

Cultivating Mettā for Future Generations

Bhante Bodhidhamma · Tips of the Day · 4 min read

Noirin Sheahan Following from last month's tip, I want to explore additional Dhamma supports for last of these six maximally suggested as ethical preparation for climate catastrophe. The final maximally challenges to think beyond our close circle and act for the future generation of all species. There are many ways we could do this - caring for the soil, for ecosystems, for political structures promoting long-term social well-being over short term gain. But unless we can do this with good will, we risk burning out, overwhelmed by the immensity of the task, demoralised by the cultural habits that fuel climate change and blind us to the coming catastrophe. To sustain our efforts we need to develop a metta (goodwill) practice which can encompass future generations. Last month I described how the teaching: "The whole world can be found in this fathom long body" allowed me to use news and documentary images of climate related suffering to become an embodied aspect of 'my world' - the world of present experience - for the purpose of opening the heart to those beyond my immediate circle. But when I tried applying this to developing metta for future generations, it didn't work as I couldn't imagine who or what I was directing metta towards. Because the Metta Sutta asks us to extend goodwill and care to 'those born and to be born', I guessed the Buddha would have provided some help with this aspect of metta practice and started looking for anything relevant. The teaching I found particularly helpful is from the Samyutta Nikaya: "It would be better, bhikkhus, for the uninstructed worldling to take this body composed of the four great elements as self rather than the mind. For what reason? Because this body may last for ten, twenty, thirty, or forty years... But that which is called mind, intellect, or consciousness arises as one thing and ceases as another, both by day and by night." In other teachings the Buddha clarifies that he does not want us to identify with the body, because it cannot provide a reliable basis for happiness. At any moment the body may get injured or fall ill; if we live long enough it will grow frail and eventually will die. Beautiful sights and sounds, thrilling or tender touches - all these give temporary pleasure and we can use such pleasure to lift the heart: relaxing in a bath, having a massage, gazing at the sunset, sipping tea. But if we keep chasing one sense pleasure after another we'll exhaust ourselves. None of them can ever satisfy our natural desire for lasting happiness. In this teaching however, the Buddha tells us it would be better to identify with the body rather than the mind, because the body is a more trustworthy source of stability. He says this applies to 'an uninstructed worldling', someone who doesn't know the Dhamma. This is true of all of us at times - when we're on autopilot or caught in an emotional storm or getting fixated on an idea or somehow stuck in meditation. Our Dhamma knowledge has temporarily deserted us, we need to relearn it in this presenting moment. What I really like about this teaching is that it gives us permission to make a mistake. For those of us who tend towards perfectionism, this is gold dust. We know it's a mistake to identify with the body, but we do it anyway, assured that it's the lesser mistake than following our current line of thought. Relaxing

into the body, enjoying the temporary illusion of identity, some wiser thoughts start to appear in the mind. I used this approach to develop metta for future generations. I pictured a cousin's grandchild, tried to imagine him getting older, with his own children and grandchildren and the kind of world they might be living in. But trying to hold this in imagination along with goodwill was a step too far. The images kept collapsing and I began to feel resentful at being asked too much. I took the Buddha's advice and let myself sink into identity with the body. It was a great relief to let go of the imaginative effort and lots of joy arose at simply being able to sit and breathe, to think of this as 'my body, my breath'. Recognizing the relative stability of the body brought forth gratitude for the enduring nature of physical form in general, the house I was in, the earth itself, nature, the bodies of others. Gratitude that my own body had already lasted several decades triggered memories of my grandparents. It occurred to me that although I wasn't able to imagine future generations, I could remember past ones, which seemed like a good way to ease back into the metta exercise. I recruited my grandparents in the flow of goodwill, imagining them wishing me and all their grandchildren well. It then became easy and natural for this metta to flow onwards to future generations. At intervals thoughts and images suggesting future climate catastrophe brought the metta stream to a stop. Gripped by horror I again accepted the Buddha's invitation to relax, let mental images fade, identify with the physical body, take the comfort it offered from being at this moment, safe, comfortable, well. This reminded me of the physicality of future generations – the bodies of people and animals that would be living then, the ground around them, the buildings or shelters they would inhabit. I sensed in all these the potential for strength and care and the basic blessing of survival. Metta flowed again, strengthened in fact, for having worked through the challenge. The practice of identifying with the body whenever I feel stuck in meditation or lost in daily life has since proved a refuge on many occasions. I hope it will also prove a refuge for future generations facing challenges we are spared and that the intricate web of physical life on earth can continue to link beings with the Dhamma and hence with liberation.

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