

# Compassion Filled



Anarcho-Buddhist Reflections  
on The Brahmarhara

I arranged pillows on the tatami floor of a house in rural Japan. I heard the ocean nearby and spent days focusing on the perfect posture. I wanted to be like a painting of Ajahn Lee: aesthetic, cool, respectable and brave. I didn't want to look inward, I wanted to fabricate the outward to be what a good meditator looks like.

I sat in a car in a desert in the parking lot of a hotel resting my hand on the handgun I had holstered at my appendix. I reflected on the steps I would take if things went wrong. My whole body carried tension and dissociation in spades. I couldn't be present with the plan to kill, I had to be somewhere else or I might flinch.

I sat on the floor of a shower in a converted garage and cried because I didn't want to kill anyone and I didn't think I could be the character of a punk or a monk. I went to a monastery.

In the suttas the Buddha tells the story of two chefs, one who watches attentively what their master enjoys and another chef who pays no attention to what their master enjoys. He compares this to how we ought to engage with the mind. We should be like the chef who carefully watches after their master to see what they enjoy. We should see what the mind hints towards, what creates peace and joy. Without joy you can't go far in meditation, as Ajahn Brahm says: "No joy, no mindfulness". For a long time I wasn't sensitive to what meditations brought me joy. My practice was primarily aesthetic. What is aesthetic for a Buddhist? Breath meditation, sitting on the floor, shaving your head, wearing robes, being severe. There was joy sometimes but it was hard fought and passing. I wasn't sensitive to what my mind was hinting at, I didn't listen to its taste. I wanted to look like a good meditator, having good meditations was secondary.

Years later I decided to listen to the taste of my mind and made a determination to focus on the brahmaviharas (Divine abodes or appamaññā):

## **The Brahmaviharas**

1. Metta - Loving kindness, benevolence, good will, love, friendliness, a good and wholesome vibe. An attitude of mutual aid, helpfulness and reciprocity. Metta is without condition, it's not a "you do this and then I'm kind to you" metta is "I will be kind independent of your behavior". Opposed to ill will.
2. Karuna - Compassion, sympathy, wishing for others to be free of suffering, wanting one's own or other's pain to end, wanting the best for others. It is not simply witnessing suffering or experiencing sympathetic pain but specifically the wish for the suffering to end. Opposed to cruelty.
3. Mudita - Sympathetic joy, rejoicing in the joy and goodness of others, wishing for the happiness others have to continue. The opposite of envy or jealousy. Opposed to discontent.
4. Upekkha - Equanimity, equipoise, seeing with balanced understanding about the way things are, understanding kamma/causation. Not inclining either towards the beautiful or the ugly. A looking upon not a looking away. An awareness of what is happening without favoring or opposing. It is not indifference or apathy.

I carried this focus into a formal meditation practice I call "Metta with fabrication", where I think of phrases and images to arouse the feeling of metta towards others and myself. I focus on individuals or defined groups to start: friends, lovers, enemies, family and so on. Eventually I transition to a radiance of Metta in six directions and if that day is particularly good I can let go of the words and images entirely and sit peacefully radiating love in all directions. This practice is often called Loving Kindness Meditation and I first learned it in a psychotherapy context. Metta always worked easily for me, I never struggled with so much self hate that it was difficult to express love for myself. So taking up Metta as my primarily practice brought with it a lot of immediate joy, it had always been an easier object for me to focus on and now I had a supportive community to work from. The Buddha compared practicing metta to the way a mother loves her child:

"Even as a mother would protect with her life  
her child, her only child,  
so too for all creatures  
unfold a boundless heart." [1]

So I took up a frame I had previously reserved for romantic arrangements and turned this motherly love towards the world. All the beings of the world would become my children. I had all the tools I needed to get enlightened, or at least bliss out for a little.

The first thing I began to notice was that when I started to approach metta not as a psychotherapy practice, but as a religious practice, I was lost on how to go deeper with it and not just recite words in my head. In the therapy world, metta is taught almost exclusively as directed at individuals using phrases, still to great benefit [2]. This practice of metta with fabrication is a great start but it is unable on its own to go deeper and to lead to samadhi (deep meditative states). In order to go deeper I had to learn how to locate what it feels like in my body and mind to connect with metta, which ended up being a feeling that rises from the center of my chest, often warm and white. I began to approach metta not as a singular therapeutic practice, but as a holistic practice of mind and body, on and off the meditation seat. It wasn't just about freeing myself from specific interpersonal conflict, but expanded to encompass an interior liberation from the pain of ill will.

