

Holistic Kindness: Metta Pāramī

Ajahn Sucitto

Who isn't touched by acts of kindness? Who isn't moved by the intention to 'pervade the all-encompassing world - to others as to myself - with a mind imbued with kindness - abundant, exalted, without boundaries, free from hatred and ill-will'? Or by the phrase 'even as a mother protects with her life, her child, her only child - so with a boundless heart should one cherish all living beings.'? The ideal of kindness or good-will, *mettā* in the Buddhist tradition, is shared by all spiritual paths; it's immediately and obviously a big part of what spirituality, and true humanity, is all about.

We can all experience good-will towards some being at some time. And we can all lose touch with that bright way of relating - especially to ourselves. So it's valuable to bring to mind that each of us has at some time been on the receiving end of freely-given good will. It's one of the recollections, or 'five-minute meditations,' that we need to undertake throughout the day. I have done this myself for years, recollecting any specific acts of kindness of just this very day and dwelling on the emotional resonance of that - and so far I have never found a day when someone didn't offer a kind word, ask if I needed something, or even talked about our conflict in a gentle and a non-hurtful way. With all of this I acknowledge: 'They didn't have to do that.'

So when you're feeling bitter, anxious, or lonely - remember this: at some time you have been seen with a loving and sympathetic eye. Stay with that impression, breathe it in and out and extend it. Also recall: no matter how mean you may think you are, you experience good-will towards something. They say that Hitler loved his dog and that seems very likely to me. However it's clearly the case that for most beings this possibility of feeling good-will flowing through the heart is restricted. Therefore as the ninth *pāramī*, we can consider both that is a vehicle that can meet and cross the floods that sweep us out of fellow-feeling, and that it rests on the strengths and skills we develop in the other perfections. Then, when we make the resolution of kindness, not just towards kittens on a nice day but even towards cockroaches on a bad day; when we include dictators and brutal maniacs, as well all aspects of ourself and how we appear to be in our all-encompassing world - then we're making *mettā* into a perfection, a vast and transfiguring way of life. The result, the fulfilment of the *pāramī* is a mind that is grounded in wisdom and compassion, and which easily opens to the peace of Nibbana.

Kindness unfolds the mind of self and other

Let's get down to the crunch-point. A heart brimming with love is indeed an attractive ideal, but what's more important is breadth of application rather than intensity of affection. As an

analogy, the Buddha remarked that if bandits caught you and sawed your limbs off, and if at any time during that process, your mind moved into aversion - then you wouldn't have been practising *mettā* thoroughly. So if you include all beings all of the time, you'll recognise that to not allow the mind to move into hatred and ill-will is a pass-mark that you could aim for (And is indeed a very high standard).

Mettā is an extension of the mind, (or 'heart' - *citta*) that in Buddhism is the affective, responsive and sensitive sense. How crucial its alignment is! This is the mind that gets trapped by fear, greed, hatred and delusion, and on the other hand can extend in generosity and other perfections.

So the main issue for the mind is how it relates to what happens. Relationship is fundamental - because we are actually never a being, but always a 'being with' or a 'being in' or even a 'being with the sense of being without'. Consciousness itself is just this awareness of 'being with' in the various 'fields' of seeing, hearing, tasting, smelling, touching and thinking. And in that process of being with, consciousness automatically establishes the sense of a subject and an object - a seer who sees a visible object etc. Out of that duality, the sense of self and other arises. That's the program of consciousness. Notice that self and other are relative positions that depend on each other. You can't have an experience of 'self' without an 'other' (animate, inanimate) that is in contrast to it. However for each mind, the emphasis is on the 'self', the 'me, mine' bit as being the crucial aspect in a world of changing 'others'. Even in your own mind, there appears the 'self' or subject as a watcher and the 'other' (the object) as thoughts and emotions. Yet another way that the mind forms self by being with its thoughts and mind-states is that 'self' is how I conceive myself as being and 'other' as what I should be, might be, or was.

This is what is called 'self-view', and it's the norm for unawakened beings. Self-view rests on the assumption that these dependently-arisen polarities are actually separate and autonomous beings. It infers a self, despite the inability to own or control the body or mind that self adopts as mine; despite the genetic and psychological inheritance from others; and despite the subject's inability to rest unsupported by sights, sounds, affection, and purposeful activity - all of which are outside its dominion. Self-view is blind to interdependency. Consequently its flooding ignorance sweeps us into alienation whilst all the time asserting that this is our empire.

