

Choosing to Love

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Article abstract

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Choosing to Love

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“So watch the thought and its ways with care,
and let it spring from love born out of concern for all beings.” The Buddha

This essay proposes a pedagogical ethic of love based on the four brahma-viharas—also called the divine abodes—of Theravada Buddhism. Witnessing, Kelly Oliver’s theory of mutual subjectivity, finds practical expression in the brahma-viharas, a comprehensive way to train the mind and heart to sustain an ethic of love in all of our relationships. Together, witnessing and the brahma-viharas offer an approach whereby we may choose to love students and to cultivate more open, responsive, and egalitarian relations with them, in spite of academic asymmetries of power. In perplexing or vexing interactions with students, I draw strength from three of the four divine abodes: metta (lovingkindness), karuna (compassion), and upekkha (equanimity). Consistently applying the contemplative practices associated with these states begins to disentangle the threads of complicated social relations.

Introduction

“Let me say, with the risk of appearing ridiculous, that the true revolutionary is guided by strong feelings of love”: these are the words of Che Guevara, quoted by Paulo Freire in a footnote to *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1974, p. 78). Despite powerful voices such as Freire and bell hooks (2003) urging us to base pedagogical relations on love, most educators shy away from the word. I propose that our culture’s propensity to identify love with passion or eros is one reason it is seldom seen as appropriate subject matter for educational scholarship. Concerns regarding boundaries and professionalism limit discussion of the connection between love and teaching, except in the most elusively abstract ways. And yet, I am compelled to understand what love means in my life with students, especially because I regard my work preparing historically underrepresented students for graduate school as part of a larger political project—transforming institutions of higher education into more socially just and equitable places for first-generation, low-income and ethnically underrepresented students.

I wonder whether learning to love students better would ultimately help us move toward the goal of educational equity, but my work is complicated by the fact that I very often serve students who have been wounded by their journeys through the educational system (Margonis, 2011). I must often relate to students across differences of race, class, gender, sexuality and ability, and trust is hard to develop. My efforts are further hampered by the social and academic power imbalances inherent to the university, as well as its history of excluding the students I serve. Indeed, they are often positioned as “outsiders” to the academic community. Even when it is not the case that I am relating across differences, asymmetrical power relations sometimes take their toll because I am always in the more

dominant position simply due to my place in the academic hierarchy. As any university faculty or staff member will readily confirm, relations with students can sometimes become difficult. In such a context, what is the meaning of love? How is one to nurture more egalitarian, loving relations? How can I embody a loving presence with enough force that students will apprehend my intentions and feel secure enough to develop open, responsive, and trusting relations with me? These questions matter to me, for I believe that without responsive relationships, there can be no authentic pedagogy. My desire to articulate a pedagogical ethic of love has found an experiential home in my practice of the four *brahma-viharas* – also called the divine abodes – of Theravada Buddhism. Previous work by Claudia Eppert (2010) and Ann Diller (2004) has prepared the way for this essay. Eppert's thoughts on teaching emotional literacy suggest a profound use of the *brahma-viharas* in an educational context, while Diller's question, "What blocks the flow of wise clear love in teaching and learning?" (p. 170) closely resonates with the concerns I address.

To nurture the capacity to express the four *brahma-viharas* in my relations with students, I follow the practical teachings of *vipassana*, or insight meditation. The Buddhist understanding of love is founded on neither eros nor passion, and taken together the *brahma-viharas* form a comprehensive way to train the mind and heart to sustain an ethic of love in all of our relationships. However, this essay will focus on using them to sustain loving relations with students across social and power differences, even when the way becomes murky. I take as my starting point the fact that relations across differences can sometimes become troubled, although by no means do I wish to infer that they are necessarily so. To sustain a loving attitude in perplexing or vexing interactions with students, I draw strength from three of the four heavenly abodes: *metta* (lovingkindness), *karuna* (compassion), and *upekkha* (equanimity). In my experience, consistently using the contemplative practices associated with these divine abodes begins to disentangle the threads of complicated social relations. As I practice them—on my cushion at home or in my office chair—my relations with students deepen and I find that more and more the abodes become my home.

