

Brahma Viharas I : Sympathetic Joy  
Joan Sutherland, Roshi  
Cerro Gordo Temple ~ Santa Fe, NM  
July 29, 2009

Good evening, bodhisattvas.

I've been enjoying this extravagant season we've been having. Tonight's talk is a praise song for the summer we have the great, good fortune to take part in.

One of the ways to look at our practice is that it's about discovering ways that we can not only see the beauty of the world outside us, to feel this extravagant summer bursting all around us, but to come to know that the same summer is inside us. It's continuous from outside to inside. We contain that. We can stand in that garden or that park or that corner of St. Francis Drive and Cerrillos Road any time we want to. It's always there and it's the same as what we love in the so-called external world.

One of the ways to think about finding ways to stand in that garden inside ourselves has been called in Buddhism, for a very long time, the Brahma Viharas, which are the Heavenly Dwelling Places. There are four of them : equanimity, compassion, lovingkindness and sympathetic joy. We tend to spend a lot of time talking about equanimity, lovingkindness and compassion. It's interesting that we don't spend that much time on sympathetic joy. That's the one that seems most interesting and alive to me right now in summer, so tonight I want to talk about sympathetic joy — that is, taking joy in the joy of others. In the same way that compassion is having empathy with the suffering of others, sympathetic joy is an empathy with the gladness and good fortune of others.

One of the fundamental ideas of Buddhism, from the beginning, is that we're surrounded by gates all the time; some of them lead to heaven, some of them lead to hell. Of course there are external, objective circumstances that create gates to heaven and gates to hell. All you have to do is look at what's happened in Iran lately to see that a gate of heaven had started to open for a moment and see the exuberance of people and the feeling of freedom, and then the way that it turned into a gate of hell and repression. So there are objective circumstances that create gates. It's also true that day to day (absent getting cracked over the head by military police or that kind of thing) in our own lives most of the time we choose whether to walk

through a gate of heaven or a gate of hell. That's one of the things that practice is about : working with those gates and how we choose to walk through them or not.

I want to talk about sympathetic joy's three different aspects. The first I'll call a 'local' sympathetic joy, which is the simplest form. That's when someone comes up to you and tells you good news about something that's happened to them. What happens? What do you notice? Does a gate to heaven or a gate to hell open up when that person tells you that news? The gate to heaven is pretty easy to identify. We feel a sense of openness and gladness to their news — a gladness for their gladness and happiness for their good fortune. Often, we'll have a different kind of reaction, which opens the gate to hell. That can be a whole spectrum : *Gosh, nothing like that every happens to me*, or *How unfair; she doesn't deserve this. I do!* Therein lies the gate to hell, because all of a sudden we've taken this occasion for gladness that we've been invited to participate in and we've turned it into a moment of deep contemplation about what's lacking in the world, what's wrong, how things are out of balance. This is really turning gold into straw. When we do it, if we have any kind of self-awareness, it's painful. There's also the feeling of *Ooh, I can't believe I'm reacting like this*, so there's a second level of yuckiness about the whole thing.

When this happens I think about Linji's take on the host and the guest. That metaphor is very common in Chan. You can understand it from the biggest perspective, that the universe, the vastness, eternity is the host and that everything that rises and falls within that, including ourselves, is the guest. That's the biggest way to look at it. But it's also true at a more local level — how we treat each other, other beings, the world around us—do we act as host? Do we welcome things as guest, not just in the outer world but in our inner worlds when we have thoughts and feelings? Do we welcome them as guests or do we reject them and push them away? This unsympathetic reaction — the opposite of sympathetic joy—feels like a ghost version of Linji's host and guest. He said, "If wherever you are you take the position of a host, then that place will be a true place." When we have not a reaction of sympathetic joy but instead, as Stephen Batchelor would say, a spasm of self-concern, we turn the guest and host thing on its head.

*[The recording stops here.]*

Brahma Viharas II : Equanimity  
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Good evening, bodhisattvas.

Two weeks ago I started talking about the Brahma Viharas, which means the Heavenly Abodes or the Boundless States, which are four good places to be that are shared by all of Buddhism. They are : lovingkindness, compassion, sympathetic joy, and equanimity. Two weeks ago I was talking about sympathetic joy in relation to this incredible, beautiful, exuberant summer we're having. Tonight I thought I'd carry on and talk about another of the boundless states, which is equanimity. Equanimity was considered the guardian of all the others. Equanimity is a foundation for and a guardian of compassion, lovingkindness, and sympathetic joy.