The sense of dissatisfaction that occurs in the territory of alienation then gets attributed not to the disconnection between self and other, but because there's something wrong with either the other, or the self that eventually becomes an 'other' - my mind that I have to deal with. So we pick away at either or both of these apparent culprits. It's often the case then that the boundary mark between self and other becomes one of ill-will, although we may not even

recognise it. That is 'I should be like this', 'I'm the one who has to do this', 'I need to help others to be more the way they should be' - in all of these, the relationship is one marked with a sense of the inadequacy of either 'self' or 'other.' The flood of becoming makes such assumptions reasonable - of course I have to become better! And of course you/ the world could improve! But does frustration and blind reaction make that happen? Following that instinct, do you ever notice that the good times still don't arrive? Now it's not that everything is exactly right, but when the assumption of needing to become something else precedes and is the basic configuration of our attitudes - where's the appreciation, where's the joy? In a world of flawed humans, where's the foundation for good-will? Where's the resource and the *pāramī* that can make the world a better place?

Therefore, in the practice of kindness, we look into the mind as it is happening, a moment at a time, with the intention to gentle it out of the hold of aversion, depression and anxiety. To support this, the teaching is that, although the sense of 'self-other' happens by default, we can have some say over its emotional and energetic flavouring. Our current intention doesn't need to be tense, inadequate and critical; it can be uplifted and uncramped. The sense of self and other can catalyse and give occasion for an intention to offer support. This intention is essential for a happy life - because if we don't use the relational experience in a kind and generous way, then defensiveness, anxiety, fault-finding and grudges are going to haunt our lives and impair the lives of others.

Mettā is non-aversion, but it's also non-fascination, and non-projection. It releases others from being the objects of our projections, lust and idealism. It allows others to not be the way I want them to be for me. True love for another means that you don't appropriate someone or project your unfulfilled wishes or needs onto them. Instead, *mettā* means recognising otherness, and feeling that it's OK. We don't have to make people the same as ourselves or judge ourselves, based on what we think about them. We don't have to feel we have to win them over, or feel that they should satisfy our emotional hunger. And when *mettā* is fully developed it can so allow us to be with the irritating and the unfair and the messy that such perceptions no longer even take hold.

It's the same for ourselves: when we hold ourselves with the mind of good will, we don't have to feel intimidated and compelled to prove ourselves. We have all been small, weak and stupid. We have all been totally irresponsible infants, awkward adolescents, made a mess of things, lied, cheated and maybe even killed. Yet we changed. These were all visitors and forces that occupied the mind, the affective sense that in itself has no manifest image or mood. Now there's no denying the responsibility for allowing one's mind to be so occupied, but that's the responsibility of cultivating virtue, discernment and kindness now, not of obsessing and sustaining the burden of guilt and denial. And one of the major healing tools for this process is *mettā*. With this we take on *samsāra* with non-aversion and non-projection.

We can accept the presence of the unlovely as a visitor conditioned into the mind, and work with it. Then there is nothing to hide from or dread anymore. This is a more useful approach than going through anguish, self-hatred and defensiveness. By stilling these reactions, *mettā* enables us to penetrate to and remove the causes of ill-will at their root.

Start with empathy

Although we may not be performing acts of hatred and violence, the more habitual bottom line of ill-will is that when we are unable to sense empathy and good will. This lack of empathy flavours consciousness and is the source of many problems. Sometimes we are blinded by the instinctual drive that assumes that selfish greed and ambition is the way to happiness; sometimes it's that ego-drive of becoming that wants us to 'better' - more attractive or successful than another; sometimes it's ill-will over a difference of opinion and viewpoint. The thing to acknowledge is that this is just the mind acting in accordance with the basic conditioning of self-view. It's not a permanent truth, not who you are, but the current read-out of the ongoing line of affects and responses - now reflective, now eager, now caring or restless.

Then regarding this mind as it really is, you become awed and compassionate. You realise that many minds don't know that much about kindness, because they haven't received it. Hurtful abusive things may have been done or said to them, appreciation and warmth may have been in short supply. Consequently, their minds can have sour flavourings that attach to their sense of self and others, and engenders aversive or mistrustful responses. The default then is a distorted relational sense in which pleasure and personal security comes from besting others, even through making fun of or scapegoating them. A boundary has been created which blocks empathy - and it doesn't even feel bad at first: getting more than another, putting others down or taking revenge has the same sweet burst to it as a drug. That's why it takes over.

