Holistic Kindness:
Mettā Pāramī

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 a kindness that is 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 goodwill (*mettā*) expressed in these phrases from the Buddhist tradition is one that is shared by all spiritual paths. Kindness is immediately and obviously a big part of what spirituality, and true humanity, is all about.

We can all experience goodwill towards some being at some time. However, 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 goodwill. It's one of the recollections, or 'five-minute meditations,' that is useful to undertake throughout the day. I have done this myself for years, recollecting specific acts of kindness that occurred in this very day, and dwelling on the emotional resonance of that. 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 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 goodwill towards something. We all do — they say that even Hitler loved his dog. However, it's clearly the case that for most beings this channel of goodwill gets blocked from time to time by a flood of ill-will. Therefore we need a means to carry the heart across the floods that submerge our fellow-feeling. And 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 as all aspects of ourselves — 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 Nibbāna.

The Mind of Self and Other

Let's get 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 recognize that to not allow the mind to move into hatred and ill-will is a pass-mark you could aim for. (And that, indeed, is a very high standard).

Mettā is an extension of the affective and responsive mind or heart. How crucial its alignment is! On the one hand, the mind can get trapped by fear, greed, hatred and delusion, and on the other hand it can extend in generosity and other perfections.

The main issue for the mind is how it relates to what happens. Relationship is fundamental, because we are actually never a stand-alone being, but always a 'being with' or a 'being in,' or even a 'being with the sense of being without.' Consciousness 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, a hearer who hears an audible 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 or inanimate) that is in contrast to it. However for each mind, the emphasis is on the self; the 'me, mine' bit is the crucial aspect in a world of changing others. Even in your own mind, there appears the self (the subject) as a watcher and the other (the object) as thoughts and emotions. Or the self is how you conceive yourself as being, and other is what you should be, might be, or were.

This is 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. It infers a self, despite the inability of that self to own or control the body or mind that it adopts as its own; despite its genetic and psychological inheritance from others; and despite its 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 a sense of separation and alienation, whilst all the time asserting that this is our empire.

The sense of dissatisfaction that occurs in the territory of alienation is not attributed to the disconnection between self and other. Instead, ignorance tells us that there's something wrong with either the other, or the self that eventually becomes an other — that is, 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 recognize it. We might say: '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 and 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 goodwill? Where's the resource and the *pāramī* that can make the world a better place?

Accepting Otherness

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-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 recognizing 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 other people. 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 allow us to be with the irritating and the unfair and the messy, so that such perceptions no longer even take hold.

It's the same for ourselves: when we hold ourselves with the mind of goodwill, 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. Now there's no denying the responsibility for allowing one's mind to be so occupied, but our current responsibility is one of cultivating virtue, discernment and kindness, 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 petty-mindedness, the guilt and anxiety as visitors conditioned into the mind, and work with them. Then there is nothing to hide from or dread anymore. This is a more useful approach than going through another round of anguish, self-hatred and defensiveness. By stilling these reactions, *mettā* enables us to penetrate to, and remove, the root cause of ill-will — often towards ourselves — underneath the complexes.

Start with Empathy

Although we may not be performing acts of hatred and violence, the more habitual bottom line of ill-will is an inability to sense empathy and goodwill. 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 we are pushed by the ego-drive of becoming that wants us to be better, more attractive or more successful than another; sometimes we feel 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 expression of the ongoing series of

affects and responses — now reflective, now eager, now caring, now restless.

If you can regard this mind as it really is, you become compassionate. People's minds are conditioned and formed around circumstances. You realize that people may not know much about kindness simply because they haven't received much of it. Hurtful, abusive things may have been done or said to them; appreciation and warmth may have been in short supply. Consequently, such minds can have sour flavourings which attach to their sense of self and others, and which engender aversive or mistrustful responses. The default then is a distorted relational sense in which pleasure and personal security come 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 was operating the pumps — a young man like Steve — leaned into the car and noticed the photograph of Ajahn Chah pasted to the dashboard. He 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, 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 he even felt like ending it all. 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,' falls away. No one has changed anything except

the self-other line up, but in that moment of empathy there is a mutual deepening. The way out of ill-will is not through judging who's right, but through finding common ground. Kindness, or non-aversion, begins with empathy, the sense that we're all in this same samsāric ocean together, struggling in the floods.

Softening Comparative Judgements

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. This focus brings even more suffering, in terms of comparative judgements that bring competition and conflict. 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 so conducive to trust, strength and uplift as a struggle shared. 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 those with whom we're in conflict — in an important respect, the suffering ceases. This, the Buddha pointed out, is the suffering we can bring to cessation. In doing that, we're not just released from pain, we are broadened and deepened out of alienation, 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. Of course there are boundaries; there are other beings on earth. But what counts is how those boundaries are maintained, opened and closed. When 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, we can feel 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 that 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 the heart becomes a breeding ground for ill-will.

Reflect on this: if you take someone to be the same as you, 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 not only when you think others are different from yourself, but also when you think they are the same. Trying to make people be clones of yourself makes you intolerant. Or, you pressurize people into having the same view. But a 'we' that hasn't arisen through recognizing 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 with whom one is ill at ease.

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 and aggressive to others in the dorm. He did what he felt was useful work, which was actually 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; 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,' I thought, 'he must annoy so many people. 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 as I did so. I had no expectations; it was just a response, but the effect surprised me. His wildness diminished, and his bodily tension eased. As I commented that he wasn't a bad person, but that his behaviour frightened people, he came to a standstill. I put my arm around his shoulder, and 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.

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.

Hence there's a requirement to develop *pāramī*. Generosity and 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.

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, of not blaming oneself or others, and of not 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. And it arises 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, or 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 were different. Instead, it is about entering that place where one touches the pain directly. Then, through staying in the hurt where the mind can't do anything, has no remedies, ideas or philosophies, it comes out of the position of 'me.' The small, localized 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'), we let the healing happen by itself. Then there is a sense of grace, of receiving compassion that 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 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.