



Ajahn Sucitto

# CULTIVATING EMPATHY

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The overarching 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 (*anukampa*). This is the fellow-feeling that motivated the Buddha to teach; it's the sense that we live in a shared scenario with its qualities, problems and potential. When it's activated, it follows one or more of four intentions: loving-kindness (*mettā*), compassion (*karunā*), sympathetic joy (*muditā*), and equanimity (*upekkhā*). Collectively they are known as the 'measureless' or the 'sublime abidings' (*brahmavihāra*), states that are all 'lofty, uncramped, measureless, free from hatred and ill-will, to others as to myself.' They are all described in this way. It defines their basis, the empathic sense.

The Buddha defines these states by what they are not. They are not cramped, they are free from hatred and ill-will, and they are measureless in that they rise above comparisons and judgements – such as, who deserves what, how much I should give, how long should I persist and to whom I should extend goodwill: all these measuring attitudes cramp the heart and limit its potential. So the Buddha brings these states to mind in a way that emphasizes letting go: it's by the removal of certain blocks that healthy states naturally arise. It's not just a case of simply pumping out *mettā* on demand, or worrying as to whether one is compassionate enough, but rather that if you understand the obstacles to goodwill and practise releasing them, then a greater potential naturally comes forth.

These *brahmavihāra* are transformative; they change the way our human realm is structured and motivated. In the cramped and anxious realm, people are often running from shelter to shelter, or creating patches of territory where they feel safe, or curling up inside their own little burrows and closing off the rest of the world. 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 cooperative and friendly, all that would be no problem. As it is, most people feel that they have to hold their own against some other humans or society in general.

In this cramped state of limited empathy we assume we are independent solitary beings. However, this is just not true: we needed parents to be conceived, medical support to get born, and as we grow up we do so dependent on the resources of a shared planet and the culture and infrastructure of the society we live dwell in. If that isn't deeply sensed, with the accompanying sense of respect, responsibility and gratitude, this is ignorance. Yet sadly enough, that empathic sense may be missing, and people end up dwelling in a cocoon of thoughts, memories, hopes and ambitions, secret fears, and illicit passions, watching TV and playing computer games in their our own little rooms. For many, depression and anxiety are at the door, and even with such distractions, barely kept

away.

So feeling good with others and with ourselves in an undistracted way isn't just about being a nice person, it's about releasing life-inhibiting blocks. A big part of the solution comes from being able to attend to the flow of emotions; to let them arise and pass. It's a cleansing process. But you can't do that unless you're capable of feeling emotions in a focused and non-reactive way. That's what mindfulness is about. When we bring mindfulness to bear on how we're affected, it gives us a way to step back from the pressure of emotional reactivity. Then we're able to be present with them, allow them to arise and manifest and pass. This reduces their pressure, without suppression or judgement, and the heart settles. In this natural emotional settledness the sense of empathy becomes clear and the sublime abidings can manifest.

The specific quality of the measureless state depends on what one is attending to or why. *Mettā* 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 *mettā*. 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. It feels good: to experience goodwill for another is something that we like to do. But it must also be cultivated towards oneself – whether one is feeling stupid, depressed, inadequate, joyful, guilty, or excited. 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. And if it's not free, goodwill is not a genuine offering of heart.

*Karunā* is 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 the intention is to shelter: 'let no harm come to this one.' Compassion is to be developed towards oneself in the same way: to protect oneself from others' hostility, or self-aversion – or from neglecting one's own well-being in order to attempt to fulfil needs elsewhere.. It's not that you have to 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 your time. Then you get to feel guilty about that. In any case, although you doggedly stick to your duty, you still lose heart.

*Muditā* is the joy that is associated with appreciation; of acknowledging goodness, or inner strength. 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.' *Muditā* is then the gladness, the rejoicing in another's – or in one's own – good fortune, strength or skilfulness. The word is connected to *anumodanā*, 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 good kamma: wonderful. Don't overlook this.' The understanding is that skilful qualities are increased, and get embedded in the heart, through that act of personal appreciation. If we dwell on our strengths, they become readily available. We can touch into *muditā* any moment when afflictions are not present! 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.' But 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 you'll get hurt when it passes' – but how long do you want to be defending yourself against happiness?

