Cultivating Empathy

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The standard Dhamma practice for the human realm - the realm of being affected by people and events, and by our moods, limitations and disappointments — is the cultivation of empathy (*anukampam*). In Buddhist practice, this is made more specific by cultivating four 'measureless states': loving-kindness (*metta*), compassion (*karuna*), sympathetic joy (*mudita*), and equanimity (*upekkha*). Collectively they are known as 'sublime abidings' (*brahmavihara*), states which are all 'lofty, uncramped, measureless, free from hatred and ill-will, to others as to myself.'

The way the Buddha defines these states is by what they are not. They are not cramped, they are free from hatred and ill-will, and they are beyond measure. This is typical of the way the Buddha speaks, a way that emphasises letting go: it's by the removal of certain blocks that healthy states happen. It's not 'pump out the *metta* now,' 'you should have more compassion, otherwise you're not good enough,' but more that if you understand these blocks and practise releasing them, then you can be free of their cramped boundaries. A greater potential can come forth.

These *brahmavihara* are very profound, because if one contemplates the human realm, then what people are often doing is running from shelter to shelter, creating patches of territory, defending them, and curling up inside their own little burrows. Why? Because of a lack of empathy. Sure there are natural dangers, but if the few billion resourceful humans who live on this planet were co-operative and friendly, all that would be no problem. As it is most people have the sense that they have to hold their own against humans of one kind or another.

From the political level right down to that of everyday social life, it's not an uncramped, measureless abiding. We can all find ourselves caught up in contracted ways of being, because the context within which we live, and how we can best operate in it, have not been fully cultivated. Because of this 'ignorance,' we get contracted into a cocooned world of thoughts, memories, hopes and am-

bitions, secret fears, illicit passions, and so on. There's always a toy we can play with in our own little rooms. Therefore to live out here, in a shared world, we need to find a way to be comfortable in that mutual environment. Of course all of us need conventional boundaries— doors that close— but all of us need doors that open as well, otherwise our life is not free. We can't move, and can't feel our own fullness if we're closed in on ourselves. So how do we get to feel good, or at least OK, with others— and when we're alone?

A big part of the solution comes from attending to the flow of emotions. But you can't do that unless you're prepared to feel them in a focused and non-reactive way. That is why we meditate; that's what mindfulness is about. When we bring mindfulness to bear on how we're affected, what arises is a means to handle the emotions — in a non-separative, non-judgemental way. From that transformative shift of view arise the sublime abidings of the *brahmavihara.*

Metta is the quality of well-being, of being given or providing nourishment. The image that is used in the Buddhist commentaries is one of a mother nursing, suckling a baby. It's that kind of feeling— you're just being held and nourishment's being given. This is *metta*. It removes the hard-hearted view of 'everyone for themselves.' This kindness is to be developed towards others, whether you regard them as good, bad, important, unimportant, in a superior or in a lesser position than yourself. Actually, to experience loving-kindness for another is something that we like to do. But also, to cultivate it towards oneself—whether one is feeling stupid, inadequate, joyful, enlightened, exalted, whatever it is— is just as important. In fact, the kindness has to begin with ourselves— otherwise our kindness to others can be something we do in order to win their attention or support. Then the offering of heart is not a free one.

Karuna: compassion or protection. In this case, the image that is used is that of a mother watching over a child in its cot while it sleeps—making sure no harm comes to him or her. In this case, the awareness is a little more spacious, and is one of providing shelter: 'let no harm come to this one.' And similarly compassion is to be developed towards oneself: to protect oneself from abuse— or from neglecting one's own well-being in order to attempt to fulfil needs elsewhere. It's not that you regard yourself as the only one who counts, but it's good to ask: 'Do I have the energy, and the capacity to fulfil that need right now?' Going into 'full speed ahead' when there's no gas in the tank isn't going to help anyone. And if you don't attend compassionately to your own needs in relation to others, eventually you get to resent them for 'taking up my time.' Then you get to feel guilty about that feeling. So although you may doggedly stick to your duty, you lose heart.

Mudita is the joy that is associated with sympathy, with appreciation. The analogy is of a parent seeing that the child is growing up, getting stronger, and being able to do things. 'Very good. You can manage….' It's joyful: 'I know what it's like to feel strong and confident and upright and independent.' *Mudita* is the joy, the rejoicing in another's—or in one's own—good fortune, strength or skilfulness. *Mudita* is connected to *anumodana*, which is the chant we do in the monastery for the acts of offering that sustain us. It is an act of rejoicing, with the reflection:. 'You've done some good *kamma*: wonderful. Don't overlook this. Please reflect on your goodness so that you also feel good.'

