



Ajahn Abhinando

KINDNESS

Kindness

Adapted from a talk given at
Aruna Ratanagiri Monastery in 2010.

Ajahn Abhinando



Aruno Publications

Kindness is nourishing for all of us. How do we feel when we are met with kindness or experience kindness in ourselves? How do we feel when we perceive it as being absent? The difference should make it clear to us that we will benefit from paying attention to kindness, and from trying to cultivate our ability to be kind. In fact, the unobstructed heart is said to have kindness as its natural foundation all the time. So whenever we check and notice that this quality is missing, that we can't feel it, we can take this as an indicator that our heart is obstructed.

Probably most of you are aware of the traditional form of *mettā* meditation, in which you recite a standard phrase to yourself. There will be some variations in the phrases used. The ones I use are: 'May I be well. May I be peaceful. May I be happy'. In this case the well-wishing is directed to oneself. The traditional way in which kindness meditation is still taught nowadays by most teachers in Asia is to start with oneself, the underlying assumption being that this is actually the easiest way to start; that it is natural for all of us to like ourselves and wish ourselves well. To Westerners this might seem counter-intuitive. For many of us it is the exact opposite: it is hardest to offer kindness and well-wishing to ourselves. This is not so for everyone, of course, but suffering caused by low self-esteem and a hypercritical mind is endemic in our culture, and that trend has started to spread into traditional Buddhist cultures in Asia as well.

With this in mind, we tend to start by bringing up the memory of someone towards whom we feel naturally kind, perhaps someone who has helped us in important ways, so that we naturally feel grateful to that person. Hopefully we can all think of such a person. The idea is to hold the image of the person you remember in your mind and see how this affects you. What happens when you bring up this memory? Do you feel a response to it? Where do you feel that response? Can you actually feel something in the body? Feelings like kindness are mainly located in the chest – it is literally in the area of the physical heart that we can feel a resonance, some warmth perhaps, or pressure or tenderness. Then wish that person well, saying silently in our mind, in our heart: 'May you be well. May you be peaceful. May you be happy'. Then keep centring your attention in the body, in the chest area; notice whether you feel something there in response - warmth, softness, anything. It doesn't matter whether the feeling is strong or very subtle; bring your attention to it, as if you were massaging that area with your attention. Feel it in the body; try to increase it.

This practice is a tool. Just like other tools it doesn't always work, and it works differently for different people. So if this tool doesn't work for you,

don't worry about it, there are many other things you can do. But if you would like to try this tool out and cultivate it, even if you don't feel anything to begin with, never mind. If you bring up the memory of someone or something, you can repeat a well-wishing thought to yourself, and if that is really what you feel or would like to feel about that person, it is authentic enough. Just keep it going. Perhaps sooner or later you will also start to feel it in the body. The important thing is to practise with it for some time, at least a few minutes at a time, to cultivate it consciously. By doing this we can stimulate that particular kind of feeling, as other memories might trigger other kinds of feeling. So we use this tool, this practice, to kindle kindness in our heart, to get it going; but then we realize that this kindness is a possibility we always have, a resource to which we can always choose to pay attention. If we remember this and keep using this tool, we can strengthen our resource, in the same way as we cultivate awareness through the practice of continuously bringing attention back to the breath. The more we do that, the stronger grows the capacity just to be aware of something. We can consciously cultivate kindness in the same way, but it is important to recognize that this capacity for kindness is something we already have; it is ours.

We can keep this practice going in our meditation over a period of time, bringing up helpful images, repeating our well-wishing thoughts, and paying attention to and strengthening the experience of kindness in our body and mind. Then we can start to play with the space we have created. This is an attention practice, so we bring attention to the chest. We pick up the sensations of warmth and softness related to our kind intentions, and we merge our attention with those sensations. It is as if we were creating a warm space – a heart space, you might say. So we are aware of the fact that our attention is not just attention; it has an affective quality. It has that quality anyway in some form or other, whether we are aware of it or not, but in this case we pay conscious attention to it and try to cultivate a quality of warmth in our attention. We are not just creating a space of awareness, but warming it up, creating an atmosphere of warmth, of kindness, of welcome.