I begin this essay with Kelly Oliver's understanding of subjectivity. Her work provides a foundation for my discussion of ethics and contemplative practice; it is a considerable help in my struggle to envision loving pedagogical relationships that are less susceptible to the academic culture of power (Delpit, 2006). I undertake to show that witnessing, Oliver's theoretical approach to relationships, is extremely compatible with, and transitions seamlessly into, a contemplative practice based on the *brahma-viharas*.

Witnessing

In *Witnessing: Beyond Recognition*, Oliver (2001) is explicitly concerned with opening up the "possibility of a more humane and ethical future beyond violence" (p. 18). She grounds her idea of witnessing in a political call to move beyond domination, and strives to create egalitarian, nonviolent relationships within asymmetrical power contexts. Thus, Oliver speaks to the problems that may arise as we attempt to work with underrepresented students who have quite likely experienced academic and social violence. Asserting that how we conceive of ourselves will in turn indicate how we regard and relate to others, Oliver discusses the nature of subjectivity. She takes as her starting point the Levinasian notion that we are not recognizable, independent selves before we relate to one another, but rather, it is in the event of relating that we become subjects; subjectivity arises in responding to the alterity of the other, who is ultimately an unknowable mystery, "beyond any description we can give" (Margonis, 2007, p. 65). Resonating with Levinas, Oliver (2001) eschews fixed notions of the self, independent from and constructed in opposition to others, in which, she writes, "we come to recognize ourselves as subjects or active agents through recognition from others; ... [and] a positive sense of self is dependent on positive recognition from others" (p. 4). For Oliver, our very selves come into being in the act of

relating to the other. We are not separate, isolated individuals—although this is a common belief and one that is certainly encouraged in our educational system. Rather, she writes that subjectivity is “the result of the process of witnessing” (p. 7), which is “the ability to respond to, and address, others” (p. 15).

Oliver’s debt to Levinas is clear: the ethical encounter with the other is at the heart of witnessing. But witnessing is more than the ability to respond to and address the other. In a move that promotes egalitarianism, she expands the Levinasian notion of subjectivity with a reciprocal concern for the other’s subjectivity. “We have an obligation not only to respond but also to respond in a way that opens up rather than closes off the possibility of response by others” (Oliver, 2001, p. 18). I only witness if the other also feels she has entered a relationship that allows her to address me in return. Do my actions and words allow the other to respond to and address *me*? Can we move forward together in a dance of mutual subjectivity? If we accept Oliver’s obligation, witnessing constitutes subjectivity for those in dominant as well as those in marginalized positions—in our context, for both professor and student. In practice, when a professor responds to and addresses a student, she must do so in a way that allows and encourages the student’s response in return. She must be address-able. This, according to Oliver, is the infinite responsibility posited by Levinas. Significantly, witnessing must rise from a sense of the limits of our understanding—that we apprehend there are things beyond our recognition, what (following Levinas) I would call the mystery of the student. Moving beyond recognition is to know that the other “brings more than I contain” (Levinas, 1969, p. 51)—once glimpsed, the other’s experience ultimately remains unknowable. We can acknowledge it, but not recognize it. Although it may feel risky, witnessing thus requires a deep openness to the other as well as responsiveness. It places us in a vulnerable position.