Upekkha— this is equanimity. The commentary describes this as when the parent sees that the child is now fully grown and can move around on its own. Then the parent senses: 'Well, he or she will find out what they need to find out. I still care for them, but now they have to discover things for themselves.' This is *upekkha*: it's accompanied by the understanding that we all have to work with our own sometimes confused impulses, habits and attitudes. Equanimity holds a caring space that allows us to grow. It trusts that we can go through what we need to experience; it is love manifesting as trust. We all have to be with our fears and joys, our success and failure, our good and bad, and equanimity allows us to be present with the results of our actions so that we can acknowledge and investigate them. With equanimity we know what is good, as just 'that leads to a good place' rather than 'I am right.' And what was unskilful can be known as ' that was unskilful' rather than being agonized over. So we learn and see things in a way that doesn't attach a big 'I am' to them.

Equanimity is not indifference. *Upekkha* main-

tains the sense of empathic connection— to others as to oneself. So when one is going through a rough time: 'Do I have the breadth of heart to hold that?' Rather than to panic, react, start beating myself up, or run away. Equanimity is not about cheering up, and being happy, but about having confidence in being present. We trust mindful presence of heart to have its effects. With some stuff, you just don't know what to do; but you can know that all you *can* do is be present with it, hold it in an empathic way, and just not keep adding more to it. This is *upekkha*, to others as to oneself.

Through meditation practice we can access a core presence, which feels like an 'inner' state, where things are not happening, and the flow of events has receded. The world disappears, thought quietens, and we feel firmly grounded. There is a sense of singularity, of 'just being here.' This is a valuable basis from which we can look into the roots of mental/emotional behaviour. This takes non-attachment: a clear and empathic relationship to states, energies and attitudes. It requires not sticking to ideas of what I want and what should be, but really relating to what is present. But meditation is not about getting into that inner state just for its own sake, but about moving into and out of states in order to learn and develop non-attachment. And you take the skills of application, of sensitivity and strength with you as you move through different mind-states and levels.

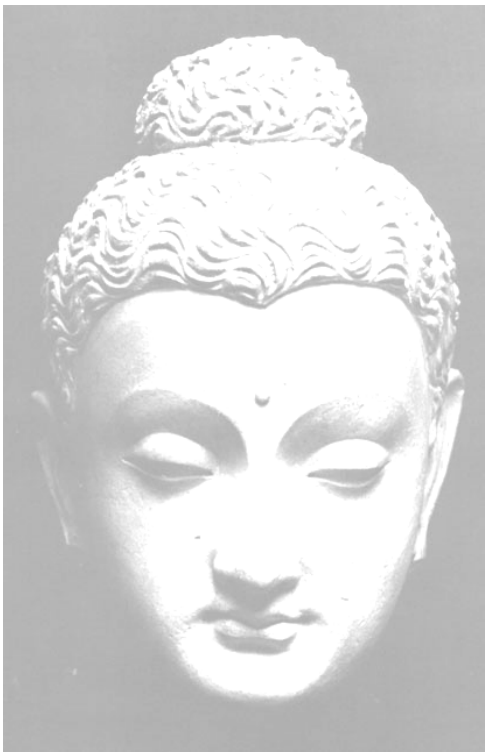
Some of what we have to learn about occurs when we're handling the 'external' world; it is part of what we work with. The great asset of the *brahmavihara* is that they help us to integrate the directness and non-attachment of meditation into how we live. Otherwise, if we see the contemplative practice is purely about inner depth (or any state in fact) we remember that place where we felt comfortable and calm and think: 'If I get a few hours in that everyday, I'm okay. If I get a retreat, I'll get in there a long time. Then I'll feel pretty good and strong before I go "out there" and get battered again. But maybe I won't get enough this time, because last time I was in the middle of my retreat and then someone went and died on me. I had to go to the funeral, and that made me lose my *samadhi*.'

