



the urban retreat 2013

course material for day 1: saturday

introductory

introduction

Over the week we're going to teach you a traditional Buddhist meditation practice known as the *metta bhavana*, which translates as 'the development of loving-kindness'. The practice has many benefits. It can help you become more aware of your emotions and to feel more emotionally alive. By doing the practice you are cultivating the ability to be more emotionally buoyant, robust, and confident. It is about gradually learning to be more kind and patient, and less inclined to anger or irritation – or at least less swept away by negative emotions. This meditation can also help us to be aware of suffering in the world, to be concerned and responsive, but without being overwhelmed.

how the practice works

Here are four principles by which the practice works. If these seem a bit abstract, then don't worry; it will probably become more “real” when we give you the actual instructions for the practice.

First of all we spend time in the meditation **just being aware, getting in touch with ourselves**. We are trying to have an aliveness and alertness to the kinds of feelings, thoughts, and emotions that we are currently experiencing in our body, in our mind, and in our heart. We are especially trying to notice underlying attitudes and emotions towards ourselves and other people.

Secondly, once we're more in touch with our experience we can step back from it a bit. We see that it is always changing and that **we don't**

need to over-identify with the flow of feelings and thoughts. It isn't "you" in any absolute or ultimate sense. It is just what you are experiencing right now.

Thirdly, if you don't over-identify with the flow of experience you have a little more freedom to make choices and be discerning. For example, you can listen to the stories in your mind – that running commentary by which we interpret our experience. Once we loosen our identification with those stories we can ask: Which stories are helpful and enhancing? Which are harmful or diminishing? We might decide certain ways we have of thinking about ourselves, or about someone we know, aren't helpful. We try to steer our mind away from them and, instead, **we try and choose or cultivate a positive intention.** What do we really wish for ourselves or for that person? Just bringing this to mind will have a positive effect.

We then continue doing this, but with a spirit of patience, kindness, and not "pushing it". We just allow the heart to gradually open, unfold, and expand outwards. Lastly, **we try to broaden our "sphere of concern" – to be more aware of others** and what would bring them real happiness.

how to do the practice

This meditation is done in five stages; today we are going to introduce three of them, and tomorrow we'll do all five stages. Later in the week we'll look at each stage in much more depth and detail. But, for today, here is a simple, basic introduction, and then the led meditation.

To start with you need to find a posture in which you can sit at ease, so you can be comfortable and focused on the meditation, but also reasonably upright and relaxed, so that you stay awake! If you need it, you can read [some guidance on meditation posture](#) or watch our [meditation posture video](#).

So, as explained above, we start with **just being aware, getting in touch with ourselves**. We notice feelings and sensations in our body, and our heart, and we notice the kinds of thoughts that may be running through our mind. Awareness of the body isn't “thinking” about the body, but actually experiencing any sensations happening in the body right now. Awareness of the heart is more subtle; we are trying to notice the emotional flavours, or moods, that are colouring our experience – brightness and happiness, or dullness or sadness. We try not to get swept away by thoughts, but just note them and particularly any underlying emotional tone. Through all of this, we are trying to tune-in to a deeper sense of ourselves, which takes time and sensitivity.

Then, **in the first stage of the practice, we wish happiness and well-being for ourselves**. Sometimes people are surprised this is where the practice begins, but turning out to the world, and being concerned for others, starts with a healthy sense of self confidence and self-esteem. You are trying to have an attitude of kindness and care towards yourself.

Secondly, you bring to mind a good friend – someone you quite naturally like and care for. When you are new to the practice it is best to choose someone you are not sexually attracted to, or that you don't have parental or filial feelings towards. Although in time you can include everyone in the practice, at the start it is best to choose someone with whom other emotions, that might seem similar to metta, are less likely to come into play. Think of your friend; be aware of them and their life. What is going on for them? What is it you appreciate about them? Again, you just try to have an attitude of loving-kindness, wishing that they be happy and free from suffering.

Finally, expand your awareness outwards and gradually include more people. There is you, and then your friend, then think of other people. Perhaps you bring to awareness those around you in the building or street where you are doing the meditation. Perhaps you think of all those you'll meet (or met) at work today. And then you might expand out even further and bring to mind more people that you know, or people that you've seen on the news. You are trying to expand your awareness and concern for other people simply by bringing them, and their lives, and their wish for happiness, to mind. Obviously this stage involves using your imagination a bit more.

In these three stages, we suggest you try quietly saying words or phrases to yourself as you go along. For example, in the first stage you might say “may I be well, may I be happy, may I be free from suffering”. In the second stage, you would wish the same thing for your friend. These simple phrases are helping you stay focused on the

meditation and may also help spark and kindle a positive intention and attitude.

Try the [led-through practice](#) and see how you get on. Tomorrow we'll tell you more about how the metta bhavana meditation works, and introduce the other two stages. In the meantime, if you want to post comments on how you are getting on, or any questions, then you can do that [if you log in to the space on The Buddhist Centre Online](#). And each day there is going to be a suggested “daily practice” or reflection for loving-kindness off the meditation cushion...

daily practice: actions and consequences

Each day there will also be a box like this with a practical suggestion, or a suggested reflection. These are all adapted from a recently published book by [Subhadramati: Not About Being Good](#) from [Windhorse Publications](#). The book is about ethics and the excerpts we've chosen are all about loving-kindness in action. Today's excerpt is a reflection on the likely effect of acting with more, or less, kindness and awareness.

Sit quietly, close your eyes, and bring to mind, as vividly as you can, something mean or unkind you've done recently. Spend one minute on each of the following:

* Tune in to how it makes you feel physically, and how it makes you feel about yourself.

* Tune in to how it makes you feel in relation to the world at large.

* Perhaps you could open your eyes and write three or four words that sum up how you felt about yourself and how you felt in relation to the world at large.

Now close your eyes again and bring to mind, as vividly as you can, something kind and generous you've done recently, no matter how small. Again, spend about a minute on each of the following:

* Tune in to how it makes you feel physically, and how it makes you feel about yourself.

* Tune in to how it makes you feel in relation to the world at large.

* Perhaps you could open your eyes and write three or four words that sum up how you felt about yourself and how you felt in relation to the world at large.

Now sit quietly for another minute to absorb the experience.