



**the urban retreat 2013**

**course material for day 2: sunday**  
*introductory*

## introduction

How did you find the meditation yesterday? Feel free to [post comments and questions and to share experiences...](#)

Learning anything new takes time, so be realistic with your expectations! Especially learning about our emotions and how to cultivate kindness, courage, patience, and so on, is a big task. So it will take time, although you may notice some changes straight away. It is like learning to run a marathon; first of all you just run a mile slowly! Then you run a few miles, and you gradually build up. If you train wisely, then steadily your muscles and lungs develop capacity. Meditation is a bit the same. Just build up your practice gradually. In time your metta muscles will become bigger and more beautifully toned! You'll develop the ability to recognise the kinds of habits and attitudes that can trip you up, and you'll know more how to respond helpfully to them.

## how the practice works

Today we are doing all five stages of the practice: ourselves, a good friend, a neutral person (i.e. someone that we don't have strong positive or negative feelings for), someone we find difficult, and then, finally, a fifth stage where we gradually bring more and more people into awareness.

If you think about that sequence you'll see that it involves a gradual “stretching” outwards, going beyond our usual limits. It might seem easier and more natural to wish ourselves and our good friend

happiness. But extending that to a neutral person may come less naturally, and trying to cultivate good will towards someone we find difficult can be even more challenging! In this practice we are gradually going beyond our usual “sphere of concern” and trying to expand it outwards, to include people who we aren't usually so aware of, or well-disposed towards.

The way the practice progresses, or the way the different stages unfold, also involves acknowledging and working with different feelings. When we think of a good friend in the second stage then pleasant feelings might naturally arise. But when, in the third stage, we think of a “neutral” person there might be a lack of strong feeling and even a lack of interest. And in the fourth stage, being aware of someone we find difficult, it may be negative feelings and emotions that arise. The point of the practice is to learn to acknowledge and be aware of the range of our feelings and, even so, have an attitude of well-wishing to people. Even a person we don't like, or who has been hurtful to us, is still a person, a human being, and this practice is about learning to remember that, and act from that awareness.

So when you are doing the practice, watch how you respond to people as you bring them to mind. Notice how you respond in your body, in your heart, and in your mind. How does your body feel when you think of person X – tired or alive, tense or relaxed? What about around the heart area – do you feel warm or wary, open-hearted or closed-off? And what goes on in your mind? Perhaps stories about that person start-up almost automatically? If so, what is the emotional

tone of those stories, are they helpful, or even true? Or maybe you just do a “mind-swerve”; you suddenly find yourself thinking about something completely different! You realise you've just lost interest in the practice and find it hard to think about that person for very long. Why does that happen?

Yesterday we talked about how 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. If you manage not to over-identify with the flow of experience you have a little more freedom. For example, you can listen to the stories in your mind and ask: Which ones are helpful and enhancing? Which are harmful or diminishing? You might decide certain ways you have of thinking about yourself, or about someone you know, aren't helpful, and you try to steer your mind away from them. Instead you try and bring in positive intention: What do you really wish for yourself or for that person? Bringing this to mind will have a beneficial effect.

### how to do the practice

That is the “theory”; here is what to do in practice! If you need it, you can read [some guidance on meditation posture](#) or watch our [meditation posture video](#). Then there is [a led meditation for you to try](#).

We start with **just being aware, getting in touch with ourselves**. We notice feelings and sensations in our body, our heart, and we notice the kinds of thoughts that may be running through our mind.

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.** 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. 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 well-wishing, to allow a heart-wish that they be happy and free from suffering.

**Thirdly, you bring a “neutral person” into awareness.** This might be someone you cross paths with at work, but with whom you've never developed a strong connection, or it might be someone you see on the bus. They might be someone you know, or they might be a stranger. But now you are trying to be more fully aware of them and have a sense of their life and to wish them well. Obviously you need to use your imagination, as you may not know them that well. They may be a bit of a mystery – but that is fine! There is another human being with a whole life you don't know about – and whom you can wish well.

**Fourthly, you consider someone that you find difficult.** It is best not to start with someone who you find very difficult, or who is very hostile to you, but choose someone who is a bit irritating or just triggers a bit of aversion or discomfort in you. Try and hold them in

your awareness and consider that there is more to them than that. Try and empathise and wish them well.

**Fifthly and finally, expand your awareness outwards and gradually include more people.** There is you, and then your friend, the neutral person, the person you find difficult. Bring all of you to mind once again. 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 during the next day or so. 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. We are trying to expand our awareness and concern for other people simply by bringing to mind them, and their lives, and their wish for happiness.

In all these five stages, we suggest you try quietly saying words or phrases to yourself as you go along: you might say “may they be well, may they be happy, may they be free from suffering”. Remember, these simple phrases are helping you stay focused on the meditation and also help spark and kindle a positive intention and attitude.

**Try the led meditation now** and see how you get on. Notice what happens, what is good and what seems more difficult. Are some stages easier, or more engaging than others? Tomorrow we are going to start exploring each stage in more detail – one stage per day – so that by the end of the week you've got a really good grounding in the practice.

If you've time after the meditation, or perhaps later in the day, here is a reflection adapted from [Subhadramati's 'Not About Being Good'](#). We've chosen to include this at this juncture of the Urban Retreat because it is about looking ahead and seeing what challenges might be round the corner – what might happen in the next few days that could prevent you keeping up a meditation practice, or being able to act from loving-kindness as you go about your life? We're imagining that many of you have started this urban retreat during the weekend, when your circumstances are a bit more easy and spacious, but that in the next few days your lives might be getting busier and more demanding. So this reflection is about anticipating that and being prepared, vigilant, even a bit canny about the likely trials and challenges ahead.

### **daily practice: Looking ahead and being vigilant**

Take five or ten minutes to think of the week ahead. Choose one event that you anticipate will be particularly challenging in terms of you being able to stay aware and positive enough to act from loving-kindness. It might be that you know you've got a difficult meeting coming up at work, or your partner's relative is coming to stay and you find them irritating, or some other “challenge”.

Think of three things that you could put in place that would support you when this challenging event comes around. Write them down now. (It might be things like: going for a walk round the block before the meeting to “mentally prepare”, putting the difficult relative in the metta bhavana practice for a few days, taking time to reflect what it is

that “presses your buttons” and to think of a better verbal response, putting a few words to remind you of your positive intention somewhere you'll see them during your day, such as on your screen-saver, or on the fridge.)

After the event has happened, make the time to reflect again. Did your efforts to be prepared make any difference? What did you learn? Write down some reflections.