You might notice the connection between calling them the boundless states and our own boundless vows — the vows we sing at the end of every meeting — the four impossible vows we take over and over again as part of our practice. The Brahma Viharas were thought of as boundless states because they weren't conditioned. By that is meant that most of the emotional states we get into have causes and conditions. They arise because of or in conjunction with certain things so they are part of a vast network of causes and conditions.

The sense with the four Brahma Viharas is that they are boundless states. They can be unconditioned states; they don't require causes and conditions to be present in order for us to experience them. With dedicated and persevering practice we can come to find a way in which lovingkindness, compassion, sympathetic joy, and equanimity arise, not out of our own states of emotion, not out of our own will or desire, but out of something bigger than that. They arise through us and come out our hands but are not generated by us. The work we have to do (at least in the koan tradition) is get rid of the stuff that gets in the way of those boundless states arising and flowing through us. I'll talk a bit more about that in a minute. That's the sense of boundless : not caused by circumstances and not generated solely by us as individuals.

Let me say a few more words about the Brahma Viharas in general and give some of the ground out of which they arose before I take up equanimity. At one point, the Buddha said

that our practice, the Way, is the liberation of the mind, which is love. That's interesting. The liberation of the mind, which is love. Expanding on that idea, he talked about what equanimity means. He said, "Making the whole world of beings the object of our minds endowed with love" — making the whole world, everything we think about, everything we're concerned about, with our minds endowed with love — "we will continue to relate to the world with minds that are like the earth : untroubled, free from enmity, broad, enlarged, and free of limitations."

I think that the sense that a mind of equanimity is a mind that is as large, spacious, untroubled, and capacious as the world itself, is an important one. Right away we get the sense that equanimity is not about detachment, it's not about not feeling things or being unconcerned about things; it's about becoming so big, spacious, and capacious that we can allow for everything without getting overthrown by it.

How do we go about developing this mind as spacious and as big as the world, this heart as big as the world? In another place, the Buddha gives this simple formulation. He said, "Abandon the unskillful. Cultivate the good." The thing I love about this formulation is that it immediately takes the prescription for what to do off the good / bad axis. He doesn't say to abandon the bad, he says to abandon the unskillful. That does two things : it releases us from this endless, sorting discrimination process of what's good / what's bad and the tangles we get into when we're focused on trying to divide things up between good and bad, right and wrong. Instead, he says, abandon the unskillful; look for what doesn't work. That's what you let go of, and that changes everything. Don't dwell on what's bad, making judgments about that. Look for what's not working; look for what's even causing difficulty.

Secondly, in order to know whether something is skillful or not, we have to pay attention to its effect on the world around us, its effects on the people around us. So immediately we're called out of the small room of self-concern, out of : *How am I doing? How compassionate am I? How filled with lovingkindness am I? How am I failing at all of those pursuits?* Immediately it calls us out of that small, inward-turning, tight self-concern to : *What's happening in the world as a result of what I'm doing? What's the effect? Is this working? Is this not working?* We make our course corrections and try to do better based on that.

Those are the Brahma Viharas in general. As to equanimity in particular, I want to talk about it from two perspectives, because they give a great, whole picture. First there is the perspective of the Theravada, which is one of the earliest forms of Buddhism. Theravada means the Way of the Elders and is the Buddhism that developed during the life of and right after the death of the Buddha. Second, to look at it from another perspective : the Mahayana, which means the Great Vehicle, that was the development in Buddhism several hundred years later. They come at it from different angles that are both tremendously valuable, and together they make a good, broad, and capacious-as-the-world picture of equanimity.

In the Theravadan tradition largely what you're trying to do is overcome negative states with positive states. Equanimity is seen as an antidote for prejudice, bias, and discrimination that causes difficulty. So if the problem is our tendency to have big opinions, make right and wrong, have prejudices and biases against things, the antidote in the Theravadan way is equanimity, which is a way of considering all things equally, of seeing all things as equal in some deep sense rather than evaluating and making judgments about them all the time.