My disability has been getting worse for a long time and when my body would be in pain, I would berate it, insulting my body for being weak, a piece of shit. I lived in opposition to the body I could not yet escape. This ill will towards a part of myself made managing the physical pain harder. In understanding what makes “us” the Buddha teaches about the five khandas: form, feelings, perceptions, mental formations/movement, and consciousness. In a sense the khandas are all roommates in a large apartment and my roommates were at war: my mind had made enemies with my body. Can you imagine if every time one of the roommates complained or suffered the other roommate just called them a shithead? Hell of a tense household! I shifted to viewing my body as a dear friend in pain, decreasing the suffering present in my mind and body. The suffering was no longer impossible to hold, but became a pain like a crying child that I could soothe as a mother. Instead of berating my leg for hurting I'd validate the stress it was going through saying “you're in a lot of pain, aren't you? I'll do my best to take care of you.”. This began a process of real freedom from pain, not in the sense of it disappearing from my awareness, but in the sense of the “second arrow” that comes along with pain where you don't just experience the sensation of it, but the mental

interpretation about the horrifying nature of its existence within your awareness. My entire adult life has been lived with this chronic pain and I am hyper aware of how the mental distress in relation to it is often worse than the physical pain itself, the feeling of a never ending pain is terrifying and induces despair.

This was a form of “looking after my own happiness”, an easily misunderstood teaching, often mentioned through the story of two acrobats:

“You should look after yourself, and I’ll look after myself. That’s how, guarding and looking after ourselves, we’ll display our skill, collect our fee, and get down safely from the bamboo pole.’

“That’s the way,” said the Buddha. “It’s just as Medakathālikā said to her tutor. Thinking ‘I’ll look after myself,’ you should cultivate mindfulness meditation. Thinking ‘I’ll look after others,’ you should cultivate mindfulness meditation. **Looking after yourself, you look after others; and looking after others, you look after yourself.**

And how do you look after others by looking after yourself? By development, cultivation, and practice of meditation. And how do you look after yourself by looking after others? By acceptance, harmlessness, love, and sympathy.” [3]

When I was younger I repeated this story in a family therapy session, I didn’t truly understand what it meant, I wasn’t sensitive enough to my mind. One morning I woke up and argued with someone on the internet in a decidedly uncompassionate way. Later that day when I sat in meditation I was disturbed, obsessed with my fight, obsessing how that person was a total asshole and I was so right. My own ill will disturbed my happiness. Another morning I woke up to a friend messaging me their suffering. I recalled how I was disturbed before and asked “how might I act to be satisfied and at peace later on?”. The answer was obvious: with compassion, with good-will, with equanimity. I responded with kindness, not ignoring them or dismissing their pain and my meditation was peaceful. It’s easy to view looking after yourself as a “fuck you I got mine” but this only works in denial of how hurting others hurts ourselves. To see this teaching you need a clear view of your mind and what inflicting harm does to it. You can’t truly look out for yourself without looking after others.

A lot of American and European converts overlook Sila (virtue, morality) as a foundational aspect of Buddhist practice, preferring meditation and mysticism over handing out bread. In America it's a reinforcement of the rugged individualism ethic that lets people walk past hungry and cold people on the street with only a passing hint of guilt that they quickly suppress. People justify abandoning virtue with made up fantasies about how "they all use drugs anyway" or "I cannot help them, I might make it worse", desiring to exercise not a spirit of giving but a spirit of contract: giving with an agreement, good will with conditions, support at the cost of slavery. Metta looks past these petty and dangerous delusions to say: I will love you, regardless of what you have done, are doing or will do. As The Buddha said:

"Mendicants, if sentient beings only knew, as I do, the fruit of giving and sharing, they would not eat without first giving, and the stain of stinginess would not occupy their minds. They would not eat without sharing even their last mouthful, their last morsel, so long as there was someone to receive it. It is because sentient beings do not know, as I do, the fruit of giving and sharing, that they eat without first giving, and the stain of stinginess occupies their minds." [4]

