

## **1. What is the Metta Bhavana?**

**Metta** – translates (approximately) as ‘unconditional friendliness’ or ‘loving kindness’

**Bhavana** – translates as ‘cultivation’ or ‘development’

We can therefore say that the **Metta Bhavana** is the cultivation of loving kindness – OR developing ourselves through unconditional friendship. It is concerned with cultivating emotional positivity and recognising that qualities like warmth, kindness and empathy are part of our natural makeup.

Kindness is one of the most basic qualities we can possess, and one of the most powerful. In Buddhism, it is called metta – an opening of the heart to all that we meet. Any friendly feeling contains the kernel of metta. It is a seed that is waiting to be developed, right here amidst the conditions of our daily life.

Some other meditations, like the Mindfulness of Breathing and the body scan, are concerned with cultivating awareness of the body. These practices require an attitude of coming back to the object of meditation without judgment and with kindness. This non-judgmental attitude is actually a reflection of metta. Metta is the attitude that meets whatever comes into our experience with kindness, openness and patience. It’s important to remember that, although our initial response might not involve these qualities, we can choose to cultivate them. Practising the Metta Bhavana involves deliberately cultivating awareness of ourselves and others, and specifically our emotional responses to ourselves and others.

Like all other practices it starts with awareness of the body and of our thoughts, feelings and emotions. We begin by getting a sense of ourselves at present and acknowledging whatever we find with kindness.

Metta is said to be ‘unconditional loving kindness’. What do we mean by ‘unconditional’?

We can better answer this by first looking at what **conditioned** behaviour is. Our conditioned responses are based on our habits of liking and disliking, as well as the mentality whereby we do something for someone and we expect to get something in return. A couple of examples of this might be:

1. You hold open a door for someone out of a friendly intention. Unfortunately, the other person rushes past you and doesn’t say ‘thank

you'. You feel anger or resentment. If you reflect on this, you might realise you have a hidden expectation - you want the other person to acknowledge that you have put yourself out for him.

2. You buy a friend a present for her birthday. You spend a lot of time thinking about what you are going to buy and then spend a lot of money on it. When you give her the gift she is very happy and tells you how much she appreciates you. When it comes to your birthday you get a card and a small amount of money. You feel disappointed, dwell on the matter and begin to think that your friend is inconsiderate and doesn't care about you. Again, although your motivation at the time of buying the gift seemed to be friendly, you realise that your motive was actually mixed. When your birthday came around you expected your friend to make a similar amount of effort for you.

These two examples show us how we may act in a conditioned way, wanting something in return for what we see as our 'good deeds'.

What, then, does it mean to act **unconditionally**? It simply means that we do things without an expectation of reward. It requires that our kindness is sufficiently robust to absorb the effects of others' actions when they don't act the way we want them to. However, and importantly, it doesn't mean that we become an 'emotional doormat'. If we are upset about something we can still find an appropriate way to express how we feel. In fact, expressing ourselves in this way may be an act of 'self-metta'. Crucially, we need to realise that we cannot directly change others - we can only really change ourselves.

The ideal of metta is that we should always act unconditionally. We probably won't achieve the ideal, but we can certainly work to move slowly closer and closer towards it, and this is a hugely positive aim in itself. Don't be misled - it takes a lot of practice, but this practice has a great starting point when we recognise and acknowledge our conditioned responses. By observing our long-established habits with kindness to ourselves, reflecting on the meaning of metta and practising the Metta Bhavana we can slowly but surely change our habitual behaviour.

## 2. The meditation

The practice has 5 stages, in which we cultivate metta towards:

1. Ourselves
2. A good friend
3. A 'neutral' person
4. Someone we find difficult
5. All of the above in equal measure, then finally all beings

There are guidelines about whom to choose in each stage. This is because we are trying to have as uncomplicated relationship as possible with each person where we can develop metta unconditionally. If we have projections –

age related, inferiority or superiority complexes, authority projections or sexual fantasies – these will all distract us and hinder our attempts at metta.

So we choose:

- Someone of similar age to us
- Someone to whom we are not attracted sexually
- Someone alive not dead
- A person not an animal

It is also a good idea to decide before we begin the meditation whom we are going to include in each stage so that we do not waste a lot of time during the meditation itself deciding whom to put in each stage when we actually get to it.

### **Stage 1 – Ourselves**

It is important to begin with ourselves and contact or develop a healthy self regard for ourselves. If this isn't the basis for our practice then our responses to the other people in the meditation will be somewhat skewed – for example, how can we really wish them well if we do not wish that for ourselves.

Many of us have grown up hearing that if we praise ourselves, we are 'too big for our own boots'/big-headed/have ideas above our station/are putting ourselves on a pedestal etc.

To think well of ourselves is not self-indulgent! It is a healthy way to be – to hold both our good qualities alongside the things we might not like about ourselves, without judging either; neither fluffing up our feathers with our positive qualities nor going down the drain with our more difficult ones!

### **Stage 2 – The good friend**

This is often an enjoyable stage – we enjoy recalling our friend and our relationship with them and naturally want them to have in their lives what they would wish for themselves! However, as in the case of most relationships, they are not always plain sailing and this can apply to our good friend too. We might have had a disagreement that isn't totally resolved, so occasionally, we may need to put our good friend in the fourth stage (see below)! Again this is where we need to be perfectly honest with ourselves and acknowledge what we are really feeling and not try to gloss over anything or manufacture feelings – even in relation to our good friend with whom we usually have such a positive relationship.

### **Stage 3 – The neutral person**

This is someone whom we might see regularly – for example, a shop assistant, postal worker, car mechanic, bus driver, a neighbour etc – but about whom we know very little if anything.

