

Metta Week 3

Reading taken from Ajahn Sucitto, *Parami: Ways to Cross Life's Floods*

Cultivating a Boundless Mind 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 keep it for yourself, and you fuss 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. You 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 one is being loving and useful to others. We impose a requirement on others that they benefit from our love. 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 others 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 fieldwork. So it's useful 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 create an image 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 goodwill. With self-view, sooner or later someone's going to be inferior and someone superior. Instead, we have to connect goodwill to the experience of self and other as it happens; that is, how I feel about you in the moment. Then we bring the intention of goodwill to the uncertainty, or fear or irritation as we experience it. And we're also prepared to be affected: we stay open to what's happening for self and 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 also studying for and gaining a Masters' degree. She had to, in order 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 to 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 she asked forgiveness for the hatred that she had felt for him and his faction. She followed that with offering her forgiveness for the 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 mind brings 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 thus can soften the edginess of the mind. We can open to include the experience of ourselves and others in our awareness. This is the cultivation of the boundless mind; over time, it widens to include it all.

Building 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 goodwill 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 conditions are always changing, 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.

morality are foundations for fellow-feeling. And with renunciation, 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, which include material things, stimulation, busyness, status and praise. When we start to let go of some of those props, then we notice the blank patches in the mind, where there's a raw need to be stimulated, and we notice the consequent restlessness. These blank patches indicate where we must begin filling our emotional body with well-being. The first three perfections — generosity, morality and renunciation — make well-being possible because when one is generous and virtuous, there is self-respect. Because of that good *kamma*, we have 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. As the fear and the need disappear, discernment gets clearer, and we can see where we need to work. This means we begin to recognize where fearful, self-defensive boundaries occur in our lives.

Beyond these boundaries we collapse or get incoherent, and in maintaining them we contract or get volcanic. But with the *pāramī*, we see what affects us at the edge of our sense of self, and then we find the energy to work into that sensitive place.

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 our space; we have 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. 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 along the self-other boundary, but that doesn't release the pain. Instead you 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 latent tendency that is holding the self-other boundary gets released.

Quotes and Suggestions:

Just as a strong conch blower can easily notify the four directions without any difficulty, in the same way, when the liberation of mind through kindness is thus developed, thus followed, the results of limited [unskillful] actions don't remain and linger on there. (S. 42.8)

There's the case when a bhikkhu cultivates the Enlightenment-factor of mindfulness accompanied by kindness and similarly the Enlightenment-factors of investigation-of-states, energy, rapture, tranquillity, concentration, equanimity, accompanied by kindness which is based on detachment, dispassion, ceasing and leading to complete relinquishment.

Reflection Give consideration to any acts of goodwill that have been shown to you this day. Do likewise to any such actions that have occurred in the past. Then reflect in a similar way to any such actions — encompassing generosity, loyalty, advice, care, service or forgiveness, that you know have occurred between other people. Dwell on such reflections long enough to establish the emotion and attitude of kindness.

Ajahn Sucitto:

<https://forestsangha.org/teachings/books/parami-ways-to-cross-life-s-floods?language=English>