As I continued to practice the Brahmaviharas I thought of my enemies, or estranged siblings. For an anarchist to practice love towards the IOF or Matt Walsh is a strange thing. Years back when I first started to practice metta I remember experiencing a bodily revulsion when I did this towards Nazis. I limited the metta strictly to karuna, it was with condition: "may you stop being such an asshole, may you become a better person". I didn't really want them to be happy, I wanted them to be someone else. I didn't want to fully recognize that happiness depends on us looking after others, so to wish them happiness was to wish them expediency in their genocide. Yet those who make lives off of hate and deep delusion like this are already living in a kind of hell. You can't find true happiness in murder. In letting go of opposition I came to accept the real causes of peace and could reach past the delusion that wishing them happiness was wishing for anything other than a freedom from enmity, for them and those they shoot at. One day while walking back a forth practicing this metta I saw the image of an IOF soldier removing the magazine from his rifle, perhaps for the last time, seeing how carrying out a genocide was an impossibly large threat to his own happiness, that his

freedom could only come through peace. I didn't have to wish for him to be someone else, I had to wish for him to be happy.

It's a threat to identity, putting aside opposition. What is an anarchist if not someone who hates the police on a visceral emotional level? What if my suicidal friends don't think I'm a badass antifa super soldier anymore? Is it cringe to love? Much of identity lives on its opposition: against this, against that. What kind of anarchist would I be if I practiced an anarchy without opposition [5, 6]? This identity making is core to what causes dukkha (stress, anxiety, suffering, boredom, unpleasantness). To abandon the identity of opposition, of resentment, was a threat to me. Who would I be if I wasn't living in emotional opposition, to state and cops and cages? Yet this opposition does more to generate anger and despair than it does to generate change. At one time I would go to a spot with a shrine for murdered Palestinian people, I would look into the eyes of the dead children, I would cry and sometimes chant and sometimes lay down and cry again. It motivated me to sit quietly, not act to change anything. Sadness is the near enemy of compassion.

White guilt blockades anti-racism as surely as being enraged during an action will get you caught.

In the hours after Marcus Williams was murdered I experienced some grief. It's something to know someone's face, their name and their innocence and hope they might not be killed. Only to have confirmed the suspicion of the state's evil upon his death. This grief is the near enemy of compassion, it motivates a kind of addictive sadness that supports identity; "I am the anarchist who grieves". Our grief validates our supposed goodness: shouldn't a good person cry when innocents die? The next morning I put aside the grief to focus on the only action available to me, to practice metta for Marcus and dedicate merit for his next birth. Neither he nor I benefit from grief, my sorrow won't help him in the next life and serves more significantly as a signifier of identity and group affiliation that is used as a replacement for action. Without letting go of identity affirming grief we might take action solely to satiate our grief, acting not out of compassion for others but out of selfishness to alleviate our own sorrow.

Many a protest or solidarity camp is far more for the participants than those living amidst genocide. If all we did was cry, who would erect the barricades? If those barricades are placed more to alleviate our own grief than affect anything, we place them unskillfully and avoid doing what needs to be done. Tears are as filling as air and won't substitute for a sandwich. Protests to soothe our need to do something do little to stop a munitions factory. Moving towards peace comes from a place of stability, a cultivation of upekkha or equanimity. Karuna is a warm fire, upekkha is cool water and both must be applied skillfully and at the right time so as to avoid the pitfalls of unproductive guilt or destructive anger and judgment. In practicing this I had to walk through what felt like physical jello before I could express actual good will towards the people who would shoot me dead, yet in getting through I was freed from feelings that serve only as stumbling blocks to change.

One day, I went to the park and noticed that a teenager had written the N-word in thin green sharpie on a sign outside the bathroom. Like any self-respecting anarchist I grabbed my paint pens and started first wiping with alcohol the previous sharpie, then whitening out the remaining faded green. Standing with my black marker, I considered what I would write: ACAB? Nazis fuck off? I thought about how the probably highschooler would read such a reply as giving them exactly what they wanted: someone to fight, someone to piss off. What could I say that would honestly deny them what they want and preempt their desire for an opponent to give them the only thing that would make them less hateful: a friend. So I wrote "love urself". Hatred would thrive off opposition, opposition would give the hatred a point, a reason to continue. Cutting through that to see that such hatred comes from a lack of self acceptance and love, a lack of actual contentment, let me point back at them what they were lacking. We weren't having a writer war because I wasn't fighting. I ended what could've been a fight, without indulging in apathy or passivity. The sign was not retagged and the park services never buffed it.