Once we have a clear impression of the sensations related to kindness in our chest, we can, by moving our intention, try to spread them through our body and see how that affects the body. We can even address the body, using that phrase of well-wishing; saying: 'May you be well, may you be peaceful, may you be happy' to our body. This is particularly something we can use when we feel discomfort or pain, or when dealing with illness. If we pay attention to discomfort or pain in the body and our attention carries a

sense of kindness towards the body, this will have an effect on the way we receive our experience. Grounding kindness in the body is also a way of making it more stable and durable. We can literally carry kindness around in our body. We take our body wherever we go, so if we can ground this feeling of kindness in our body, we will take it around with us too. If kindness is not grounded in the body, the feeling will easily dissolve when it meets some challenge.

First we establish this heart space for a while; then once it is clearly established, we can invite different people into it. We can bring up images of various persons we know. The recommendation, of course, is first to bring up people to whom we naturally feel kind – to keep developing the feeling of kindness, making it stronger, creating more and more internal warmth. After a while we can start to invite people about whom we usually feel neutral, and see what happens. We may then start to realize that this space of kindness can exist quite independently of circumstances. It is ours, so to speak; it doesn't have to depend on the person we're thinking about or with whom we're in contact, to whom we're relating. It might be easier to kindle kindness with a person we like, to whom we feel grateful; but once the flame of kindness has been lit, we realize it is actually something we can always choose to keep alive; and there's an empowerment in that.

If we continue this practice with people about whom we feel neutral, repeating our phrase: 'May you be well, may you be peaceful, may you be happy', it might affect the way we feel about those people. We might start to see them in a different way. That can be very interesting. Then the real challenge is to bring into our consciousness people we don't like so much or don't like at all, or with whom we are in conflict, people we find difficult. Again, we see what happens. We don't demand or expect a particular result, that something really good should be happening or that something should change. It might not. You might just feel the heart space closing down. That's what usually tends to happen. When that is the case, we are not supposed just to keep trying harder or to judge ourselves. Rather, we go back to a place where we find this practice easy, perhaps to the person with whom we started. Why? Because we recognize: 'OK, that space of kindness I have opened up in my heart is not yet strong enough, it is not well enough established, so I need to do a bit more work.' It's like if you're a weight-lifter and you're trying for a new record, but the weight just doesn't move – so you say: 'Oh, all right' and then go back to the gym and do some more practice; you try some lighter weights first until you become stronger. You can try the record weight again later.

Maybe one day we will succeed in wishing someone we don't like well. It's not about liking where we disliked, or pretending to like, but about seeing whether we can develop a capacity of heart, of kindness that is independent of the experiences we encounter. That needs a gradual training of the heart. And a very strong empowerment comes with it, because it means that our heart becomes more independent from other people. Others are less capable of influencing our moods or states of mind, because we develop our own inner resource for feelings of wellbeing and kindness towards ourselves and others. The same applies to any experience we might dislike and from which we therefore habitually shrink. Our increased capacity for kindness might give us the extra space to allow ourselves to stay more open and be more willing to accept unpleasant feelings. That gives us a ground on which to stand, from which we can then investigate our experience. It might give us the strength to look at people in different ways, see different aspects of them which may be clouded over or blocked out if we are just reacting to our perception or feeling that they are being unpleasant and unkind to us.

You will have experienced that when there's a conflict or a disagreement, we often just bounce off each other with our emotional reactions. Mostly we immediately pick up the other person's emotional state, whether they're afraid, aggressive or judgemental, for example. Often that doesn't allow us to hear what that person has to say, even if it's actually quite sensible. Before the argument even enters the rational part of our mind, we react on an emotional level to the other person's emotional state. For example, if we have to point out something difficult to someone, it is much easier and often more effective if we can maintain a sense of kindness towards that person. It doesn't always work, of course; success also depends on the capacity of the other person to pick up our good intentions. But they are more likely to listen to us if they are able to pick up the fact that we are coming from a place of kindness. That always makes it easier to take in something difficult such as criticism, whereas if we come from anger or righteousness, even if we have the best arguments, the other person is much less likely to listen to them, but instead will react to a feeling of being attacked.

The other very important aspect of this practice is how we relate to ourselves and the conflicts we carry within ourselves., From what I hear and read, I believe that in the Buddhist countries of South East Asia, meditation teachers instruct their disciples to start each meditation session with a period of loving-kindness practice, just the first few minutes. I find that interesting. It is like tuning the mind before you start to work with it, like

musicians giving a concert: before they start playing, they first tune their instruments. I don't often use a particular kindness practice at the beginning of meditation myself, but I find it very valuable to pay attention to the quality of my attention and try to find that sense of softness, of kindness in it before I try to move forward, with any kind of meditation technique.