Things can get like this. I think that whatever it is that makes people keen on meditation can carry the urge to find a place away from the abrasive world, a Refuge where we can get away from pasky and complicated humans. But where is the Refuge? Where are you going to be where there aren't any of those humans around? But to look at it another way, you're going to need fellow-humans to help you when you get old, or when you're ill. Why should they bother? Yet an uncramped heart does offer, and does care, quite naturally. This is because *metta*, *karuna*, *mudita*, and *upekkha* are natural responses to the sentient experience when we relate to the simple facts of life, rather than in terms of who you are as an individual and whether you deserve to be looked after. So perhaps if we developed that way of regarding ourselves and others alike as subject to suffering and loss, and wanting happiness and freedom, then there would be a more continual sense of empathy.

Why not? Well, through past afflictions, we learn to defend and we learn to assert control. Control and defence are basic strategies through which we manage the uncertainties and risks of life. And we can get locked into those to a neurotic degree. So the world at large can feel like a place of anxiety, with terrorists and criminals and con-men lurking on every corner or boring into your computer software. Therefore, we create laws and defence and punishment and wars against our enemies…but it isn't a satisfactory solution is it? Huge prison systems, a vast defence budget that tops every other form of expenditure – and the crime and the terrorism don't go away. Meanwhile, not much effort goes into pragmatic kindness, sharing, looking after those in need, or healing the damaged. These *brahmavihara* are obviously not very easy things for the human mind to cultivate….The self-orientation of our minds thinks: 'Nuke the enemy.' 'Why should I have to cooperate and listen and share? As for all this empathy stuff— it complicates things: it's more straightforward and simpler if I do it *my way*.'

Even in meditation retreats you can see this. We easily form our own ways of doing things, and then get irritated when other people do things differently. People can get violently upset about someone breaking the silence; or dogmatic about details of etiquette and ritual or even domestic duties: 'someone didn't clean the

tea-towels properly. I've said this three times. I'm a patient person, *but the tea-towels are supposed to be cleaned properly!'* Why do these things get so intense for us? I've heard things like this in my own mind: it's awful to have so much rage over little things, so much anxiety over seemingly little things— but they trigger patterns of losing control, and suddenly things flare up. Then I want to get out of this shared domain and into Nibbana, and imagine that Dhamma practice is about cutting myself off from everyone else. But just consider how many hindrances to Awakening occur through feelings of resentment, lack of worth, anxiety, and a joyless attitude to life: these have to be addressed and cleared. And even practising on one's own is an emotive experience, with unexpressed emotions, unresolved bitterness, fear or grief welling up from the recesses of the heart….You can only control things for so long; eventually you have to clear them. That means meeting your shadows with empathy; which means meeting other people with the same.



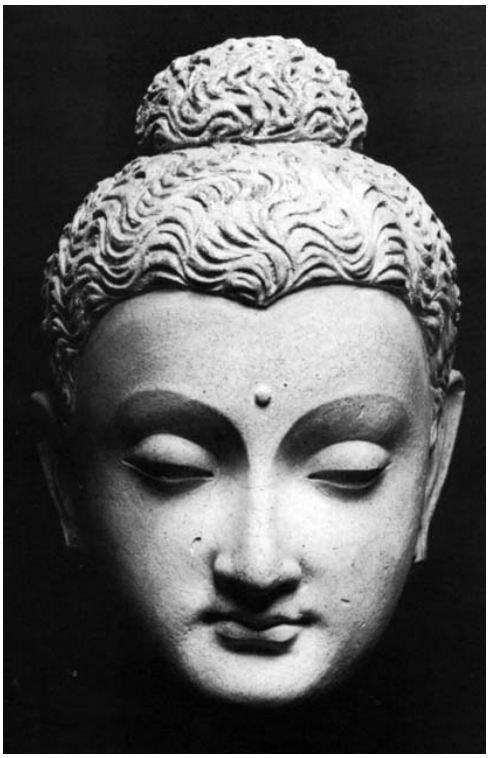
Why not view oneself and others with empathy? Is it something that means that I won't be able to stay in my quiet place? Does kindness and compassion entail social engagements or agonising over myself and getting emotionally involved and tangled up and overwhelmed again when I want to be quiet? Or is it possible to cultivate empathy in a mindful and wise way? To listen to 'me' and 'my shadow?'