Staying Connected: An Ethic of Love

Rather than construct a sense of self in opposition to the student, privileging separation and distance from the other, Oliver asks us to accept that we are already connected to others by virtue of the fact that our subjectivity depends upon them. But maintaining a sense of connection can be a hard task when what is beyond recognition becomes central to pedagogical relationships—mystery has the potential to alienate us from the other, and we may tend to emphasize the difficulty in relating. Furthermore, connection to others does not necessarily imply we always get along with them; the aim of the pedagogical relationship is, therefore, to develop more fruitful forms of connection. Oliver (2001) addresses these concerns by rethinking the concept of vision itself. “Recognition...supposedly results from vision attempting to bridge the abyss of empty space between the subject and its object” (p. 11). But our sense of vision “involves touching light, [and as such] we are touched by and touching everything around us even as we see the distance between ourselves and...other people” (p. 212). In this understanding, vision is a means of connection rather than separation, and space is not merely a void that separates us from one another.

It is full of air, light, and the circulation of various forms of ... energy that sustain us and connect us to each other and the world. If space is not empty, and if vision connects us ...we can imagine an alternative form of recognition, which gives rise to an alternative conception of subjectivity and identity. (p.12)

To conceive of vision and space as a means of connection with others helps sustain witnessing: to view ourselves as profoundly connected to, rather than separated from, one another, supports the radically intersubjective idea that our own subjectivity depends upon how we respond to others. In witnessing, we are called to maintain a sense of connection with, and relation to, students, in spite of hidden or acknowledged tensions that might lie between us. With acceptance of our connection to others comes a

movement toward the other: what is beyond recognition, what we cannot comprehend, propels us. Mystery and experiences beyond our recognition thus take on a positive tone, although we may still feel that we have entered risky relational territory.

To encourage a sense of connection with others, Oliver relies on an ethic of love. Love can sustain faculty and staff in the Sisyphean task of transforming the academy. It helps us to maintain connection with and to move toward students, even though we must do so within a complicated web of power relations. Love reminds us that to disrupt the institutional hierarchy and create egalitarian relations beyond domination, we need to look past our own interests. Oliver does not use love in the common understanding of an emotion reserved only for those closest to us, nor as an “abstract and ahistorical metaphor” (Margonis, 2007, p. 67) that allows for a false sense of connection, glossing over “historic chasms created by colonial histories of genocide, enslavement, and stolen lands” (Margonis, 2007, p. 67). For Oliver (2001), love is “the ethical agency that motivates a move toward others, across differences. Love motivates a move beyond self-interested political action, which is necessary to move beyond domination” (p. 218). Education is a political act, and transformative actions are motivated by an ethic of love that acknowledges difference and mystery, yet strives for connection.

Oliver (2001) describes love as “an openness to others” (p. 220), as well as a “vigilant concern for others” (p. 218). Further, she sees love as a matter of conscious choice:

...it is a willful decision. We can choose to love or we can choose not to love. In this regard, love is an attitude that we willingly cultivate toward others. ...Love is not something we choose once and for all. (pp. 220-221)

She asks us to choose love over and over again through self-reflection which “...is not a turn inward but a turn toward otherness” (p. 219). In self-reflection, we ponder the “reflection of otherness that constitutes the self as a subject” (p. 219): to turn toward a student to see how my self is being constituted in the moment of interaction, and to base my response to her on that. Such self-reflection is necessary to help negotiate blind spots, so we might learn to apprehend what we cannot see (p. 218); it is one way we can bring an ethic of love to our actions.

But, as Sharon Todd (2003) pointedly asks, “How do we go about intentionally loving an other?” (p. 79). How does one cultivate an ethic of love? It is an ongoing endeavor, and it is here that the *brahma-viharas* provide practical guidance. The practices associated with the four *brahma-viharas* are interdependent and complementary approaches to nurturing loving relationships with ourselves and others; in turn, they complement other components of Buddhism’s Noble Eightfold Path. *Metta* (lovingkindness), *karuna* (compassion), *mudita* (sympathetic joy), and *upekkha* (equanimity) exist together and profoundly strengthen one another. For an example to illustrate this interconnectivity, and how we may intentionally choose to love, I will use lovingkindness, which is supported in difficult situations by compassion and equanimity. Although this essay will not discuss *mudita*, I find that my practice of the other three divine abodes leads to more frequent, spontaneous joyful occasions with students. I am more able to deeply feel and celebrate their successes with them; it is a gift that grows by cultivating lovingkindness.