We overcome the negative idea of prejudice by cultivating the positive quality of equanimity. Another example of how that works : many of you may be familiar with *metta*, lovingkindness practice, in which you bring into your meditation other people and yourself as well and offer lovingkindness to them. Metta practice was originally taught by the Buddha to a group of monks who had gone deeper into the forest to practice. There were tree spirits who didn't appreciate their coming deeper into the forest and turned themselves into demons and harassed the monks. The monks came back and asked questions. The Buddha taught them metta, lovingkindness, as a way of dealing with the tree spirits who weren't happy with their presence. So they went back and started doing metta, started practicing lovingkindness meditation, and soon the tree spirits joined them and they were all doing metta together. That's an example of taking a negative state (the monks were afraid because they were being assaulted by the tree spirits) and turn fear into lovingkindness through a practice like metta.

In the Mahayana tradition there is a bit of a different perspective. Things like equanimity are there, inherent in our own heart-minds and in the fabric of the world. All four of the Brahma Viharas are inherent in the way things are. Our problem is we get in the way of knowing and experiencing that. Rather than replacing the negative state with the positive state, the Mahayana suggestion is : look for the obstacles that get in the way of your

understanding that equanimity is the way things are, if you'll just let them be. So we look at the things that prevent us from being equanimous, prevent us from having that broad and capacious and accepting view, and we deconstruct those things. The more we can deconstruct those things, the more open we are to the natural equanimity of our own heart-minds, which connects with the equanimity that's woven into the fabric of the world.

In the Theravadan tradition you would cultivate equanimity as a way to overcome obstacles in the path to finding nirvana. If prejudice is an obstacle, then you cultivate equanimity in order to remove that obstacle so you can come closer to a state of liberation. In the Mahayana, the goal is a little bit different. We cultivate equanimity because it tends to encourage *bodhichitta*. Bodhichitta is the desire that arises in us for our own liberation so that we can act for the liberation of all beings. We seek enlightenment not only for ourselves but so that we can work for the circumstances that will allow the enlightenment of all beings. Equanimity is a good part of that path towards ours and everybody else's awakening.

One of the stories that Mahayana Buddhists tell about equanimity and lovingkindness and the Brahma Viharas in relation to bodhichitta is about the great Indian figure Asanga. He went off into a cave to practice for twelve years because he wanted to bring down Maitreya. Maitreya is the Buddha to come, the next Buddha. Maitreya is very much connected with lovingkindness. The Sanskrit root for that is *maitri*, and Maitreya is the Being Who Loves, who's off in heaven somewhere loving the world, but not here yet. So Asanga wanted, by the power of meditation and devotion, to bring Maitreya, lovingkindness, and love down into the world. He did hard practice as a hermit for twelve years, and then he got discouraged. He realized it just wasn't going to happen, so he gave up. As he left his cave and was walking back into town, he saw a dog in the road who was badly hurt. This immediately raised in him a feeling of great compassion and lovingkindness for the dog. He went over to see what he could do to help. As he bent down to help this wounded dog, Maitreya appeared.

The sense of the story is that it's not enough to do the practice in the cave for twelve years. Practice isn't realized — we don't bring love into the world — until we leave the cave and walk down the road, until we find both the great joy and great suffering of other beings and respond. It is that spontaneous response that the practice is about getting us to. All the practice is about clearing out the obstacles so that lovingkindness and compassion arise spontaneously in us in response to things. It's when *that* happens in the world, in relationship,

that Maitreya appears, that we bring Maitreya into the world. Because, in some really important sense, Maitreya isn't a being sitting off in heaven separate from us, but Maitreya is what we bring into the world over and over again, every time we allow lovingkindness, equanimity, sympathetic joy, and compassion to appear in the world through us, or to be revealed to the world through us.

One other contrast or conjunction between the Theravadan and Mahayana views : One of the things equanimity is about from the Theravadan perspective is understanding how karma works. Understanding your own and other people's karmic responsibility and making distinctions between those. *What is mine? What is yours?* Which is a very sophisticated psychological exploration for them to have figured out 2500 years ago. There's an equanimity *gatha* in the Theravadan tradition that's valuable. It goes, "All beings are the owners of their own karma. Their happiness and unhappiness depend on their actions, not on my wishes for them." *Their happiness or unhappiness depends on their actions, not on my wishes for them.* That's a radical statement. The first time I heard it I thought, *Whoa! Is that true?* That's the radical Theravadan position : one of the things that equanimity does when it prevents us from jumping in where we shouldn't jump in, is give us the ability to allow karma to work its way out in the way it should. Not to interfere in other people's karma. Not to take on karma that isn't ours to do. To know what is ours to do. To know what is someone else's to do. And to know what the promise really is of those great transpersonal forces that are working in and around us all the time, and that fortunately we have absolutely nothing to do with.