Dhamma practice is not about getting sentimentally attached to our moods and sensitivities, but about coming to the place of insight, of a clear view of how it is. And a part of that comes through sensing the meaning of being in something, or with something, rather than identifying with the idea of who I am, my way, and what I want. This is very apparent when you start to come out of the silent centre of meditation and open your eyes and ears; or when you're moving around in walking meditation— there is the sense of being *in* something else. You're with something *other*. It's not actually a physical sense: it's intrinsic to the mind-consciousness that is bound up with potentials and variables. That is, although we can see shapes and hear sounds, we assess them through a mental tint of expectation, uncertainty, or need. There are mental tints, attitudes, of reaching out or withdrawing. comparing and contrasting, liking and disliking, and based on these, the world gets coloured in. Mind colours the world, so we have to comprehend and clear its tints; if we close off from the world, all we really experience is the colour of our own closed door.

The *brahmavihara* help us to deal with what appears; what manifests as the world 'out there', but is actually suffused with psychologies and emotions that are challenging for 'me in here.' If you sieve through some of the topics that spark off the sense of fear or mistrust or aloneness or irritation — you realise that many of them are not all that bad on the external level. Why does one get so angry about having to wait for fifteen minutes in a traffic jam? Is that anger going to make things move faster? Or the waiting any more comfortable? Why did I get so resentful about your talking to this person and not talking to me? Is that going to draw more warmth my way? Maybe it's because we are carrying a lot of latent ill-will and desolation already, in a heart that's so cramped that it has to project it as 'out there.' So when we're in a safe, virtuous, and benevolent place — and yet experiencing hell, the thing to check is: how much of that is coming from our own minds? Maybe there are levels of affliction and confusion that we haven't really acknowledged. Maybe we're looking at people and events through a lens that is tinted by being abused or

neglected by other humans. But right now we don't have to give energy to those tints and relive them; instead, we can develop the empathy and compassion towards that in us and that in others that causes and attaches to pain. And one aspect of that is the division between 'me' and 'others.'

This is where meditation is so useful: with that skilled attention, we can place and sustain mindful awareness in different areas of the body/mind. And the *brahmavihara* are particularly relevant at the doorway between 'self' and 'other', or between one aspect of myself and another. It is just this boundary that is so marked with mistrust, fear of being hurt, and fear of causing hurt. It's an awkward edge…but this is where the cultivation of empathy is so important. In essence it's just the ability to stand alongside one's fear or grief or despond, to feel with it, rather than get lost in it, shut it off or distract into something else.



Fear and irritation are very basic: we all have them just from having been born in a physical body. The body reacts to protect itself; it goes into fear, it retracts; it does that automatically. It has to jump when it's startled, otherwise it doesn't survive. Fear is not some kind of personality disorder. Then sometimes there's that twitch of rage, which is the defence reflex that causes the whole body to flood with as much power as it can. Bodies have to do that. However for human beings it gets much more complex, because the same mechanism gets triggered by all kinds of psychological interpretations. It's no longer triggered by tigers jumping at us, but it's triggered by people looking at us in a disapproving way, or by a raised tone of voice; or even by how we *imagine* other people sense us. We have a thinking mind and a heart that stores perceptions of friendship and threat and so forth; so that we can be living in a state of mild panic all the time. We carry a sense of fear of what we don't know, and intimidation in the face of authority. Alternatively, if you are carrying responsibility, you may get the sense that you've got to carry it until you drop dead. And then they'll say you didn't try hard enough, or weren't good enough, or weren't relaxed and friendly enough…That burdened sense can come up in the mind, even when no-one else is demanding things of you. You can fret and worry and try to get it right and please everyone…but that requires a lot of control and organisation. And control is about being apart from something in order to manage it. So if you're controlling, you're always apart, and that feels alienating.

This intense 'self and others' issue can get triggered into red-alert over your role or responsibilities or gender. You'll feel slightly intimidated or guilty and find yourself doing or saying the things, or presenting yourself in a way that will ward off the punishment that you sense is waiting for you. Isn't it pitiful what we can do to ourselves through losing empathy with our own humanity? But we've got conditioned into making unreasonable demands on ourselves— even when no-one else is giving us a hard time. Then when they are, we have no resources to cope with the blame, failure and loss that are part of the social context. Isn't this something that gives rise to compassion?