Sometimes we can just plod on with our meditation, not really being aware that we might be meditating with a negative state of mind, being judgemental or very critical of ourselves, trying hard to achieve something or struggling in some way or another. If that is the case, this simple quality of relaxing, softening a bit and bringing some kindness into the very way we relate to ourselves, our body or our own mind, can make all the difference. For example, if you are doing mindfulness of breathing and you've just noticed that you've spent the last twenty minutes planning tomorrow night's dinner, at that moment when you notice this is what you are doing, you are quite present; you are actually aware, you are doing what you are supposed to be doing. But then what do you do next? That would be the test. On what basis is your mind actually established? Do you feel happy at being present at this moment, at actually having noticed, or are you judging yourself for having wasted twenty minutes of time? See what a difference that makes in how we evaluate our practice, how we move on from there; whether we move into our judging mode, or into a state where we can celebrate presence whenever we are aware of it.

To celebrate presence, to develop an appreciative, non-judgemental awareness, this quality of kindness has to be there. In fact, it seems to me to be an inherent quality of awareness that is unobstructed. Unobstructed awareness is not some kind of sterile, unfeeling observation. In Buddhism we have the term *citta*, which we translate sometimes as 'heart', sometimes as 'mind', sometimes as 'heart-mind', because it covers both the knowing mind and our sensitivity, the feeling heart. If awareness is to serve as a refuge, as a space of knowing that is liberating, that can embrace our experience in a non-reactive way, it has to have both of these qualities, knowing and feeling. It is therefore also an experience that can be accessed through both qualities. Most of the time we try to access it more through what we take to be the knowing quality, mindfulness, just knowing what is present. But to do so properly we have to attend to its affective quality as well. 'Just knowing' is a feeling kind of knowing, so it is also the capacity to 'just feel' whatever we feel in a non-reactive way. It is this 'just feeling' which creates a space in the heart that is naturally kind, naturally equanimous.

Awareness itself receives experiences in a non-judgemental way. It has no preferences. It will receive and acknowledge our preferences like any other experience, and if we manage to take refuge in awareness, to abide in it or as it, it also offers us the strength not to follow our preferences, or not to need our preferences to be satisfied in order to feel all right. It can therefore serve as a foundation for patience, for equanimity. It is like a space, the heart space of awareness, which is responsive, which will naturally, spontaneously, resonate with the quality of our experience – with compassion towards pain and suffering, and with joy towards what is wholesome and pleasant. In Buddhism these qualities, compassion and wisdom, always go together; one without the other is really unbalanced and not quite complete. So you can see the connection of mettā meditation to insight – it belongs naturally to an awareness which can receive our experience in a way that is non-reactive.

Mettā meditation or kindness, then, is not about producing particular kinds of loving feelings, which may or may not arise. I prefer Luang Por Sumedho's translation of mettā as 'patient kindness' rather than 'loving-kindness', because it doesn't have to manifest as good feeling or lovingness. This essential basic quality of unobstructed awareness, of that warmth, is more about being patient. Being truly patient is not grinding our teeth and putting up with something, but this willingness, this allowing an experience to be here, even if we don't like it. I think that's something we can notice when we are with people who are kind and very open. When we meet them, particularly if we are suffering and therefore feel constricted, they are so helpful because they are able to receive us and our pain in a spacious, non-judgemental way – not because they are spaced out, but because they are very present, really able to meet our pain, making space for it without judging. Thus the strength of equanimity serves as a foundation for our kindness.

Kindness meditation can also work as a tool for unifying the mind. When I visited Amaravati Monastery some years ago, we had a lot of business meetings there, and between the meetings I spoke to a lot of old friends whom I hadn't seen for some time. So over this period of a few days there was a lot of talking and taking in news, and much of it was about difficulties people had. After a few days of that my mind was in a bit of a state. Finally I had a free morning; I didn't have to see anybody. I got up quite early and thought: 'Oh, great, I'll go into this little shrine room and meditate.' I was by myself, there wasn't anybody else there that early in the morning. I sat in the shrine room in front of the Buddha image, and practised or tried to practise what I would usually do – awareness of the body, awareness of the breath and just being with whatever was manifesting.

But my mind was all over the place, manifesting endless chatter about all the news I had been taking in, particularly the difficulties, trying to think up solutions for those problems. The result of that, whatever it was, certainly wasn't samadhi, wasn't wellbeing or restfulness or peace.