Part of compassion is seeing what other people need to end their own suffering and the suffering they create for others. Applied internally it's having compassion for your own mind. Noticing when we are beating ourselves up for our emotions or our thoughts and intentionally embracing our own mind with good will. Listening closely and vulnerably to what our



mind needs to be more peaceful. For a long time what my mind has done to achieve a sense of control and safety is to hold on very tightly to the breath. Directing every single in breath and out breath, especially when anxious. There isn't real freedom when you're controlling and directing every single action and movement, my mind was functionally the cop for my body's autonomy. I was afraid from prior drug use that I might stop breathing. I was afraid to lose control. When I let my body breathe on its own even for just two breaths, the ease was immense. I had to have love and respect for my body to trust that it could take breath for itself.

In freeing my body to breathe for itself that freedom reflected the liberation I was cultivating for my mind. Ill-will exists as an internalized form of oppression towards ourselves, through metta we are cultivating an internal liberation from the harm others have inflicted on us. By allowing ill will to remain within ourselves we are capitulating to the harm and oppression we have experienced from other people. Love is freedom, freedom to make choices independent of the way other people have injured us, making decisions because of our own values and motivations, and not because we've been hurt by someone else. At its peak, it's a liberation from yourself and the identities we might have cultivated in dependence on trauma. It's easy to hate cops. It's easy to hate your rapist and having been both raped and physically abused by police I recognize that those experiences lead more frequently to paralyzing fear both of police and of vulnerability with other people. To cultivate metta is the cultivation of liberation from the cage of ill will. When I am at my most peaceful and most genuine, the things I say to police on the riot line are not an impassioned fuck you but an authentic and vulnerable communication to them that I believe they can be better people, that they can at any time decide to stop being the oppressor and that I will be there when they are able to make that compassionate choice. Those people might never take me up on the offer to genuinely practice virtue. The Buddha said that all too often we mistake what is painful for what is pleasurable, all too often we worship the bat and mistake the adrenaline of violence for liberation, we fabricate a thin blue line between ourselves and peace [7]. Liberation is realizing there is no peace when we have police.

Ill-will is further dependent on the views we have for the world and the people within it. Believing in an essence (atta/self) contributes to

maintaining ill will towards people and systems we oppose. It's believing that fascists or police or soldiers are evil people not precisely because of their behavior but a pre-supposed transcendent essence of evilness. This is black and white thinking, it seeks on a fundamental level to create a class of human beings towards whom it becomes acceptable to kill, torture, imprison or genocide. When we recognize that the reasons people cause harm to themselves and others are fundamentally dependent on causes and conditions – especially, greed aversion and delusion – then we recognize that we could have been them, that they are as susceptible to change as we are, that they exist without an unchanging essence of evil, and that we exist without an unchanging essence of good. Recognizing a fundamental similarity between beings: our lack of essence. In recognizing all of what we are and what we do is dependent on causes and conditions, and not a soul, true self or unchanging essence, we free ourselves from the delusion that some people deserve hate, death and oppression. We kill the cop in our head that says those people deserve to die.

This actualization of the Brahmaviharas in society is an extension of Buddhist wisdom applied to the world. One of if not the most crucial teaching of The Buddha is the four noble truths, that dukkha exists for conditioned reality, comes into being dependent on causes and conditions, ceases when those causes and conditions cease and that there is a path to the total end of dukkha. The Brahmaviharas can be mapped onto these four noble truths as Venerable Analayo does in Compassion & Emptiness:

“Compassionate activity should ideally be based on the perspective afforded by the four noble truths. The resulting compassionate vision sees not only the actual pain and affliction of others (first truth), but also the conditions that have led to their predicament (second truth), and the conditions that can lead out of it (fourth truth). The motivating force of compassion is the wish for others to be free from pain and affliction (third truth). This is what makes compassion become thoroughly Buddhist, namely by way of being combined with the wisdom of the four noble truths.” [8]

