasūtra – II.30*
11. *Majjhimani*, Mahārāhulovādasūta (62), 1 Ghaṇi, p. 424.
12. *Itivṛttaka* – 93.
13. *Majjhimani*, cula as sapurasūta (40), 1st part, p. 284.