Then suddenly, as I was thinking about one person in particular, this phrase came up in my mind: 'May you be well, may you be peaceful, may you be happy.' I thought: 'Oh, that's interesting.' I hadn't intended or tried to do that practice, but of course it was a practice I'd known for a long time and done every now and then, so it had become a skill the mind had kept stored away, and at that point it remembered. The phrase seemed just to pop up, so I picked it up. I listened to it, and then I thought about somebody else, and again this phrase came up: 'May you be well, may you be peaceful, may you be happy.' And then it just took on its own momentum, coming out effortlessly almost like a mantra. With all those different people I was thinking about, the situations, the problems, there was always this single response: 'May you be well, may you be peaceful, may you be happy.' Many different problems came into the mind, but the heart always responded in the same way, with the same attitude. It felt rather good! It felt quite genuine, too, I truly felt that; I didn't make it up or try to feel it, it was a genuine response. And I could focus on it, enable it, allow it to continue. As I stayed with it, it started to pacify and unify the mind. Before I had been trying somehow to be with the body or the breath, but I just couldn't; it felt like trying to put up a tent in the middle of a storm. But this thing I could do. It was a genuine response to the chaos in my mind, and so I could also extend it to myself: 'May I be well, may I be peaceful, may I be happy.' The mind started to unify on that one attitude. And as I was able to feel it in the body, it was a way of finally bringing my attention into the body in a very pleasant way.

That was quite a revelation for me, because I had not often tried to do this as a formal meditation exercise. It seemed just to initiate itself at that moment, when I felt tired of and helpless about all the noise in my head. Once the process began by itself, I could pick it up and develop it more consciously. Only then did what I had tried to do before become possible; only then did my attention become able to settle into the body, and it did so in a very soft and peaceful way. And once that happened I finally started to have a sense of the spacious awareness receiving whatever might come up. The natural intelligence inherent in unobstructed awareness could start to manifest ideas about how to respond to the difficulties from a clearer,

more peaceful perspective. Although there still didn't seem to be solutions, this enabled me to stop worrying, to stop trying to force solutions into existence. This proved to be a different way to come into that space of insight, just to abide in awareness and allow the natural intelligence of awareness to operate, with its clarity, its non-judgemental knowing and appreciation of our experience. Those two, knowing and appreciation, must always come together. No matter from which end we start, we have to bring the knowing, seeing, more analytical aspect of the mind together with the feeling quality of the heart in the body.

I hope these reflections may serve as an encouragement to explore the value of consciously paying attention to kindness in our formal meditation, however you want to do that – whether you decide to pay conscious attention to it at the beginning of your meditation, or try to remember and attend to it throughout whatever else you are doing in your practice – whichever way it works for you.

Copyright

Kindness

Published by:

Aruno Publications

Aruna Ratanagiri Buddhist Monastery
2 Harnham Hall Cottages,
Harnham, Belsay,
Northumberland NE20 0HF UK

Contact Aruno Publications at www.aruno.org

This book is available for free download from www.forestsangha.org

Digital Edition 1.0

Copyright © 2016 Harnham Buddhist Monastery Trust



This work is licenced under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 2.0 UK: England & Wales Licence. To view a copy of this licence, visit: <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/2.0/uk/>

Summary:

You are free:

- to copy, distribute, display and perform the work

Under the following conditions:

- Attribution: You must give the original author credit.
- Non-Commercial: You may not use this work for commercial purposes.
- No Derivative Works: You may not alter, transform, or build upon this work.

With the understanding that:

- Waiver: Any of the above conditions can be waived if you get

- permission from the copyright holder.
- Public Domain: Where the work or any of its elements is in the public domain under applicable law, that status is in no way affected by the license.
 - Other Rights: In no way are any of the following rights affected by the license:
 - Your fair dealing or fair use rights, or other applicable copyright exceptions and limitations;
 - The author's moral rights;
 - Rights other persons may have either in the work itself or in how the work is used, such as publicity or privacy rights.
 - Notice: For any reuse or distribution, you must make clear to others the licence terms of this work.

Harnham Buddhist Monastery Trust operating as Aruno Publications asserts its moral right to be identified as the author of this book.

Harnham Buddhist Monastery Trust requests that you attribute ownership of the work to Aruno Publications on copying, distribution, display or performance of the work.