So that was an important part of the practice of equanimity in the Theravadan and the Mahayana. In the *Blue Cliff Record*, which is one of the great koan collections, equanimity is called heart nirvana, that a heart full of equanimity has found nirvana. This is the sense I take of nirvana in this case : the word nirvana, which means the blowing out of something like a candle, is usually taken to mean the extinction of all the obstacles, obstructions, obscurations, karmic entanglements, and stuff that causes us to suffer and causes us to cause other people to suffer. All of that is just blown out, like a candle, and that's nirvana. Which has always felt cold to me, a little inhuman. Then I learned that the word nirvana is related etymologically to another Sanskrit word which refers to a state of coolness and rest that happens after a fever breaks. Suddenly that made perfect sense to me. *Ab! That's Nirvana!* Nirvana is after the fever has broken, when things get calm and cool again. So when the *Blue Cliff Record* and the koans

talk about equanimity as nirvana, I think that's the sense they mean — that rest, that peace after the grip and constriction of the fever has gone.

I will stop there. Next week I'd like to talk about some of the ways we've been working with equanimity, the ways we've expanded the sense of equanimity through our own experiences. We tend to think about equanimity as how we relate to the things of the world and other people in the world, but what's it like to have equanimity toward the vastness? What's it like when equanimity leads us in both directions — into the world and also into the vastness at the same time? And what if we think about equanimity as being not just a quality of ourselves, but in the sense of the equanimity of other beings? How do we see the equanimity of all things? What is the equanimity of the trees? And the candles on the altar? We'll take that up next week. In the meantime, any comments or questions this week?

Q1 : I'm very aware that I don't feel equanimity. I feel often that I'm carrying fear. Does that mean I'm not walking in equanimity?

JIS : How do you feel about the fear?

Q1 : I am amazed that it's there all the time. It feels like there's something wrong.

JIS : Does it have causes and conditions or is it just existential fear?

Q1 : Existential. It's just there.

JIS : So, a first thing to do might be to look at how there's a fear and then there are the judgments you make about the fear. It's possible to have equanimity and to have an agitated or an activated state within equanimity that's being held by the equanimity. I think the beginning of the route toward that is to dismantle the confluence we make between feelings and the feelings that we have that we shouldn't be having the feelings. And it goes on and on and we get further and further away from it. You can have a fundamental state of equanimity, which is another way to say, trust in your life. You can have a fundamental trust in your life and feel a fear or a grief or an anger that's held in that. We want to get underneath those states that rise and fall like weather. Even if they last a long time, they're still rising and falling. We want to get underneath those states and make a container that can hold them. Then whether we're feeling fear or sorrow or anger or whatever it is, it becomes less important because it's in a context. It's not filling the universe anymore. It's being held by something. Does that make sense?

Q1 : Yes.

JIS : Thank you for the question.

Q2 : Joan, you've talked about the heart of practice being liberating the mind, which is love. Can you say a little bit more about that?

JIS : I have to give you my interpretation of what the Buddha meant by that. I love the surprise of that — that the liberation of the mind isn't freedom from the world, or perfect peace or anything like that, it's *love*. This goes back to the sense that there's something fundamental about love, not only in our own heart-minds, but in the nature of things in the world. It's the stuff that gets in the way that's a problem. If we can liberate our mind, which is to say, if we can get rid of those obstacles and obscurations, we find that place where the love that is fundamental in us touches the love that is fundamental in the world, and it becomes continuous and it becomes the way we experience the world no matter what else is happening. That's a deep liberation; again we get back to trusting our life and trusting *life itself*, not just our individual lives. To be able to rest there is a profound liberation. That doesn't negate tragedy and difficulty and horrors and all of that, but it says that we come to all of those things with a fundamental trust in life. So we bring that trust to the difficult situation. We may bring our fear and sorrow and rage and all of that, but we *also* bring that trust. That's huge because the difference between bringing sorrow, rage, and fear and bringing sorrow, rage, and fear *and* our trust is like the difference between night and day. It's a way that our liberation of our own heart-minds can contribute to the liberation of the world when we keep bringing that trust along with everything else, into the world.

Q2 : You just said liberation of our *heart-mind*, which makes more sense because you talk about that process of liberation being an attempt through obstacles. The obstacles aren't always in our mind, but they are always in our *heart-mind* — the complete continuum.

JIS : Absolutely. Which is why I think it's so important that the Chinese moved from talking about just the mind to talking about the heart-mind, always. Because yes, of course, it's all of that together.