Inclining the Mind Toward Love

A vital link between the *brahma-viharas* and witnessing is the assumption that we are already connected with others. Sharon Salzberg (2002) writes,

When we are caught in the concepts of separation, we suffer distance and alienation. We need to defend ourselves at all times because the world seems very threatening. When we experience a strong idea of separate, immutable self and other, it seems as though there is constantly a great big

“other” out there. (p. 86)

She notes that the Buddha first taught *metta* as an antidote for fear. This is something to bear in mind when we feel vulnerable – when we have entered a risky relational space, perhaps being challenged by a student. But in Buddhist psychology, Salzberg (2002) writes, the concept of separation is considered false, and “only through seeing our fundamental connection with the world” (p. 88) is it possible to live a life of true inner peace. We learn that “nothing is fully separate, that who we are, what we are, is intimately woven into the nature of life itself” (p. 88). We can choose, through developing new habits of mind in contemplative practice, “to transform our minds so they embody love” (p. 89). Even those who prefer to believe in a separate self will, perhaps, more easily agree with Salzberg’s statement that what binds us in common humanity

is an urge for happiness, which at heart is a yearning for union, for overcoming our feelings of separateness. We want to feel our identity with something larger than our small selves. We long to be one with our own lives and with each other. (p. 21)

Accepting the ways we are interdependent creates a space where the *brahma-viharas* may grow.

Salzberg notes that “(i)n our culture, when we talk about love, we usually mean either passion or sentimentality” (p. 18). But she continues,

It is crucial to distinguish *metta* from both of these states. Passion is enmeshed with feelings of desire, of wanting or of owning and possessing. Passion gets entangled with needing things to be a certain way, with having our expectations met.... By contrast the spirit of *metta* is unconditional: open and unobstructed.” (pp. 18-19)

Salzberg notes that the Pali word for *metta* has two root meanings: one is “gentle” and the other “friend.” It is also sometimes called “loving friendliness” (Gunaratana, 2002). Joseph Goldstein (2003) astutely observes that *metta* is the “difference between the enchantment of *falling in love* and that quality of being when we are *standing in love*” (p. 143). He describes

(*m*)etta [as the] generosity of heart that wishes happiness to all beings, both oneself and others. Lovingkindness softens the mind and heart with feelings of benevolence. The mind becomes pliable and the heart gentle as *metta* seeks the welfare and benefit of all. The feeling of lovingkindness expresses the simple wish “May you be happy.” (p. 143)

Metta is a deceptively simple practice, but as the mind is trained toward love through regular meditation, the roots take hold and grow in our lives and our approach to others. The Buddha said in his teachings that what we frequently think about and ponder upon becomes the inclination of our minds—an idea that is increasingly supported by neuroscience. Our minds grasp at pleasurable feelings, push away those we dislike, and ignore those we find boring: this includes our feelings toward the people in our lives. But, as Salzberg (2002) notes, simply developing the intention to love, and repeatedly sending *metta* to others can turn the mind away from negative patterns of relating. We can begin to “rewire” our ingrained, natural responses.

Four phrases are generally used in *metta* practice. After centering the body and quieting the mind by focusing attention on the experience of the breath, we gently turn our attention to the heart center. We take a few moments to allow a feeling of lovingkindness to enter the heart, then hold in mind the person to whom we are directing *metta*, slowly repeating some variation of the following thoughts, and connecting with the intention of each one: May you be safe. May you be happy. May you be healthy. May you live with ease. Translations vary, and more embellishments are sometimes added, but the gist remains the same. These sentences are traditionally said for a series of beings, and ultimately *metta* is directed toward all of humankind as well as other species; the spirit of *metta* is inclusive of all beings.

