

- While holding the various people in mettā, (whether yourself or others) you may reflect on each and every of them as having their particular ups and downs, constantly changing moods and concerns. We may be happy today, yet frustrated tomorrow. All this is dependent on a vast network of conditions, some of which we may be able to control but others not. Seeing yourself and others in this way — as conditioned — can make you understand on a very deep level that there is no point in getting upset or excited about any of these changes. We are but waves in the ocean, with all the waves being of one and the same ‘substance’, yet nothing but temporary manifestations, nothing to last. There is no ocean without waves — and no waves without ocean!

While you are reflecting in this way, let the mettā be in your mind — an openness and softness of heart, radiating out to all regardless of their ‘illusory nature.’

“It may help to imagine the person standing whole against a wide, blue sky and let the spacious feel of the sky infuse both your sense of the person and your mind and heart. Relax into any moments of release in the physical heart centre. Notice if this more open perspective engenders an appreciative awareness of those people – and encourage any glimmers of kindness and care. You could also extend the wish, ‘May all beings come to rest in their own deepest nature’.” (Viveka)

- Having related to beings in all directions with a mind endowed with mettā, you may reflect, ‘This deliverance of mind through loving-kindness is conditioned and volitionally produced. But whatever is conditioned and volitionally produced is impermanent, subject to cessation.’ (Majjhima Nikāya, i. 351)

Taking this further, you allow subtle thinking to arise in your mind — occasionally checking whether you are able to sustain an access level of concentration. You may choose to reflect in either one of these two ways: 1) Considering the limitations of the attitude of mettā itself through seeing it as made up of at least four distinctive coexisting mental activities: placing and sustaining your attention on beings, with pleasurable interest and directed thoughts arising. All these, being dependent on conditions, are impermanent and unreliable. 2) Taking the notion of ‘being’ as object of your investigation, you see the apparently discrete material and mental constituents of what we call ‘personality’ in their changing, non-substantial and unsatisfactory nature.

Gradually, becoming established in these understandings, you let go of whatever belief in personality may be there and turn to ultimate liberation.

Such thoughts should be held very lightly and within a sphere of luminosity. Let them be like precious jewels or fragile, beautiful blossoms that can easily break. Keep them embedded in the loving spaciousness of the mettā that you have been feeling for yourself or the people you are contemplating.

Equalizing mettā and radiating out

The last stage of the mettā bhāvanā practice begins with ‘equalizing’ the mettā you feel for the people of the previous stages. This is an important step in the practice — and once again one that needs to be approached with sensitivity. You can’t force it.

If you have made the basic reflection, “I wish to be happy/well ... as I, all beings wish to be happy and well,” a regular feature of your practice, you may find that the equalizing will unfold quite naturally by merely holding all these people in open appreciative awareness. If, furthermore, you have learnt to bring people to mind with an openness and freedom from judgement that — whilst not getting caught up in their particular life histories and personalities — is nevertheless vibrantly alive to their ‘living-being-ness,’ you should be well prepared for this stage. Then, it may even serve as a kind of springboard for insight to arise.

When you move on to radiating out the mettā, avoid losing yourself in fantasies about the vastness of the universe. “What you are doing here really is developing a consistent and sustained expression of the brahmavihāra of mettā ‘in yourself’ which, in principle, would find expression towards anyone or any being whatever who you happened to think of or encounter. This is what ‘universal’ and ‘unlimited’ really mean.” (Tejānanda)

Opening toward vipassanā in the mettā practice

Traditionally, vipassanā would become a major feature, if we were to practice all the Brahmā Vihāras — in particular the upekkhā bhāvanā. Yet, there seems no reason why one shouldn’t take it up in the mettā bhāvanā practice as well. In fact, trying to evade that possibility would indeed be tantamount to shutting yourself off from experience as such. But it’s good to be honest with yourself, and make sure that there is indeed a good basis of mettā in your experience. Tradition would describe the kind of basis indicating that you are ready to move on to insight, in this way:

“A bhikkhu abides pervading one quarter with a mind imbued with loving-kindness, likewise the second, likewise the third, likewise the fourth; so above, below, around, and everywhere, and to all as to himself, he abides pervading the all-encompassing world with a mind imbued with loving-kindness, abundant, exalted, immeasurable, without hostility and without ill will.” (Majjhima Nikāya, i. 351)

On this basis of mettā-full concentration, there are there various ways of introducing an element of vipassanā into the practice. In one way or other, their common feature consists in your allowing into consciousness — heart and mind — the self- or ego-less nature of yourself and everyone else.

In principle, you can look at this in terms of two approaches. Firstly, inclusion of an element of vipassanā *into* the fourth stage of the practice. Secondly, using mettā as a kind of ‘springboard’ to vipassanā. They aren’t necessarily exclusive, but different in emphasis.

A few suggestions:

- To begin with, in a somewhat general way — in the context of the fifth stage of the practice — you may reflect on the ultimate incomprehensibility of living beings, the fact that you don’t really understand, neither yourself nor others. So it’s best to let go of any views you have been holding with regard to these people but rather learn to meet and experience them ever afresh, with no expectations whatsoever. You cannot control them, so it is best to give them space — not only to breathe, but to be as they are — mysterious and always new. A monk asks: ‘What is the Way?’ – Master Ummon replies: ‘March on!’ – After a more general reflection of this kind, make it more specific in relation to yourself and the specific people of your practice.