



the urban retreat 2013

course material for day 7: friday

introduction

Today we reach the fifth stage of the metta bhavana – the stage of including everyone in the practice so far (ourselves, our friend, the neutral person, the person we find difficult) and then gradually expanding our awareness outwards to include more and more people. We are going to explore this over two days, today focusing on “including everyone in the practice so far” and tomorrow looking at “expanding our awareness outwards to include more and more people”. The reason for this is that there is something important about both these aspects of the fifth stage, but the significance of that first aspect can sometimes get a bit lost. So it is good to take time to explore it more fully.

Bringing everyone in the practice into awareness and directing metta to them altogether is almost like a stage of the practice in itself. It is about cultivating loving-kindness for all, regardless of our own interests, likes and dislikes, and preferences. Of course there will be some people we hit it off with, and some people whom we find it awkward to be with, but in this practice we are trying to have loving-kindness for as many people as possible. You can genuinely want someone's happiness and well-being even though you find them difficult!

So this stage of the meditation is about considering ourselves, our friend, the neutral person, the person we find difficult together, and then trying to hold that attitude of love and well-wishing to them all equally. We are trying to cultivate equanimity. Here is a helpful quote to

explain what that means. It is taken from [Vessantara's book 'The Heart'](#) – which is a great little book all about the metta bhavana meditation:

“Equanimity... gives you a great inner freedom. Naturally, we all have our likes and dislikes, and as mild personal preferences, they're fine. What we don't often see is how unhappy they make us when we treat them more seriously. In capitalist societies, we are often encouraged to fine-tune our likes and dislikes in the name of consumer choice. We almost define ourselves by our lifestyle choices. But through doing this more and more, we paint ourselves into a corner. Rather than being open to life, rejoicing in all our experience, we are constantly narrowing down our range of enjoyment. For instance, I live in an English city in which you can buy tea in any food store. But I have developed a taste for almond tea – a black tea with almond flavouring that is available from one stall in the market square. I no longer enjoy the usual cup of tea at all. So my happiness, regarding tea at least, is dependent on this one source of satisfaction.

It can easily become the same with people. You may have such strong fixed likes and dislikes that you only really feel comfortable under very particular conditions. You may be happy only amongst people of your own age group, people who share your interest in a particular pastime, people of your own social standing, and so on. Then within that group there may be only a handful of people whose personalities gel with yours. Before you know it, out of all the billions of people on the planet, you're down to half a dozen

that you feel really comfortable with. And this constant movement, being pulled towards people you like and pushed to avoid those you dislike, can go on all the time, giving your heart no rest. So likes and dislikes that are natural enough in themselves can end up limiting your freedom of action, and leading you by the nose so that you are never really happy.

Equanimity is the alternative to this. Rather than running a kind of internal check on each person you meet to see whether they have favoured status, whether they're your kind of person and safe to be let into your heart, you could just take away the border guards and the barbed wire and open the frontier of your heart to all comers. Obviously you don't do this naively; some people are untrustworthy and dangerous. But in principle you let everyone in to the extent that it makes sense to do so. You might still have emotional preferences, but you don't let them rule your thoughts and actions.”

As Vessantara also says, equanimity is not just about our own inner emotional freedom, it also frees us to respond and care for others: “It is about seeing through the more superficial differences of personality and circumstance and to the fundamental humanity shared by all of us.”

You can perhaps see why this aspect of the practice is the precursor to expanding awareness further to include more and more people, which is the final aspect of the practice that we'll focus on tomorrow.

suggestions for practice

During this stage of the meditation **bring all four people into awareness in a way that works for you.** In his book, Vessantara suggests imagining all of you sat in a circle. Or you might just bring each person to mind and where they might be, and what they might be doing, thinking, and feeling right now. Just try to hold people in awareness and watch what happens – acknowledging any preferences and tendencies for your attention and interest to incline one way or the other. But also try to bring to mind what you've got in common, your shared humanity. All of you want to be happy and to avoid suffering. All of you have joys and struggles, hopes and fears, at different times of your lives. Try and keep your heart open and concerned for all.

Try the [30 minute led meditation](#), which takes you through the whole metta bhavana, with a special focus on this aspect of the practice. Tomorrow we'll look at the last aspect of the practice.

daily practice: identifying imaginatively

This is a reflection that gets to the heart of what the metta bhavana practice is about, especially the fourth stage. You'll need a pen and paper for this and it will work best if you read all the instructions before you do the exercise.

Sit quietly, close your eyes, and bring to mind something that someone in your life does that annoys you. Perhaps your teenage son scoffs the entire contents of the fridge, your flat-mate or room mate

lets her milk go sour and stinks the place out, or your husband never cleans the bath after he uses it.

Our tendency is often to think they are doing this thing to annoy us. But, just for this exercise, I'm asking you to put yourself in their shoes.

So first spend two or three minutes imagining, as vividly as you can, that you are them, doing this thing.

Now ask yourself (still imagining you are them), "How am I feeling as I'm doing it? What am I thinking?" The more you can suspend your usual narrative the better this exercise works. You might even find it a relief to temporarily let go of your own story or version of events.

Now spend five minutes or so, still inhabiting your "character", writing about what motivates you to do that particular thing.

Now let go of the person you are imagining and read through what you've written. How do you feel reading it? And how do you feel about them doing that particular action now?

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 final [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.