However, in one of its simpler forms of practice, the categories to which *metta* is directed include: oneself, one's benefactor, a member of the family or a dear friend, a neutral person, and a difficult person. Importantly, practicing the *brahma-viharas* begins with oneself, because "(l)ove for others without the foundation of love for ourselves becomes a loss of boundaries, codependency, and a painful and fruitless search for intimacy" (Salzberg, 2002, p. 26).

After nurturing *metta* for those closest to us, or for whom we feel gratitude, it becomes easier to extend *metta* to individuals we find more challenging. Even if I am distressed by an interaction with an angry student, it has been my experience that as I have trained the mind toward *metta* in contemplative practice, it is more possible to stop and wish him or her well in the course of my daily interactions. John Travis's phrases have been especially meaningful to me in these circumstances. "May whatever covers my heart be dissolved. May I live with an open heart." Such thoughts soften the mind; we become less reactionary and are able to more clearly see what a skillful response might be. We learn to attend to others more fully. As Salzberg (2002) writes, "To be undivided and unfragmented, to be completely present, is to love. To pay attention is to love" (p. 15). As part of our undivided attention, Goldstein (2003) asks us to listen

so well that you can see where you can actually make contact. Can you let the other person in? What is the right vocabulary? Can you speak to what is really important to that person? We learn to listen and speak from a feeling of *metta*, basic goodwill. Wise discernment and *metta* enable us to connect. (p. 150)

We thus enter a space where we can form responsive witnessing relationships with students: the skillful response in any interaction should open the possibility for the student to respond in turn.

But the skillful response may also require us to exercise compassion, which is especially useful in sustaining a pedagogical ethic of love when problems arise. Teachings on compassion remind us that all humans suffer. Compassion "is the tender readiness of heart to respond to one's own or another's pain, without resentment or aversion. It is the wish to dissipate suffering" (Goldstein and Kornfield, 2001, p. 200). When difficulties arise in relationships with a student, we can call that person to mind and gently say, "May you be free of your pain and sorrow" or "May you find peace" (Salzberg, 2002, p. 116). Surely, we can distance ourselves enough from most disturbances to know that they often arise because the other is suffering in some way—mental and emotional anguish are common enough feelings. In this way, we can find it in ourselves to lovingly relate to students, even when relations are tense. Practicing the equanimity phrases is particularly helpful in conjunction with compassion. Goldstein and Kornfield (2001) write, "True equanimity is not a withdrawal, it is a balanced opening to all aspects of life. It is an engagement in the whole of life with composure and with balance of mind..." (p. 200). And so, when faced with a student who is sad or angry or even one who makes the classroom uncomfortable for others, I first direct lovingkindness and compassion toward the student, then I gently repeat to myself: "I wish you happiness but cannot make your choices for you" or, "I will care for you but cannot keep you from suffering" (Salzberg, 2002, p. 152). We are not in control of our own lives or anyone else's, but we can remain open to experiences of all sorts if we cultivate equanimity in this way. The goal is to become balanced enough to accept that life is a mix of pleasure and pain, and to meet either one with composure, rather than grasping at one and pushing away the other.

Practicing the *brahma-viharas* in daily meditation, the mind becomes steadier, and inclines toward an open, loving approach to relations; this manifests as a more relaxed and open attitude even if an interaction with a student seems perplexing or irritating. There is less attachment to outcomes, and anxieties regarding the vicissitudes of some students' academic trajectories dissipate. Some days I may direct *metta* toward the traditional categories of people and beings during my sitting practice; other days perhaps to students who are struggling with personal difficulties or creating interpersonal tension within the cohort. Over time, simple repetition coupled with a sincere effort to connect with the emotional state each phrase evokes allows a more finely-tuned attention for the other to grow. The

