



the urban retreat 2013

course material for day 3: monday

introduction

For the next five days we are going to look at each stage of the metta bhavana meditation in more depth and detail, starting today with the first stage. What is your experience of doing this stage? Do you find it easy or difficult? Is it easy to engage with, or is there resistance?

Sometimes people do find this first stage hard and today we're going to explore a couple of the possible reasons why, followed by three helpful suggestions.

Sometimes people can just have unhelpful expectations of meditation. If they are not feeling wonderful and expansive in the meditation, that must mean they are doing it wrong. But the way meditation works is more subtle and gradual than that. Sometimes you might feel happy, sometimes just OK, or sometimes life is tiring and plain difficult.

Meditation won't necessarily make all that go away. What meditation does give you is more ability to *be with* whatever is going on in your life. You are in touch with whatever is happening, easy or difficult, but it is all accompanied by an underlying sense of worth, of your potential and wish to grow and flourish, to make the most of your human opportunity. Meditation won't make difficulties disappear, but it will help you not be so blown about by them, and to not swing from elation to dejection, or from delight to despair. That is what metta towards oneself is – an underlying kindness towards oneself and a self-respect that keeps you going, even when times are tough.

There might also be a deeper reason why we find this stage of the metta bhavana challenging. There are deeper views and conditioning that seem prevalent in our culture that cause people to have poor self-view, even feelings of worthlessness. One doesn't want to over-idealise the East, but one does hear stories of Eastern teachers being shocked when they encounter Westerners and their low self-esteem. But it is good to wish ourselves well, to want happiness and flourishing for ourselves! In fact, it is very hard to be genuinely concerned for others if you feel this basic lack within yourself. This first stage of the metta practice is about having that healthy desire to be happy, and to lead a meaningful, fully human, life.

suggestions for practice

How can we do this? Here are three suggested approaches.

The first is to **continue working with the words and phrases that we've been using**. We've been using words that are derived from the traditional way of teaching the practice, but you can vary the words according to what is meaningful, authentic, and helpful for you. What do you really wish for yourself? How do you really wish to be in life? Find simple words and phrases and drop them in, quietly and gently. You don't need to hurl them in forcefully. They are wishes, intentions, or aspirations – not marching orders! Just drop them in, like letting small pebbles fall into a deep pool... and you might notice a slight ripple expanding outwards.

A second suggestion is to **focus on appreciation of your life – recalling all there is to value in your life, and reminding yourself just how precious it is**. This is actually a traditional Buddhist reflection known as “the preciousness of human life” or “reflecting on opportunities and advantages”. You can bring a flavour of this into your metta bhavana practice. You can remember all the sights and sounds and smells you will experience today and, in a way, how wonderful and extraordinary that experience is. Just appreciate that you are alive and aware, you can experience and enjoy seemingly “ordinary” things like the rustle of leaves in the breeze, the light shining through clouds as they cross the sky, the smell of coffee, or the taste of food that sustains you. You are a human being with abilities to think, feel, speak, imagine – how amazing! You can think about friends and family who love and appreciate you. You can recall books, films, music that you have appreciated, or even spiritual teachings and practices that you have found liberating. Just bring to mind everything that enhances and enriches your life, and do this in a spirit of open-hearted appreciation. This way of practicing isn't about denying the more difficult, or even ugly, side of life. It is about appreciating what is good so that you've got more resources, more resilience, with which to deal with the difficult and the ugly.

A third suggestion is from [Subhadramati's book 'Not About Being Good'](#). She describes the first stage of this meditation as a bit like “being a friend to yourself”. You are tuning-in to how you are feeling and thinking, and listening and responding to that just like you would

expect a good friend to respond. Or, putting this another way, if you were listening to someone else tell you how they were feeling, how would you respond? Try and respond to yourself in the same spirit. You can see this first stage as “actively responding to *yourself* as if you were your own good friend”.

There is now a **30 minute led-through meditation** which focuses especially on the first stage of the metta bhavana, although it then takes you more quickly through the other stages. Try it and see how you get on. See if any of the suggestions above help you to engage more creatively with the first stage.

Then, if you have time now, or perhaps later on in the day, here is a suggestion from Subhadramati's book for how to continue the practice as you go about your day.

daily practice: talking to yourself

Over the next few days, notice your inner dialogue.

- * What do you say to yourself when you do something well?
- * What do you say to yourself when you make a mistake?
- * How would you respond to your closest friend in each of those circumstances?

Actively practice talking to yourself as if you were talking to a good friend. Each time you do this as yourself, “How does this feel? What effect does it have?”

Lastly, don't forget you can also join-in, post comments and questions, and hear how others are getting-on [if you log in to the space on The Buddhist Centre Online](#). There is also the [daily talk from Vessantara](#), as well as other talks and [a daily film](#) highlighting some aspect of loving-kindness in action in the Triratna Buddhist Community. And have a think about how you find the second stage, as we'll be looking at that in more detail tomorrow.