Q3 : Can I bounce off of that? I love this. It feels true to me that liberation's outcome would be love. I'm thinking back to the sutra service and the words "Dark road after dark road, when will we be free from birth and death?" I'm confused with that because there's this

idea that if we're truly free we wouldn't have any preference to not being born and dying. So what are these dark roads and what is this urge to be free from birth and death? If we've got that freedom, that's the point, isn't it? [Laughter]

JIS : The point of that is just what you said, being free of the *ideas* of birth and death, that they are different things : a beginning and an end. It's what we were talking about in koan salon about birth and non-birth, seeing the identity of birth and non-birth. Being free of birth and death is being free of the identity of birth and death. To be free from the way we divide them up into different things that causes difficulties. It's *not* seeing the identity of birth and death that causes us to walk these dark roads over and over and over again.

Q3 : So once we see clearly the identity of birth and death there's no preference, no attempt to not get involved with them?

JIS : Right, what's the difference? Please tell me the difference between birth and death. So instead of *I'm born and have a life, I die and then something else happens that I'm not sure of. Then I'm born again ...* There's just this one continuum going on that has various conditions that rise and fall; but it's the one continuum. It's not that there's life and that's a different thing from death. At one point when I was having an encounter with this understanding, one of the ways it came to me spontaneously was that I could never commit suicide because it would make absolutely no difference whatsoever. [Laughter] Nothing would change, nothing fundamental.

Q3 : Yeah, that feels true to me. I've never gone for 'there's something better / something worse if you commit suicide.' They both stop.

JIS : What would be different? Not much I think. We'd just be dead. What's so different about that?

Q4 : Different for everybody else, but not for us.

Q5 : So would it be more accurate to say, "Trust this continuum," rather than "Trust this life?"

JIS : Sure. Yeah. That's nice. That's expanding it out in both directions.

Q6 : So if it's one continuum ... Why do we care so much about it [suicide]? We hear that there are more people who die in car accidents. Or the family strife it causes. Why do we care?

JIS : The kind of understanding we can come to for ourselves is *for ourselves*. To me the greatest spiritual sin is to impose that on someone else or to project that on someone else or

say that it has anything to do with anybody else at all. It's for us and it says nothing about anybody else, because to project that onto others, to say that applies to other people, is this pure emptiness view, which is deadly. That's why the liberation of the heart-mind is love, because it's love that keeps us connected to the actual circumstances of those people. If they discover that for themselves that's grand, but we can never have an opinion of how anyone deals with it, or how it should be. If we believe in the bodhisattva way, our fundamental task is to do everything we can to create the circumstances for everybody, for *everybody* to liberate themselves. It's not about having an opinion about how they ought to feel, or thinking that something doesn't matter because we are liberated. Our job is to create the circumstances for everybody to find it for themselves. And I think to go an inch beyond that is really dangerous.

Q3 : There's that poem by Issa when his daughter died, about the dewdrop world. [The dewdrop world / is the dew drop world. / And yet, and yet.] Why do we care so much when people won't come around — the 'and yet'? The beauty of that, the specificity. I've always loved it because it gives such honoring and acknowledgment.

JIS : Because when we're alive, we're fully alive. When we're alive, we fully care about life and when we're dead we'll be fully dead. And we'll fully care about death. To say it's a continuum is not to water it down or bring it down to some lowest common denominator where nothing matters. It's to say, *It's so vivid right now being life, it's going to be so vivid right then being death*. Let's be wherever we are. There's a beautiful passage by Keizan, one of the koan commentators, where he said, "And when you understand this your eyes will shine in the dark." I think of that in terms of how it will be when we're dead. Our eyes will be shining in the dark. We'll be so dead — right out to the edges of our fingers, dead; and right now we should be so fully alive for ourselves and for others and to hope for the full aliveness for all beings.

Q7 : It seems to me like what you're saying about why we care so much when people die is, it comes down to trust and attachment. I mean if we come to something with all of our anger and fear and angst and we're attached to that, and if we come with our anger and fear and angst and our *trust*, then we can reside in the trust, in the wholeness of things. It does no good to hang on to the fear and attachment. I think it's the same thing when people die. If you come to that experience with the trust of *this is the way things go*, then you don't have to hang on to them being here. You can see the bigger way things go.

JIS : And it's a profound thing to really empathize with what's happening for them rather than being caught in what I want and need and am afraid of. *What's happening with them? What would that be like?*

Thank you.