



**the urban retreat 2013**

**course material for day 5: wednesday**

## introduction

We are working our way through the practice stage by stage, and today we get to stage three – the so-called “neutral” person. What is your experience of doing this stage? Can you connect with it and engage with it, or do you encounter resistance or blankness? Or does something else happen? Take a few moments to consider how this stage has been over the last few days.

Sometimes the “neutral person” stage can be a touch magical, enabling you to see someone in a new way, allowing you to connect with another life. Perhaps that person behind the till in your local shop, or that you pass in the corridor at work used to tend to be a bit of a “cardboard cut-out”. But through considering them in the meditation, they become more of a three-dimensional, real-life, human being.

At other times this stage can be more difficult. Sometimes people say this is where they lose the thread of the practice. The flow of emotion runs dry, or they find their mind has re-routed down the path of distraction. This is understandable. With stages one and two of the practice, we have more of a natural “interest” in ourselves and in the well-being of a friend. Even with stage four (the person we find difficult) there can be strong feeling and emotion present, and, whilst this may not be easy, at least *something* is happening! But stage three is, by definition, more “neutral”; there is probably less sense of a connection and therefore less feeling, less to work with.

So, in a way, the whole point of this stage of the practice is to engage our *interest* in people we don't know, or don't feel a connection with. We are trying to allow and encourage a response of loving-kindness to people we don't automatically have a strong feeling for. You could even say this is where the metta bhavana practice really begins. This stage is where we go beyond our usual sphere of interest and concern, and into empathy and connection with other people. In time we may find we do feel differently about them, that there is more sense of warmth and connection towards a wider range of people, including people we don't know. Through doing this meditation practice people will become less “neutral”.

I remember hearing a nice little story from someone who did this meditation, and who happened to work in a café. There was one particular customer who came in every single day and ordered the same thing and he and the staff came to call this man “Mr Customer”. But one day he put “Mr Customer” into the neutral stage of his meditation. Within a few days he found himself, quite spontaneously and naturally, striking up a bit of friendly conversation with the man. Without it being deliberate or pre-meditated, he found himself reaching out beyond his usual sphere of concern. Maybe he even found the man's real name! The man stopped being just “Mr Customer” and became someone more alive and real and multi-dimensional.

## suggestions for practice

The key to this stage is imagination. You've perhaps got to work a bit harder, or be a bit more creative. This is because you don't know so much detail – you may even know nothing at all – about the person's life. But what might it be like? Is there anything about them that you do know, or that you have noticed recently? For example, you are considering that man who runs the local hardware store, and you remember he made a comment about his son going to university and that gives you a clue, a beginning, to imagining a life outside your immediate circle. Of course you don't know if what you imagine is literally true, but that doesn't matter. You hold it lightly, in the spirit of “as if”. You don't need the story to get too inventive or complicated, or too sentimental. You just want a few clues to help you connect with that person as a human being.

There is now a [30 minute led-through meditation](#) which focuses especially on the “neutral” person stage of the metta bhavana, whilst also including all the other stages.

After you've done this, you might have time to read and consider the suggested daily practice suggestion from [Subhadramati's book 'Not About Being Good'](#). If you don't have time now, then hopefully you can come back to it later.

### **daily practice: receiving gifts and expressing gratitude**

Over the next day or so, practice graciously receiving anything that you are offered – whether that is a compliment on your new jumper, a seat on the Tube, a material gift, or practical help.

The practice here is to try to allow yourself to receive as fully as possible. A simple way to do this is to meet the eye of the person who is offering to you and simply say, “Thank you”. If you don't think anyone is giving you anything then lower your expectations. Thank the waitress who serves your cappuccino, or the bus driver.

Lastly, have a think today about the fourth stage of the practice, which we'll be looking at more fully tomorrow. Do you find the “difficult” person stage easy or difficult? What tends to happen in that stage of the practice? And feel free to check out the [‘latest & updated’ section](#) of the online space to see how others are getting on, or log in to post your own comments and questions...

Vessantara’s answers to your questions will be posted up today, as well as [another of the daily talks](#) from him and [a daily film](#) highlighting some aspect of loving-kindness in action in the Triratna Buddhist Community.