For some people this is a difficult stage because, in knowing little about the person, they find it hard to develop and maintain an interest and soon get bored. For others, it's an exciting stage because, in the very fact of not

knowing about the person, they are not caught up in any overt or covert dynamics and can give their imagination and empathy free rein.

#### **Stage 4 – The difficult person**

It is important to remember, in this stage in particular, to choose someone we can manage. In other words, choose someone who mildly irritates you, not someone who causes you to feel a lot of anger or deep feelings of resentment. As we build up the practice over time, we can then work with the stronger and deeper emotional tendencies involved with people who challenge us more seriously.

As with the previous stages, we are trying to contact the humanity that we share with the chosen person. For example, we can be sure that, just like ourselves:

- they experience pleasure and pain;
- they have hopes and fears;
- they want to love and be loved;
- they don't want to suffer.

The basic stories of our lives may be different but the emotions that we experience are the same. Seeing this, we can experience a sense of connectedness and a desire can emerge for them to be well, to be happy, not to suffer and to learn from life. If this sounds all too easy, we need to consider what stops us from experiencing a sense of connectedness with the 'difficult person'. There may actually be many contributing factors, but some examples may be:

- They have hurt us in some way.
- They are not acting in a way that we think they should.
- Pride – we think they are better than us or we are better than them.
- Jealousy – they have something that we want.
- Blame – we blame them for negative feelings that are really our own.

In beginning to change our attitude toward this person it is important to remember that we have sole responsibility for our emotional states - **we create them and we can change them**. This may be a very challenging statement to hear, so it's good to examine our experience to see if it is true.

When the person with whom you have difficulty does something you don't like, ask yourself what emotional state they seem to be in. You might suspect that they are feeling emotions like anxiety, stress, anger or frustration. Then ask yourself whether this is a pleasant state to be in. If you reflect on how you behave less than ideally yourself when you are subject to emotions like these, it may become easier to feel some empathy for the difficult person.

## **Stage 5 – All sentient beings** - applying equanimity to our well-wishing

The final stage of the Metta Bhavana allows us to become truly ambitious in our cultivation of positive emotion and well-wishing, as we do our best to apply these qualities as widely as we possibly can. We start by bringing back to our mind's eye the four people on whom we have already concentrated, perhaps imagining them all being present in the same room. The important point at this stage is that, however able to feel positive emotion and well-wishing we feel we are, we try to apply them in an even-handed way to all four recipients – not forgetting ourselves! Having reached this point, we can go further if we wish, expanding the 'target' of our metta to an increasingly broad group of people. We can do this however we like – there are no rules – but the best approach is to engage our imagination and, if we feel so inclined, to let it go free! We can even include non-human beings and perhaps inhabitants, as yet undiscovered, of places beyond this planet!

This stage of equanimity is an expression of the important Buddhist principle that there is no point in seeking happiness just for ourselves – we have the capacity, as humans, to seek it for all living beings.

### **3. Ways of cultivating metta**

There are lots of ways of working in the practice, and more possibilities will come to you the more you do it. The key point is to explore ways to engage our imagination and look for a 'heart response'. Here are some possible approaches:

#### **Traditional way – 4 Phrases**

You drop into your meditation, rather like a pebble into a still pond, the phrases:

- 'May I be happy'
- 'May I be well'
- 'May I be free from suffering'
- 'May I grow and develop' / 'May I make progress'

Each time you drop in one of these phrases you give it time to affect you. Remember that the object of the practice is not to experience great waves of bliss (you probably won't!), but gradually to change your emotional responses. It is therefore our intention that is important – ultimately, to want the best for ourselves and all beings in equal measure. Don't be concerned with how much you are feeling right now – as ever, stay with your bodily experience and trust that the phrases are having an effect.

#### **Images, memory, words**

You could remember a time when you were happy and at ease, and try to evoke just how you felt at that time. You could bring to mind an image that has a positive effect on you – like a clear blue sky or a sunlit meadow. Alternatively, you could reflect on a word that evokes a positive response in you – examples might be 'spaciousness', 'kindness', 'warmth' or 'tenderness'.

## Questioning

You could ask, 'How am I?' then wait for a response, which could be in either words or images. You can then respond to whatever you find with kindness. Alternatively, you can cultivate something that addresses your immediate needs – for example, if you feel dull, you can say to yourself 'brightness' or 'light' and try to experience the emotional quality of the word.

## 4. What next?

### Day Courses

From time to time we run intensive one-day courses like today's, providing an opportunity to immerse yourself in the subject matter, very much free from the distractions of everyday life! There are days dedicated to both meditation and introductory Buddhism (the latter also feature a significant amount of meditation). Again, please consult reception or our web site for details of dates and charges.

### Reading

Although many books on meditation are available in the bookshop, we particularly recommend:

- For body awareness meditation: **The Body** (Paramananda, Windhorse Publications)
- For the Metta Bhavana: **The Heart** (Vessantara, Windhorse)
- For a very inspiring, yet practical and readable coverage of Buddhist approach to meditation: **Change your Mind** (Paramananda, Windhorse)

The first two of these titles have accompanying led meditations on CD, often very popular with students who have finished the course and miss having a friendly voice to lead them in their meditation!

### Web Sites

There are more resources on meditation on the following Triratna web sites:

[www.wildmind.org](http://www.wildmind.org): a very comprehensive online guide to meditation, with a lot of different angles and frequent new material.

[www.fwbo.org/meditation.html](http://www.fwbo.org/meditation.html): background reading on Buddhist Meditation.

[www.manchesterbuddhistcentre.org.uk](http://www.manchesterbuddhistcentre.org.uk): information about the centre's events and activities in general.