But it doesn't have to. A few years ago, a friend of mine - let's call him Steve - drove his delivery van into a petrol station to fill the tank. The man who as operating the pumps - a young man like Steve - leaned into the car, and noticing the photograph of Ajahn Chah pasted to the dashboard came up with some jeering questions as to who this bald guy in robes was, and why did my friend have such a weirdo pasted up to look at. Steve was taken aback at being mocked at, but held his ground. He explained to the young tough that before reading Ajahn Chah's teachings and meeting his disciples, he'd felt depressed at how meaningless life seemed. He hadn't known what to do with his life, felt lonely and was just wasting his time; sometimes even felt like ending it all, and....But before he could get much further, the other interrupted with ' You mean *you* feel like that too!'

So it is. Someone dares to tell the truth about suffering - and the note of empathy is struck. Suddenly the conflict, the 'you're so different from me' fall away, no-one has changed anything except the 'self-other' line up, but in that moment of empathy there is a mutual deepening. So it is. The way out of ill-will is not through judging who's right, but through finding common ground. Kindness, or non-aversion, begin with empathy, the sense that we're all in this same samsāric ocean together, struggling in the floods.

All beings seek their own welfare. Suffering and the pressure to get free of it are the concern of us all - so surely we could get together to support each other. And yet we often focus on the ways that set us apart. That focus brings even more suffering in terms of comparative judgements which bring competition and conflict. Yet on the other hand, when there is empathy - even at the times when we experience bereavement, pain and fear - the suffering diminishes. There is nothing like a struggle shared that is so conducive to trust, strength and uplift: consider the stories of explorers who against extremity struggle through to safety together - shared conflict brings about fellow feeling with its tremendous mutual strengthening. When the boundary of concern widens to include others - even to the point of those who we're in conflict with - in an important respect, the suffering ceases. This is the suffering that the Buddha pointed out as something that we can bring to cessation. And in the doing of that, we're not just released from pain, we are broadened and deepened out of alienation and into wisdom and compassion.

So there is great practical wisdom in understanding how the mind creates boundaries of concern and interest, and how we can work with these. And there are boundaries, there are other beings on earth. Once we consider 'otherness' - the way beings are different from us - we can feel either insecurity 'How does she compare with me?' or contempt, 'You're not as good as me'; or fear and intimidation, 'You're better or stronger than me.' Or adoration/attraction - 'I want to be bonded to you.' These immediate assumptions are called 'conceit': that is we conceive of people as worse, better, or the same as us. The effect is the mind's responsiveness gets stuck. It doesn't see the rich or successful with compassion for *their* suffering. It doesn't value the beauty, humour or resilience of those 'worse than me.' And it doesn't respect the differences of those who are 'the same as me.' Caught in the conceit of self-view, the heart doesn't extend its boundaries of appreciation and concern; we take each other for granted as 'my wife,' 'my boss,' 'my teacher;' and that fixing of them freezes our sensitivity. In that state, the heart easily tips over into complaining about the other not being the way they should be (or rather the way I want them to be) and so becomes a breeding ground for ill-will. Reflect on this: if you even take someone to be the same as you and put aside adoration and dismissiveness, still you feel confused and frustrated when their opinion is different from yours. And sooner or later it is, isn't it? So there's conflict if we're different - and yet trying to make people be clones of yourself, makes you intolerant. Or you pressurise people into having the same view. But a 'we' that hasn't arisen through recognising and

accommodating differences is a conformist tyranny, not a harmonious abiding. The only way out is *mettā* - the widening of a boundary of fellow-feeling to include all. Even, of course, those one is ill at ease with.

To give an illustration. As a Buddhist monastery is an open system, one gets many visitors, and not all of them are that balanced. A few years ago, a man I'll call Dennis used to frequent the monastery for some sort of companionship, but always grew loud, aggressive to others in the dorm, did what he felt was useful work, but which actually was counter-productive, and in general made a nuisance of himself until he'd leave showering everyone with verbal abuse - until the next time. So when he turned up one day in the meeting hall, there were a few silent groans, and as he started waving his arms around and demanding attention, most people left. One of the monks stood firm and informed Dennis that his behaviour was inappropriate for a monastery - which got Dennis even more riled. I looked at this man with his demands and my mind's lens seemed to widen. Poor guy, he must annoy so many people...and yet he obviously comes to the monastery for company. So I found myself coming right up to him and, calling his name gently, taking him by the arm and walking around the hall with him, talking with him. I had no expectations, it was just a response - but the effect surprised me. His wildness diminished, his bodily tension eased, and as I commented that he wasn't a bad person at all, but that his behaviour frightened people, he came to a standstill. As I put my arm around his shoulder, he quietly slid down the wall to sit on the floor. In a few moments he had curled up and was sleeping like a baby. I laid a blanket over him. After a short nap, he woke up calm and coherent, stayed for tea and then went home. He'd got what he'd been coming for after all these years.