ability to stand in love becomes more natural; no matter the situation in which we find ourselves, our attention rests more easily and consistently in the heavenly abode of lovingkindness. Meditations on the *brahma-viharas* grow in depth, and there is much more that can be learned from those who have studied and practiced them for many years. Although they are relatively new to me, regularly sitting and repeating the phrases while connecting with their intentions has helped me to more consistently be who I want to be in relation to students: a combination of love and high expectations, someone who strives to relate to each and every one of them with the same attention, someone who understands profoundly that we are interdependent and that my subjectivity comes into being as I respond to them. But, as Gunaratana (2002) cautions and then urges, the statements “are not magic formulas. They don’t work by themselves....But if you truly participate in these statements and invest them with your energy, they will serve you well. Give them a try. See for yourself” (p. 95). The *brahma-viharas* help us realize that “we need other living beings, beings who are bound to be different from us” (p. 198); we understand more deeply that we are tied to one another in fundamental ways. As our sense of connection with others deepens, our notion of safety shifts, and we become more willing to accept the risk and vulnerability of witnessing relationships.

Toward a Relational Pedagogy of Love

It is within this context of loving connection that I can return to the idea of a responsive, loving pedagogy based on witnessing. As we also find in practicing the *brahma-viharas*, to nurture responsiveness in witnessing it is imperative that

we acknowledge our dependence on each other, not just physical but also psychic dependence. Once we acknowledge that our very sense of ourselves as agents, and the subjectivity on which that agency rests, is the result of witnessing relationships to others and otherness, then, and only then, will we feel compelled by the ethical obligation inherent in subjectivity. (Oliver, 2001, p. 131)

Oliver offers powerful reasons to reconceptualize the nature of subjectivity, and she provides an ethic of love to move us beyond domination. An ethic of love based on practicing the *brahma-viharas* can guide and sustain us in the hard work of moving toward others, maintaining connection, sustaining our political commitment, and witnessing to the best of our abilities. But as she and Salzberg would agree, the choice to love must be made again and again: “it is a decision that must be constantly reaffirmed through the vigilance of ‘self-reflection’” (Oliver, 2001, p. 221). Each time we turn our thoughts away from conditioned feelings of separation, and concentrate instead on the *brahma-viharas*, we strengthen the vigilance of self-reflection, for we realize that in choosing how to respond to a student, we are choosing who we are in any moment. Oliver asserts, too, that vigilance demands that we be persistent. Loving responsiveness may never be accomplished once and for all, but remembering our connection to students—choosing love over and over—can help us hold in mind that our own subjectivity is dependent upon them, and therefore ethical by its very nature. Developing a regular practice of mindfulness meditation encourages the persistence and vigilance necessary for cultivation of the divine abodes.

Rather than focus on the difficulties in relating across difference, those who accept Oliver’s mutual subjectivity can look at students with lovingkindness, and maintain a sense of connection that will allow them to risk vulnerability and action. She critiques the need for an alienating view of mystery and alterity, just as she critiques a negative view of mutual dependence. To be dependent on others for our own subjectivity is not weakness, nor is it to be feared. Dependence is only perceived as a threat if we believe that we are autonomous subjects.

Why does dependency have to be figured as violent, alienating, subjugating, and dominating? Only

if we start with the ideal of the self-possessed autonomous subject is dependence threatening. If, however, we give up that ideal and operate in the world with a truly interrelational conception of subjectivity, a subjectivity without subjects, then dependence is seen as the force of life, as the very possibility of change.... (Oliver, 2001, p. 68)

Instead of being a cause for concern, dependence on others is to be understood as the basis for loving action. Interrelational subjectivity and the mutual dependence it implies become a matrix for transformation rather than domination. Oliver thus lays the groundwork for an active, responsive ethic of love, one that is transformative in its social and political power. In the Buddhist tradition, Thich Nhat Hanh's (1998) beautifully articulated idea of "interbeing" is profoundly resonant with Oliver's mutual dependence, as are his writings on love and compassion. He encourages the practice of lovingkindness, and views it as a force for healing a broken and suffering world. He writes:

When I was a novice, I could not understand why, if the world is filled with suffering, the Buddha has such a beautiful smile.... He is able to smile to suffering because he knows how to take care of it and to help transform it. We need to be aware of the suffering, but retain our clarity, calmness, and strength so we can help transform the situation." (Hanh, 2007, p. 6)

We are to transform others' suffering by bringing the energy of love into our words and actions in our daily interactions with people.