Sadness is part of being human. Reptiles seem to act in fear and rage; they don't seem to get a lot of grief going. Humans have a sense of that, because as mammals, we're biologically wired to being in mother-father-offspring-mate relationships. On top of that, we're socially geared to life as part of the tribe. In either family or tribe, ostracism is punitive or even fatal. So with any degree of separation, grief is a natural sense; and it's worsened if the separation is psychological. Then it becomes alienation: this separateness is not just an event, it becomes a life-statement. 'I'm not in a place that's warm

and friendly. Nobody cares. Oh, well, I'll just put up with it. Life's like that.' It gets so chronic that this attitude feels normal and it seems that there's nothing we can do about it, except maybe get a pet, to cope with the numb patches in our lives. This is resignation.: we accept things in a resigned way, and feel that this is equanimity—but it's actually numb grief. And when we cultivate the mind for the ending of sorrow and grief, it doesn't mean burying them in resignation and indifference towards ourselves and others. It means exposing and clearing them.

The practice of the *brahmavihara* develops into the ability to move empathy through the whole field of our perceptions, starting perhaps with just the sense of what's closest, what's touching us right now. Thus: 'In the presence of this, may I be well.' 'May I not be carrying blame and criticism towards myself.' 'If I feel fearful or inadequate, may I not be ashamed of that.' 'May I acknowledge my goodness and rejoice in it: my virtues, the precepts I keep, the bad that I've given up, the commitments I've made. May I acknowledge those and rejoice.' 'May I be able to bear with the foolish things I've done— as past actions, rather than as my self.' These are daily reflections. So once we have established the basic intention towards empathy and good will, we focus on that intention with its steady feel and energy, and work towards placing that benevolent intent alongside any afflictive attitudes, moods, or energies. We ask awareness to stand beside us in our grief or anger or despond— and not try to fix anything. To just be a present witness, with a clear unfussy empathy—and allow a process to unfold.

When I begin a meditation sitting, I often imagine or visualise sitting within a pool of light, something that is gently pleasant and holding. Or I might imagine sitting in sunshine, because I enjoy doing that. So I bring that image, that mood into the mind and spread it into the body. In walking meditation, I might walk along as if I were wading a step at a time through that warm light so that the body feels relaxed. Or I might imagine sitting with the Buddha as a father, mother, or friend— to be right there in the presence of someone who's saying, 'You're all right with me. Whatever you are, I accept it.' Other approaches might work for you; I'm just suggesting ways of evoking a mood. However you do it, it's important to find your own space where you don't have to be *that* good, or happy or vigorous or punctual or neat. You have to place the body in a sense that says, 'you're welcome to be here.'

Now the bodily sense is very important. When we cultivate mindfulness of the body, we sense how the body is affected by psychological/emotional experiences—as in the tension around rage and fear, or the relaxation with friendship. We can bring around an easeful bodily state through the mind—as when I imagine my body being in that which is pleasant, buoyant, uplifting. This can help to free up residual tension, or the numb, shut-down bodily sense that many people are left with after years of coping with rage, fear and grief. It's a sense that we may experience it at particular times—such as with strangers— or in particular parts of the body, such as the area around the eyes or the throat, or the upper chest. It may not seem unusual. But in meditation on the body, you can sense the dis-ease that the body carries. Then, noticing that your chest feels quite closed, you practise slowly sweeping awareness through the whole body, through these places…with the suggestion: 'What would it be like if it were pleasant, okay, safe— right here?' Around your chest or throat or diaphragm, for example— to be willing to receive whatever impression is there, without aversion. This is a way into the *brahmavihara*. It's not about doing something to make things better. It's not about feeling wonderful. It's the willingness to tune in through empathy whenever, wherever. Then what's it like to not have to prove something, defend yourself, or succeed at something? Aren't you more fluent, capable and calm?

Amazingly enough, the empathic process takes over when we are present with our emotional stuff. Sometimes what arises is the awareness of something nourishing, of a sense of seeking our own welfare in a tender and non-grasping way. Sometimes it's the compassionate sense that checks the mind-state or compulsion with which we are harming ourselves….I remember one time being for days on retreat in a very difficult negative state. Everything felt dark and bleak and steeped in the sourness and the hopelessness of all that; stuck in the mood of not being able to make it. What was meant by 'it' was

never clear, but emotions don't play fair. For days I was being turned over by this mood and trying to get over it; but I didn't have the confidence or energy to pull out of it. After about four days solid of this stuff, I was looking for annihilation. To just dump this pathetic mind over an edge somewhere….But then, as I got that image, something shifted. I got the picture, the meaning of it. In a moment I could mentally 'see' this anguished form called 'me' dangling helplessly over the edge of a precipice on a rope… and feel the wish to just cut the rope and have done with him for once and for all. But as I saw and felt the helplessness of this being, there was empathy— and a wave of compassion arose. And from nowhere a mood, a silent 'voice' if you like, came forth. That awareness 'said': 'No, we're in this together. I won't let you down.'