*Upekkhā* is equanimity. The commentary likens this to the mood of a parent seeing that the child is now fully grown and can move around on its own. Then the parent senses: 'He or she will find out what they need to find out. I still care for them, but now they can discover things for themselves.' *Upekkhā* carries trust: it's accompanied by the understanding that we all have to work with our own impulses, habits and attitudes. In this process, equanimity sustains the empathy that keeps the heart open and allows us to grow, rather than be perfect from day one. Or perfect at all: with empathy we begin to sense that 'perfection' is a form of ill-will. If you look for perfection, what you find is the critical and discontented mind. Instead of setting up an ideal, equanimity trusts that we can be who we are and go through what we need to in order to grow.

Equanimity doesn't sound that emotionally rich, but it is a very generous form of love. 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. This is transformative.

*Upekkhā* is not indifference. So when one is going through a tough time, or seeing others struggling, rather than panicking or self-pitying or

collapsing, equanimity maintains confidence in being empathically present. We trust mindful presence of heart to have its effects. With some stuff, you just don't know what to do; all you can do is be present with it, and just not keep adding more to it. This is *upekkhā*, to others as to oneself.

Some of what we have to learn in cultivating empathy occurs when we're handling the 'external' world; the *brahmavihāra* help us to integrate the direct mindfulness and non-reactivity of meditation into how we live. Otherwise, if we limit contemplative practice to one of solitude or inner depth, we remember that place where we felt comfortable and calm and think: 'If I get a few hours in that everyday, that's OK. 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, in the middle of my retreat, someone went and died on me. I had to go to the funeral, and that made me lose my *samādhi*.'

Life 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 pesky and complicated humans. But where is the Refuge? Where are you going to be where there aren't any of those humans around? 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 *mettā*, *karunā*, *muditā*, and *upekkhā* are natural responses to the sentient experience when we relate empathically to the 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 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 swindlers 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. 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 *brahmavihāra* are obviously not such straightforward qualities to cultivate!

This is because of ignorance, whereby fellow-feeling gets replaced by self-orientation. Such a mind then thinks: 'Nuke the enemy.' 'I'm getting mine.' '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 monastic communities you can see this. We 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 or anxiety over little things – but they trigger patterns of losing control, and suddenly there's a flare-up. Then I want to get out of this shared domain and imagine that *nibbāna* comes through 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 when practising in solitude there is still the emotive experience, with unresolved bitterness, fear or grief welling up in terms of memories or projected scenarios. You can only control things for so long; eventually you have to clear them. That means meeting your shadows with empathy; and that means meeting other people with the same.

Dhamma practice is not about getting sentimentally attached to our moods and sensitivities, but about coming to a clear view of how it is to have a human consciousness. Consciousness that arises through the six senses always brings with it the sense of being with something that's heard, seen, touched, smelt, tasted or conceived. Even when you're sitting with your eyes closed, you're with what your mind brings up. Then when you open your eyes and ears, or start moving around – there is the sense of being in something else, with something other. This is intrinsic to consciousness. Then that 'other' is decorated by the mind. That is, as we see shapes and hear sounds, we assess them through a mental tint of familiarity or expectation, uncertainty, interest, need and so on. There are attitudes and inclinations: 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 try to close off from the world, all we really experience is the colour of our own closed door. The *brahmavihāra* offer their support in dealing with what appears, either as 'me' or 'them' or 'the world' or, 'what I should

be', that we find challenging. A lot of this only gets revealed in meditation where you get to the roots of the heart. Here, unless you're enlightened, you're carrying some self-view, and that carries latent ill-will because self-view is already a cramped and non-sharing environment. The twin of ill-will is hostility, whereby we assume that others look down on us, or dislike us, or are better than we are. And certainly the world can be a harsh and dishonest place. That being the case, it's even more important not to take in its poisons, but regularly clear out the senses of desolation, mistrust and negativity that activate our own latent tendencies. It's only those that affect the heart: sound, sight and all the rest carry no messages in themselves; it's what they trigger in ourselves that brings pain – or awaken our empathy.

The most fundamental structure that the heart adopts is the division between 'me' and 'others'. If you investigate what those words bring up, you'll notice that they, and all the consequent ideas and moods, both arise in the same place: the heart. It's natural enough, but it is just a way of attributing experience. This separative sense is for functioning: although we remember and affect each other in the heart, the external senses present a world that is 'out there' and other. Accordingly, there is fear and irritation: 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 a twitch of rage, the defence reflex that causes the body to flood with as much power as it can. Bodies have to do that.

However for human beings things become more complex, because the separative sense is carried into the heart. They're 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. So when it's carried into the heart, this separative sense is the root of mental pain; separation from the loved, separation from what one wants or feels one should be.