We touch the deep sources of love that are already in us, and then, in the midst of our daily lives, in our actual contact with others, we express and share our love. We practice until we see the concrete effects of our love on others, until we are able to offer peace and happiness to everyone, even those who have acted toward us in ways that are most unlovable. (Nhat Hanh, 2007, p. 16)

Oliver would have us understand that the space between two people is not an empty abyss dividing us from one another, but a space filled with light and energy and the possibility of connection. Her mutually dependent subjectivity offers a useful response to the complexities we face when working with others. If, with Oliver (2001), we agree that our own subjectivity is constituted in our responsiveness to otherness, we can see that vigilance in responding is self-serving, as well as being "a movement beyond ourselves toward otherness" (p. 135). Affection is not required for this type of active love, although it may bloom over the course of time. Certainly, we are human, and we will stumble on the path. But the intent is there, and this is key. We can ground our love in the everyday actions that constitute pedagogical practice—from advising a student on what courses to take, to sitting side by side with her as she crafts a statement of purpose for a fellowship application. When difficulties arise, as may happen in any relationship, we can rely on the Buddhist practices of mindfulness and lovingkindness to help us move through the rough spots, and eventually—one hopes—to a keener understanding of how to relate to students across differences. We will repeatedly call on ourselves to look upon our students with loving eyes, as Oliver would have us do. The loving eye, she notes, is also a critically discerning eye, so it calls us to be vigilant in our self-examination.

When choosing to love students, vigilant self-reflection may require us to sometimes silence the inner voice of the academic discourse communities into which we have been socialized. Academic discourses create in-groups and out-groups; they often perpetuate the history that has excluded and wounded marginalized students (Hinsdale, 2011; Iverson, 2012). To choose love is to remember to drop our defenses, to stop our inner dialogue so that we can listen fully and deeply—to truly hear what a student is saying. In choosing love, we accept the need for an "ethical hesitation" (Edgoose, 1997), in which we are "unsure of [our] boundaries and [the] limits of [our] liability" (p. 272)—and, I would add—unsure of our abilities to relate across difference. We all know what it feels like to hesitate: it is an embodied response, but also a mental and emotional state, one that can prevent the rush to recognize and judge the other. In the space of hesitation, we can turn to the *brahma-viharas* for direction.

Oliver (2001) asks: “What is love beyond domination? What is love beyond recognition? It is love as working-through that demands constant vigilance toward response-ability in relationships... Love is an ethics of difference that thrives on the adventure of otherness” (pp. 19-20). This is not the meaning of “otherness” in which we are destined to remain forever disconnected from those with whom we are in relationship. Rather, we acknowledge that which we cannot fully understand in another, but we move forward together. Oliver (2001) asserts that “The other’s potential to make me better than I am is the power of love” (p. 224)—a compelling thought to bear in mind as we endeavor to nurture lovingkindness, compassion, and equanimity in relationships with students. Love becomes a form of “ethical agency” that calls us to move toward the other, and to work for more than our own political self-interest. We work daily on our commitment, by means of contemplative practice, always mindful of our social location in relationship to our students, and always knowing that our good works are partial. Being human, we will certainly fail sometimes. But in choosing love, we refuse to objectify our students. The shift in emphasis from the difficulty of relating across differences to the possibility of relationships defined by the air, light, and energy that connect us, allows us to move toward a more loving vision of the pedagogical relationship. Our all-too-human community becomes like the graceful, sacred space of a Benedictine cloister—where arches and columns define the connections between spaces, and the borders enclose air and light and the energy of life.

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