Helplessness can be the gate to despair— but as eventually I allowed myself to clearly see that door and let it be open, an unpremeditated compassion expressed itself. With that, there was a sense of the unshakeable resilience of the human heart. To me, that's a Refuge. Isn't it marvellous that our very suffering can turn itself around when we relate to it rather than fight it or explain or justify it?

When you see how this works towards yourself, then practise it with how you feel about being with others. Investigate what you sense just by being here and occupying a shared space. Just go to the sense of being here, being an object to others— even before anything happens. Open your eyes and be present with no particular aim. Feel how that is in the body. You may sense affects that the mind normally ignores; a slight tightening in the shoulders, a slightly frozen, withheld feeling in the chest or the abdomen. Do you feel comfortable with being in a space with other people around? Or do you feel it would be nice just to get out and be on your own, or doing something? Feel how the body senses that disease: a non-specific sense of irritation, restlessness or nervousness. Or the sadness or resignation that evolves from having to contain and cope with a long-term low-potency fear or rage. But then feel your own presence and the steady intent that comes from meditation— and spread your awareness around you: 'to others as to myself.' Let that be your Refuge.

Can we invite others into that Refuge of empathy? Sometimes it doesn't seem relevant, or useful or necessary…or that they'd notice anyway: such is the lens of separation, personal insignificance and resignation through which we gaze. So it's important to peel off these layers from our hearts: really is there *anyone* who would not appreciate being regarded with kindness and empathy? How could I imagine that 'there's no point?' And regarding others this way is *always* going to do *me* some good!

So we work 'internally' — in our own minds — and 'externally' — with conscious action and speech that is based on sharing and respect and friendliness. Especially in hearing people talk, try to hear beneath the topic, the dismissed remark, the stresses, the places where the pauses occur and there's a reaching out for response — what is needed? And what arises in your own heart when others talk? Rather than the character assessments, the inferences about hidden motives, the waning of attention, and finally the 'oh here he goes again' of resigned indifference, we could learn to listen from an empathic place.

Then, in providing occasions for that empathic listening, we could be a blessing for each other. You could help me to learn how to regard you, and even myself, with an empathic rather than a critical awareness. Other people can help me to welcome my numb 'doesn't matter, leave me alone' patches back to life. So as I practise this towards myself, I am pragmatically learning empathy rather than ideologically demanding that you or I should be more compassionate and loving, and joyful and serene and so on...I learn to be present with my mind, rather than get stuck in it. Even when the heart is cramped, I can regard it directly, with empathy: 'the cramped heart feels like *this*.' Then I can practise welcoming it; I can feel how it affects me in a bodily way, breathe through it, and let it relax..

Practising like this, the tints of fear and tension get cleared: we get big-hearted. And then the uncramped heart feels like *this*: 'it's good to be here.' So as I come out of the nervousness or the uncertainty of being with an 'other', there's a warmth that just starts flowing out — and it doesn't matter who you are and who I am. There's no 'deserves it,' or 'don't get attached,' or getting swept away with moods. It's just steady heartfulness.

Even if it's not that way all the time, to appreciate, to be glad that 'the afflictions are not present right now, may we all enjoy and benefit from this': this is *mudita*. We could think: 'Well, this good patch isn't going to last, don't attach!' Or, 'He's saying that now, but it'll be a different tune come nightfall.' Or, 'That's no big deal. She doesn't deserve that much praise.' Feel the contraction that happens when that view comes into play. We could mutate into a niggardly Scrooge: 'Don't open up to the good, otherwise *y*ou'll get hurt when it passes' —but how long do you want to be defending yourself against happiness? If we do develop the quality of joyful appreciation, then it's more likely that, in that warm climate, the goodness will grow.

And if we learn through the practice, our personal boundaries could be maintained from a mutual understanding and appreciation of each other. So it's not that we shouldn't withdraw, have privacy and solitude, but not to have to retract in that 'bolting rabbit' fashion. If we're clear, 'out here' can be a context wherein we acknowledge and co-operate in terms of each other's needs. It doesn't have to be Desolation Row.

So may we empathise with our wish for well-being, for freedom from hostility, for appreciation and enjoyment, to accept and to be accepted. 'To others as to myself': this is the standard for the human realm.

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