We have a thinking mind and a heart that stores perceptions of friendship and threat; we can be living in its imagined reality all the time. We can be carrying a sense of sadness over the loss of loved ones or of intimidation in the face of authority. Sadness is part of being human. Reptiles act in fear and rage; they don't seem to get a lot of grief going. Humans sense sadness, 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, a state in which separateness is not just an event, it's a life-statement. 'I'm not the kind of person who others can feel friendly towards. 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. So 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 'others' that we carry can also be merciless: 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 still say you didn't try hard enough, or weren't good enough, or weren't relaxed and friendly enough ... Any of these impressions can come up in the mind: even when no-one else is demanding things of you, you imagine that they might be. You can fret and worry and try to get it right and please everyone ... but that requires a lot of control and organization. And control is about being apart from something in order to manage it. But if you're controlling, you're always apart, and that feels alienating. So you try harder to get people to approve of you or ward off the punishment or scorn that might await your first mistake ... these 'self and others' issues can get triggered into red-alert. Isn't it pitiful what we can do to ourselves through losing empathy? And if we do, we have no resources to cope when we do make a mistake, or meet the blame, failure and loss that are part of the social context. Isn't this something that gives rise to compassion?

So the doorway between self and other, or between one aspect of my mind and another, gets marked with mistrust, fear of being hurt, and fear of causing hurt. And this is where the cultivation of empathy is so important. In essence it's just the ability to stand alongside one's anxiety about what others think, one's irritation or despond, and to feel with it, rather than get lost in it, shut it off or distract into something else. Then we aren't embellishing the separative structure, so we at least get to the root of what is stirring the heart.

At the place between self and other, the practice of the *brahmavihāra* is invaluable. It entails moving empathy through the entirety of our perceptions, and inner reality, starting perhaps with just the sense of what's touching us right now. To put it simply: 'In the presence of this (sensation, mood, irritation etc.), may I be well.' 'May I not be carrying blame and criticism towards myself.' '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 and appreciate

those.' 'May I be able to bear with the foolish things I've done – as past actions, rather than as my self.' So once we have established the 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 practise in this way, I often imagine or visualise sitting within a pool of light, something that is gently pleasant and doesn't need anything from me. Then 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 friend – to be right there in the presence of someone who's saying, 'However you are now, 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.

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 irritation 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 something pleasant, buoyant, or 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 life. This numbness – such as with strangers, or in the area around the throat or the upper chest – may not seem unusual. But in meditation you can sense it as dis-ease, and then practise slowly sweeping awareness through the whole body and through the numb place, with the suggestion: 'What would it be like if it were pleasant, OK – right here?' And you maintain a willingness to receive whatever impression is there. It's not about discovering some hidden truth, or doing something to make things better. It's just about tuning in through empathy. Then notice results: you might just feel more settled or at ease, or you might recognize what was making you tense.

I remember one time being for days on retreat in a difficult negative state. Everything felt dark and bleak and steeped in sourness and hopelessness; stuck in the mood of not being able to make it. 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 of this stuff, I was looking for annihilation. To dump this pathetic mind over an edge

somewhere ... But then, as I got that image, something shifted. In the picture, I got the meaning of it. 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. Then, 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.' Sometimes you have to hit rock-bottom before the empathy kicks in.

Can we invite others into that Refuge of empathy? 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? Are there character assessments, and inferences about hidden motives? Does your attention wane until there's the 'Oh here he goes again' of resigned indifference? Feel how any of that is in your body. You may sense a slight tightening in the shoulders, or a withholding in the chest. Feel how the body senses that dis-ease: a non-specific sense of irritation, restlessness or nervousness. Sure, other people's stuff isn't always what we want but none of us can always be a source of delight. So, practise: feel your own presence and the steady intent that comes from meditation – and spread our awareness around you: 'to others as to myself.' Let that be your Refuge. This might help others, but at any rate we get big-hearted. And the the uncramped heart feels like this: 'It's good to be here.' There's no 'deserves it,' or 'don't get attached,' or getting swept away with moods. It's just steady heartfulness.

Of course all of us need to have boundaries – door that close – but all of us need doors that open as well. We can't move, and can't feel our own fullness if we're closed in on ourselves; these measureless abidings are a necessity. They can be developed a little at a time, to oneself and *muditā*, appreciation of the goodness, our resources will grow. So our personal boundaries are to be maintained with mutual understanding and appreciation; it's not that we shouldn't have privacy and solitude, but we don't have to retract in that 'bolting rabbit' fashion. If we're clear, 'out here' can be a context wherein we acknowledge and cooperate in terms of each other's needs. It doesn't have to be Desolation Row.

So may we empathize 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 has to be the standard for the human realm.

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