

## The Moon Among Stars

Those who conquer the earth, teeming with beings,  
—Kings and priests who scurry around sacrificing—  
They surely do not partake in even a sixteenth part  
Of the heart well developed in loving kindness  
—Shining like the moon among all the crowd of stars.

*ye sattasaṇḍaṃ pathaviṃ vijitvā  
rājīsayo yajamānānupariyagā...  
mettassa cittassa subhāvitassa  
kalam-pi te nānubhavanti soḷasim  
candappabhā tāraṇā va sabbe.*

—*Itivuttaka* 3:7c

The full moon shining brightly against a background of stars is a common image in early Buddhist poetry. We do well to remember that observing such a scene 2,500 years ago in a sparsely populated rural area well after all lamps have been extinguished would have been a far different experience than the modern urban dweller casually glancing up and happening to notice the moon. Even today, if we have the opportunity to camp out in the desert or sail well out to sea on a small boat, we are staggered to see just how many stars inhabit the night sky and how bright is their cumulative light.

Somehow in ancient India they came up with the equation that the full moon was sixteen times as bright as the entire background of stars put together, and this is the image used in this verse to point to the value of loving kindness. Yes, there are many people scurrying around in the world engaging in this and that enterprise or affair, and in the Buddha's time kings and priests were considered to be at the pinnacle of society and thus absorbed in matters of great importance. But as the Buddha so often hints elsewhere, *what* you are doing is far less important than the *quality of heart* with which you are doing it.

So even if you are engaged in very important work—people are depending upon you, you are counteracting the many injustices in this world, you are helping people in need—the value of that work diminishes sixteen-fold if you are not engaging in it with a heart of loving kindness. Conversely, even if you are not doing something very important in the working world, sitting quietly and developing the benevolent intention that all beings be happy, safe, and free from harm, you may well be doing something sixteen times more important than that wealthy, famous, powerful person who seems to have it all.

One way you might think of working with this idea in practice is to put aside at least one sixteenth of your time and attention and devote it to cultivating kindness. Perhaps you practice *mettā* meditation one hour of each 16-hour waking day, or make a point of being especially kind to every sixteenth person you serve or come across at work, or spend a day in silent practice for every sixteen days spent on other pursuits. Or perhaps you can just use the full moon as a reminder each month of what is of most value in this world: we are engaged in a countless sky-full of little events throughout our lives, but let's see if we can have them all illuminated by the bright full moon of our loving kindness for one another.