

An Awakened Response to Violence: The Natural Purity of the Mind

Ajahn Sumedho

Those who live in awakened awareness see the suffering of others but do not create additional sorrow around it. We acknowledge the contact with this human experience of life's inevitable suffering and the questions that immediately arise: what can we do about it? How should we regard this? The answer of course is mindfulness. With mindfulness, we feel what is impinging on our mind as unpleasant or unfair because that is simply the way it is – but we have the opportunity to choose how to respond. Usually, we just react; we hear bad news about the persecution of innocent people and we feel indignant or outraged. We want to punish those perpetuating these indignities on others. This is our conditioned reaction – when we hear bad news, we feel angry; when we hear good news, we feel happy. But when we are mindful, we can respond instead of reacting. With an awakened mind, based in right understanding or right view, we can liberate ourselves from the momentum of habit and reactivity. When we are mindful we enter the natural state of the mind, pure and unconditioned, and we can respond to life with wisdom and compassion.

The four brahmavihāras, called 'the divine abodes', are the natural responses that come from this purity of mind. They are universal qualities; they aren't personal qualities that we have to create. In other words, we don't try to feel compassionate through conjuring up ideas of compassion or sentimental attitudes about love. Compassion, or *karuṇā*, is the natural response to the misfortunes and unfairness that we see or hear about. *Mettā*, generally translated as loving-kindness, is our response to the conditioned realm, a patient acceptance of everything whether good or bad. Accepting the good is not so hard, but it is quite difficult not to hate the bad and seek revenge. We aren't compounding the bad with hatred or the desire for revenge. *Mettā* offers a response based on kindness and patience, rather than one of habitual reactions to unpleasant experiences. *Muditā*, or sympathetic joy, is the spontaneous response to the beauty and goodness of the world we live in. *Upekkhā*, or equanimity, is a state of composure and emotional balance. It is the ability to know when it's time to do something and when there is nothing that can be done.

If we approach the state of the world on an emotional level it's just too much: the genocide, the exploitation of the Third World, the devastation of the

environment, the unfairness that is part of every political and economic system in every country in the world. The situation doesn't seem to be getting any better, and we have strong feelings about this. There's so much to get angry and indignant about. What can we do? How can we help? How should we respond to these situations? One thing we can do right now – one thing that will benefit all sentient beings – is to maintain awakened awareness. This is not something we need to put off until next week or next year. This is helpful right now to all those in all the places on Earth where ethnic battles are taking place. The simple act of awakened awareness is a way of transcending all our ethnic and cultural conditioning, our biases, prejudices and our kammic tendencies. When we're in a state of awakened awareness we're touching into a universal reality, a natural purity that connects us to all beings everywhere. Each one of us has the power to pay attention, to wake up, listen and be receptive. That much we can do, right now.

This is important to realize; otherwise, we might sit here thinking we can't do anything, or we might worry about it, hating and blaming in anguish and despair, doubting our ability to help in any way. We may even begin to think that sitting on a cushion meditating is just indulgent and not for the welfare of anybody. It can look like we're shutting down – and it is possible that some of us might be shutting down. But what I'm recommending, and how I experience meditation, is as an opening up of the heart and mind. As we open, we move beyond our personal kamma and the sense of self-importance that goes along with it, learning to relax and surrender into the state of pure, attentive awareness. We enter into a universal reality rather than living out of our personal habits. From this state, we can spread loving-kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy, and equanimity.

You could say this way of responding to the suffering in the world is very 'grassroots.' Each one of us is a blade of grass. We want all the blades of grass on the planet to be healthy, but it can seem overwhelming. There have never been this many people on this planet in the known history of human civilization. The mind boggles; it can't cope with so many blades. But this one blade of grass is something I have some control over. This one conscious being is something I can work with. We each reflect the potential for all human beings to become Buddhas. We each reflect the potential for all human beings to live in a state of

awakened awareness, channeling the brahmavihāras through our human forms, acting with compassion and expressing love and joy.

We've seen this potential for awakening realized in various teachers, in people we know or in people we've heard about through the ages – the saints and bodhisattvas, the sādhus and enlightened beings, human beings like ourselves who have realized their natural purity to become channels of compassion. I've experienced it with my own teacher, Ajahn Chah, an ordinary monk from a remote corner of Thailand. He wasn't a prince or an aristocrat but a man from a rice-growing peasant family. Through his own faith and efforts, he was able to free his mind from selfish intention and delusion, revealing the potential we all have as human beings. Yet he wasn't living in an ivory tower: he was a very realistic, practical person, aware of injustice, corruption and social problems. His response was always one of compassion to the suffering of others. Through the power of mettā, karuṇā, muditā and upekkhā he affected millions of people.

Those of us who grew up during the Second World War were certainly aware of genocide and slaughter. We thought once the war was over that we were going to have peace. But the conflict keeps on going, doesn't it? We still experience the effects of hundreds of years of indignation, anger and resentment and a whole list of wrongs to which each side in the conflict clings. Where does it end? Where can it end? There are meetings, conferences and formal forgiveness ceremonies, but hatred is still latent within the hearts of human beings. We're culturally conditioned; we acquire the biases of our own ethnic groups. I've never been to any place where there hasn't been somebody to hate, some group at the bottom of the pile. 'They're the stupid ones!' 'They're the country cousins!' 'They're the evil empire!' The tendency of the human mind, the conditioning of the mind is to blame our suffering on another group.

The Buddha's teaching points to the realization of the pure mind beyond cultural or religious conditioning. The simple act of living in awakened awareness is very powerful and worthy of great respect. And this power is universal. By learning to let go of our conditioned reactions to violence and hatred, all of us can learn to respond with the natural purity of the mind. Awakening our minds allows us to get beyond the conventions of race, religion or culture and our tendencies to blame and react with violence so that the power of love and compassion can

arise unimpeded and spread. It's up to us to realize this, to try it out, to begin to awaken ourselves to this realization.

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