Who goes first: me or you?

So here's the question: who is more important, who gets first servings of kindness - me or you? Well, if your mind is crabby and depressed, you're not in the best condition for ladling out the love... but on the other hand if you're always fussing over every twinge in your own mind, then that feels like narcissism.

It's a trick question, because the practice is holistic: 'to others as to oneself.' The way it works is that you see where development can occur and widen it from there...keep expanding and deepening the sphere of kindness in all directions. This is because there are near-misses. For example, there's an altruism that seems like kindness, and may carry some of its features, but is mixed with the need to feel that heart-energy, and to sense that one is being loving and useful to others. We impose cheerfulness on others. This is missionary kindness. It doesn't always allow people to be the way they are - we want to convert the nasty into the loving and make the sick get well. Now *mettā* may indeed have such effects, but as a Dhamma practice it's focused on intent rather than arrival at a specific state. So we don't practise kindness in order to make others into our idea of what a nice person is. Instead the practice is to cultivate

a conscious field of kindness in which, as aspects of ourselves and other arise in our awareness, they will not be met with fear or negativity. Then we trust the removal of ill-will and self-view to have its effect.

Of course we can't just bring kindness to others without having felt it in ourselves, which means that our limitations, fears, doubts and pains are an essential part of our field-work. So a testing investigation is to check whether we have *mettā* for ourselves, and when we lose it. Do we beat ourselves up and feel guilty when we make a mistake, are late, or don't live up to others' expectations? Do we feel shadow impressions hovering around us over things we have or haven't done? Does our conceiving mind conceive of how great somebody else is and therefore how inferior we are? The learning point is that as long as we pick up on and attach to particular features as self or other, good or bad, we never arrive at holistic good-will. In that self-view, sooner or later someone's going to be inferior and someone superior.

Instead one has to connect good-will to the experience of self and other as it happens; i.e. how I feel about you. Then you bring the intention of good-will to the uncertainty, or the fear or irritation as you experience it. And also be prepared to be affected: be open to what's happening for yourself and the other, without having an answer as to who's right and who's wrong.

One of the nuns in the monastery was born and married in Cambodia. At the time of the Cambodian holocaust, her husband put her and the children on a plane, promising to follow them when he'd concluded some business. She never saw him again. She got busy with life in the U.S.A, not only raising three children, but studying for and gaining a Masters' degree. She had to, to keep her mind away from dwelling on the past. But all the time she could feel hatred for the Khmer Rouge (who had killed her husband) seething inside her. Eventually her intention to help the people of Cambodia rebuild their country brought her into confrontation with that ill-will. How could she bring around reconciliation, when she still hadn't reconciled herself? Through a series of encounters, she learned about meditation, and started to clean her mind of its hatred. However the real test came when she had to go to Cambodia and meet and work with members of the Khmer Rouge - one of whose leaders was still advocating that the children should be taught to fight to cleanse their country of foreign influence. Looking straight in the eye of the leader of the faction that had destroyed her husband and a quarter of the population of her country, she asked him to pause, and then asked forgiveness for the hatred that she had felt for them. She then followed that with offering her forgiveness for any pain that they had caused. Some of the assembly wept, some embraced each other. A few remained aloof, but for many the process moved on.

So in working with others as with oneself, we have to go deeply into the mind. In the direct contemplation of what is arising, at the dividing line between what we're comfortable with and

what we're not, simply note the flavour of consciousness - is it contracted, defensive, anxious, demanding? Listen to the tones and the energies behind the topics that the voices of any mind bring up; tune in to the waves of irritation, fear, guilt, and so on - and extend empathy and non-aversion. It's about not fighting, blocking or running. Holding our centre, we can thus soften the edginess of the mind - and open to include what we can of ourselves and others as they arise in our awareness. This is the cultivation of the boundless mind: over time it widens to include it all.

Building the Capacity

The ability to generate *mettā* depends on both willingness and capacity. These may be in short supply. Those who have experienced sustained abuse can find it very difficult to experience kindness for themselves or for others; those who have not had the secure presence of good-will can be subject to the insecurity that leads to attachment to views and becoming. Our capacity can also be limited by how we're being affected in the present. Although this is a changing quality, when the mind is affected by visitors such as fear, worry, guilt and passion, it easily becomes fixed in that state. If the visitor is anger, then the mind becomes bristling and volcanic. If the visitor is remorse or guilt, the mind becomes an eddy that chases itself and sinks down. So we need to develop strengths and skills to stop being overwhelmed by these fixating forces.

