

Service as a Meditative Practice

Insight Meditation of Modesto

Service is a natural expression of the heart in response to suffering. Almost all spiritual traditions emphasize service as a way to transform oneself while helping others. From a Buddhist perspective it is essential to bring **mindfulness** to the act of service. Working with service as a meditative practice requires careful reflection before, during, and after any actions we may take. In performing service, our **intentions** are the most important aspect of our actions whether they are our thoughts, speech, or physical actions. If we approach any task with intentions of the unskillful roots of greed, hatred, and/or delusion present, suffering is sure to result. In fact, much harm has occurred throughout the history of humankind in the guise of service performed unskillfully. Often times our intentions are not visible to us or are mixed. If we can **investigate** and be clear about our intentions in performing service by using mindfulness, we have the best chance to be helpful and not harmful. When we act out of the skillful roots of generosity, lovingkindness, and wisdom, we are more likely to truly be of service to ourselves and others.

The Brahmavihara (*Pali* for the 4 divine abodes) are wholesome mental attitudes that can be cultivated and used in dharma practice to develop concentration, incline the mind towards positive wholesome states, counteract afflictive, unwholesome mind states, and balance the wisdom gained through insight. They are:

1. **Metta** – lovingkindness, goodwill - is the mind's and heart's inclination toward good-will and kindness towards ourselves and others without preference or exclusion.
2. **Karuna** – compassion, sympathy - is the skillful response of the heart when it encounters suffering – ours or another's.
3. **Mudita** – sympathetic joy or appreciative joy, take unselfish delight in another's joy, well-being, and prosperity.
4. **Uppekka** – equanimity - is the ability of the heart and mind to stay balanced and non-attached regardless of the circumstances.

The brahmavihara can be intentionally cultivated as a **meditation practice**. This is done by silently repeating phrases that capture the quality of each. For example, with metta practice we might say “May I be happy and well.” or “May you be free from suffering.” It is helpful to connect the phrases with sensations in the body, typically in the heart center. Each brahmavihara has a near enemy which is a mimic that is based on clinging and therefore increases suffering rather than allaying it. The far enemies are the exact opposites of each brahmavihara:

Brahmavihara	Near enemy	Far enemy
<i>Metta</i> – Lovingkindness	Attachment	Ill-will
<i>Karuna</i> – Compassion	Pity	Cruelty
<i>Mudita</i> – Sympathetic joy	Giddiness, exhilaration	Envy
<i>Uppekka</i> – Equanimity	Apathy, indifference	Grasping or pushing away

Opportunities to Get Involved in Buddhist Service Organizations:

Myanmar Schools Project – Co-founded by dharma teacher Steve Armstrong this group supports the building and improvement of schools in Burma (Myanmar): <http://myanmarschoolsproject.org/>

Buddhist Global Relief – Founded by the Venerable Bhikkhu Bodhi this organization provides food aid to impoverished communities worldwide: <http://www.buddhistglobalrelief.org/>.

Folsom Pathways Sangha – Volunteers bring meditation and Buddhist services into Folsom State Prison: info@folsompathwayssangha.org.

Insight World Aid – Cofounded by dharma teacher Gil Fronsdal and members of the Insight Meditation Center, this group is organizing a medical and humanitarian aid mission to Cambodia for 2012: <http://insightworldaid.org>.

Brahmavihara Cambodia Aids Project – founded by Zen priest Beth Goldring this organization provides Buddhist chaplaincy services to people with AIDS in Cambodia: <http://www.brahmavihara.cambodiaaidsproject.org/>.

Buddhist Peace Fellowship – A long standing organization that supports socially engaged Buddhist practice: <http://www.bpf.org/>.

Buddhist Chaplaincy Training Program – A yearlong training through the Sati Center for Buddhist Studies. For more information: <http://www.sati.org/>.

Study Resources:

Metta sutta study guide by Andrew Olendzki of the Barre Center for Buddhist Studies. An excellent collection of materials for the study of and practice with the *metta sutta*. <http://www.dharma.org/bcbs/ReadingRoom.html>

The Spirit of Service Audio Series by Frank Ostaseski: <http://www.sfinsight.org/talks.html>.

Service Daylong audio files and other resources by Jeff Hardin and others on the Sacramento Insight Meditation website: www.sactoinsight.org.

Books:

The Engaged Spiritual Life: A Buddhist Approach to Transforming Ourselves and the World, by Donald Rothberg, 2006, Beacon Press.

Lovingkindness: The Revolutionary Art of Happiness by Sharon Salzberg, 2004, Shambhala Publications.

How Can I Help? Stories and Reflections on Service, by Ram Dass & Paul Gorman, 1985, Alfred A. Knopf.

For a Future to Be Possible: Commentaries on the Five Mindfulness Trainings, by Thich Nhat Hanh, 1993, Parallax Press.