We can analyze the Brahmaviharas in relation to the four noble truths through an anarchist lens. We see the actual pain of others in their

experience of genocide, deprivation, and other forms of oppression. We see the conditions that have led to this suffering, namely power and hierarchy as mediated through the state, capitalism, police and the military. We see the conditions that lead out of this suffering, individual autonomy and communal mutual aid, the abolition of hierarchy and institutions predicated on violence. We wish for others to be free through direct action and community building. In this way, Buddhist anarchism is the thorough application of the Brahmaviharas to a broader societal context beyond individual liberation. Buddhist Anarchism seeks a total end of the social-cultural causes and conditions that lead people to experience dukkha. This practice of the Brahmaviharas is not to be a doormat for systems of power and domination, compassion is not passivity or apathy: genuine compassion is caring enough about others that you do what you actually can to help them here and now. Some of the Buddha's earliest disciples initially rested in a calm detachment from the stress of others, for which the Buddha rebuked them. As Venerable Analayo relays:

"[MN67] reports Sāriputta being rebuked for failing to take up his responsibility as a guide for other monks and thereby implicitly for failing to act with sufficient compassion. After the Buddha had dismissed a group of newly ordained and unruly monks for being too noisy, Sāriputta did not realize that it was now his duty to provide guidance to this group of monks. Instead he decided to remain uninvolved. As a consequence of his failure to take care of the monks, he had to face the Buddha's stern rebuke. This throws into relief the importance accorded to teaching and providing guidance to others, to taking up responsibility for others. Such taking up of responsibility in situations where others are in need of guidance or assistance offers a very practical way of cultivating compassion, which can find its expression in the deliberate effort to help and advise others." [9]

This practice of the Brahmaviharas has brought me peace and joy. Without joy there is no mindfulness, without mindfulness we cannot hope to live in a more equitable and free world. By releasing myself from enmity I free myself to create that new world in the shell of the old. To internalize compassion is to do the complex work of overcoming internalized racism, colonialism and the multiplicitous forms of domination the state trains us to carry out. To actualize liberation as a way we treat

others demands transcending mere ostracization politics and in/out group dynamics. An actual anarchy is one that has freed itself from the shackles of domination: over others and oneself. The Brahnaviharas brought me home to a more comfortable and liberated house than I have ever known. Through compassion there is freedom.

[1] [https://suttacentral.net/snp1.8/en/sujato?](https://suttacentral.net/snp1.8/en/sujato?lang=en&layout=plain&reference=none&notes=asterisk&highlight=false&script=latin)

[lang=en&layout=plain&reference=none&notes=asterisk&highlight=false&script=latin](https://suttacentral.net/snp1.8/en/sujato?lang=en&layout=plain&reference=none&notes=asterisk&highlight=false&script=latin)

[2] <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4630307/>

[3] [https://suttacentral.net/sn47.19/en/sujato?](https://suttacentral.net/sn47.19/en/sujato?lang=en&layout=plain&reference=none&notes=asterisk&highlight=false&script=latin)

[lang=en&layout=plain&reference=none&notes=asterisk&highlight=false&script=latin](https://suttacentral.net/sn47.19/en/sujato?lang=en&layout=plain&reference=none&notes=asterisk&highlight=false&script=latin)

[4] [https://suttacentral.net/iti26/en/sujato?](https://suttacentral.net/iti26/en/sujato?lang=en&layout=plain&reference=none&notes=asterisk&highlight=false&script=latin)

[lang=en&layout=plain&reference=none&notes=asterisk&highlight=false&script=latin](https://suttacentral.net/iti26/en/sujato?lang=en&layout=plain&reference=none&notes=asterisk&highlight=false&script=latin)

[5] <https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/jamie-heckert-anarchy-without-opposition>

[6] <https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/saul-newman-anarchism-and-the-politics-of-ressentiment>

[7] [https://suttacentral.net/mn75/en/sujato?](https://suttacentral.net/mn75/en/sujato?lang=en&layout=plain&reference=none&notes=asterisk&highlight=false&script=latin)

[lang=en&layout=plain&reference=none&notes=asterisk&highlight=false&script=latin](https://suttacentral.net/mn75/en/sujato?lang=en&layout=plain&reference=none&notes=asterisk&highlight=false&script=latin)

[8] <https://www.niwr.org/sites/default/files/images/resource/compassion-and-emptiness-ven.-analayo.pdf>

[9] *ibid.*

Further Suttas: AN8.1, iti22, AN11.15, iti27, SN46.54, SN20.5, MN31