Hence there's a requirement to develop *pāramī*. Generosity and morality are established on, and enhance, fellow-feeling. Subsequently, renunciation means we practise letting go of the sense of covetousness and selfishness, the 'me, me, me' attitude. That, too, is a basis for kindness. With renunciation, we start to let go of the need to be successful or the need for status, and look into the props we use to support our self-image and emotional well-being - including material things, stimulation, busy-ness, status and praise. When one starts to let go of some of those props, then the blank patches in the mind, the raw need to be stimulated and the consequent restlessness, indicate where filling one's emotional body with well-being has to begin.

The first three perfections - generosity, morality and renunciation - make that well-being possible because when one is generous and virtuous, there is self-respect. Because of that good *kamma*, we have friends and emotional brightness in which the mind can extend itself to other beings in empathic rather than grasping ways. Hence we get fuller and richer in ourselves and can let go of a few more props, and as the fear and the need disappear, discernment gets clearer and can see where we need to work. This means we begin to recognise where the boundaries occur in our lives - where we collapse or bristle, and where we contract or get volcanic. We see what affects us and then find the energy to work into those sensitive places.

Extending the mind into sensitive places takes us into the turbulence that the boundary has been created to contain. Often there are emotions and energies that have been pushed aside or repressed, and they lie dormant in the field of consciousness - for as long as we keep busy or can control what's going on. But outside of that - when things go wrong, or somebody or something pushes our buttons; or when we meditate - old senses of being intruded on or pushed around or rejected can get activated. Then what arises are generally forms of fear, grief or rage. Somebody has invaded one's space; one has been denied or pushed out of warmth. There are of course personal versions of these stories, but those are the basic messages of the turbulence out of which need and depression, anxiety and resentment boil up. And with these, the first intention is of patience, then truthfulness, plus the resolve of kindness. Hold the centre, soften, widen, include it all. Sustaining these intentions no matter what leads to the settling and crossing over.

Patience is essential because sometimes it can take a long time staying at the edges before things shift and you get realisations. Truthfulness is required to acknowledge: 'This turbulence, this sense of intimidation is not him, her, them or me. It's actually that affect and response.' So it is: often in our lives we find ourselves going through the same emotional scenarios and the same wounded, 'dumped on' experiences, just with different characters doing the dumping or irritating. First you assume, 'It's him or her.' Then you might think 'It's me, it's my weakness.' But is this really true? You can spend ages attributing causes anywhere you choose in the self-other field but that doesn't release the pain. Instead we need the resolve to stay with it to get to the truth behind the self-view. As you let go of all the discriminations and positions, your mind widens to include it all. This is where the causal arising, the flavouring of consciousness, gets released.

The Great Heart

As a Dhamma-practice we sustain and deepen the intent of kindness irrespective of the various identities and shadow-forms that arise in awareness. That's enough. We establish clear awareness and sustain kindness in the moment where impressions occur and where responses arise. It's not about conjuring up any great feelings of emotional warmth, but a process of staying in touch;; to not blame oneself or blame others; and to not start going into the past to rehash old issues. The 'staying at' that point of the hurt, ill-will and pain, then begins to carry the awareness across to compassion (*karunā*) and transpersonal wisdom.

Karunā is the kindly eye on the helplessness of our suffering. When we experience this without blame or defence or struggle, compassion arises. This is irrespective of the identity or value of the wounded being. Compassion sweeps over judgements of others or ourselves. It knows how terrible it is for anything - even a mass-murderer, tyrant, poisonous snake - to be trapped in pain. When entering into this sphere of compassion, it is not a matter of doing

anything, blaming or feeling sad about it, or wishing it was different. Instead, it is about entering that place where one touches the pain directly. Then through staying in the hurt where it can't do anything, has no remedies, ideas, or philosophies, the mind comes out of the position of 'me.' The small, localised state of mind opens out of the default 'self-and-other' sense into the Great Heart.

The non-doing of such a heart has powerful effects. Instead of trying to conjure it up (and feeling frustrated if 'it doesn't work', or 'I'm not good enough'), healing happens by itself. Then there is a sense of grace, of receiving a compassion which is greater and more boundless than any of one's personal attributes or efforts. Truly this is called a 'divine' (or sublime) abiding (*brahmavihāra*). And through contemplating the selfless and conditioned nature of this abiding, the mind lets go, not only of ill-will, but also of the push of becoming and self-view. This is the shore of the Beyond.