

Dealing with strong and painful emotions (anger, resentment, guilt, fear, depression, etc.)

While the approaches mentioned so far may suffice to deal with ‘milder’ forms of aversion you may find it necessary to give specific attention to manifestations of anger, hatred, etc. of a more persistent kind

Tradition suggests a number of approaches, some more explorative, others more directive and employing various considerations and reflections. (I take it that some of the latter are well-known to you. If not, you can read them up about those related to aversion in Kamalashila’s book on meditation, pp. 242 seq.) Whatever approach you choose, if you want it to work, it must be an approach of increasing and maintaining awareness of what is actually happening.

It is basic that you first acknowledge that it is you who suffers from these painful emotions. Doing that and reflecting on previous experience, you are likely to recognise that, the more you resent and reject having such feelings, the more you will suffer from them. Nothing but the accepting, caring power of awareness can overcome them. You will need a fair degree of trust and courage, patient attention and understanding to allow these poisonous feelings to present themselves for further and deeper exploration, possibly dissolution.

Many, if not all such emotions are attended by certain physical sensations, notably sensations of tension, pain, a sharp, burning heat, etc. Painful though these are, the fact in itself provides us with a key that can open the doors to those dark caves within where we have locked away our demons — demons that perhaps had been angels and may be angels again. Using this key by way of attending to our bodily sensations will bring us in touch with the emotions behind them — and often even their origin. Our body doesn’t lie. We may have all sorts of ideas and guesses about our emotions, but the body tells us: ‘This is what I sense — this is my truth.’

It is for this reason that, for most people, an exploration of painful emotions is best done in close connection with the bodily sensations. You may not immediately have a name for what’s happening (not to mention a diagnosis); it will usually suffice to listen, to gently explore, to sense with open-minded curiosity and a genuine wish to understand. Patiently listening until the truth behind the sensation will be revealed to you. In doing that, the sensation may be more accurately felt, your breath may change, an image or a word may come up. There will be feeling tones and gradually your experience will become more tangible. Observing, listening, labelling ... and a solution may be given to you. It may take whole days, weeks, and even months to uncover the psychological roots of such pains.

EXERCISE: Exploring difficult emotions (after Marie Mannschatz)

You may do this exercise in whatever posture you prefer.

Take your attention within — is there any difficult emotion that can be felt in the foreground of your present experience? Is it possible for you to locate it in your bodily sensations? Which parts of your body are included in it?

Allow this sensation to be felt as clearly and accurately as is possible. What is its space, its extension in the body? Its texture, consistence, its volume. Does it move, does there seem to be a kind of direction or drive, is there a source of origin, some centre out of which the sensation-feeling seems to arise?

During the next few steps it is important to again and again check back with your actual body sensations. Make sure that your feelings are always being anchored in the body.

Now find out what is happening in your mind. What are the thoughts, words, ever repeated phrases or stories that seem to be accompanying this bodily sensation?

*Whatever you perceive in body and mind during this exercise, it may be good to label it, give it a name (including images, symbols, comparisons, e.g. *what kind of taste or colour*). Language used in this way will help to clarify your awareness of yourself.*

Give a lot of space, time and patience to the sensation-feeling allowing it to reveal itself to you. Don’t run away. You may wish to imagine that you are in the same room with a rather difficult visitor. Staying relaxed within, remain open to understand the motivation behind the feeling. Keep some distance and perhaps ask that sensation to utter a full sentence. If it were able to talk, what would it say? (Again, as always, check back with your actual experience – don’t get carried away in mental proliferations.)

How would love respond to this feeling? What is needed in order to fully accept the present experience? Is it possible for you to be grateful to this manifestation of aliveness that is embodied in the sensation?

Allow compassion for yourself to arise by bringing up a sentence like: “May you/I find a way of accepting this.” Or: “May my pain be healed.”

Remembering the beginning of this exercise: Is there anything that has changed? Anything you wish to keep in mind?

Gradually expand your awareness to the whole of your body, sensing its warmth, energy, movement, and vitality — find an area in your body that feels good and where you wish to stay for a while before concluding the exercise.

The third and fourth stage

Remember what was said about how to bring another person to mind. If you are ‘vibrating with’ (Pāli *anukampa*) another person’s being alive, this is bound to spark off mettā for them.

The neutral person

Some people don’t easily find a person towards whom they feel neutral, i.e. no sense of instant liking or disliking. But “if you can think of a neutral person, directing mettā toward them may actually be something of a relief, since you will have no intense feelings about this person to interfere with the practice. He or she is a generic living being, wanting to be happy just as all of us do, making mistakes just as all of us do. We have no reason to feel separate from this person or to begrudge their happiness.” (Sharon Salzberg). On the other hand, your – perhaps – quickly getting bored in this stage might make you aware of how much you relate to people through your own agendas.

If you can’t think of a neutral person, just choose someone whom you would occasionally see without feeling strong emotional responses toward them. Reflecting on the existential urge for happiness that is shared by both yourself and the neutral person may already do most of the job, all the more so, if there has been some mettā in your exploration of the first stages of the practice.

The difficult person

It seems best to turn one’s attention to a difficult person only after spending some time in mettā toward oneself and those one does find it relatively easy to feel mettā for.

At first, choose someone with whom the difficulty you experience is relatively mild. And remember, it’s about experiencing your actual responses rather than fabricating a kind of pseudo-love. Allow these responses to organically relax into an open, accepting awareness. And be patient, they may prove to be fairly hardened. Take time to explore them, letting them speak to you rather than you dealing with them.

In due course you may want to include people who you find more difficult and more demanding to cope with. When we are bringing a difficult person to mind, it is particularly important to separate our experience of them (as a human being like us) from the actions they may have committed and that we feel upset by. It may not be easy to immediately get the balance right. On the one hand we don’t want to merely call up a vague and unspecific sense of a faceless living being, but on the other hand we don’t want to identify their full humanity with the particulars of their life and deeds. Whatever specific traits may come to mind, let them be embedded in the broad awareness of your essential sameness with them (both you and he/she being manifestations of the great life stream = *līśivē* death = śūnyatā = Mind Only = Buddhature ... however you may wish to call it). All beings deserve of well-wishing and well-being. Whatever unpleasant traits and responses may come up, let them come and go, noticing, perhaps labelling, and letting go of any tendency of yours to hook on to them.

If you feel anger or hatred, attend to how you are viewing the difficult person, and observe whether he/she arises to your mind as someone who is contextualized, multifaceted, with a full life, and a great number of good qualities as well as some bad ones. See if you can sense the interdependence with your own context: how you bring your own history to your perception of that person. A whole web of interrelationships may become apparent.

Depending on the strength of painful emotions arising (or expected by you to arise), you may find it helpful to employ certain ‘technical tricks’ when bringing the person to mind. You could place them further away in terms of distance, or make them small, perhaps even place them behind a strong screen of glass or, if necessary, even behind prison bars. Let them be present in a way that is just about acceptable to you, perhaps slightly uncomfortable, but not outrageously so. Gradually, after repeated practice, you will be able to ‘release’ them — that is release yourself from your preconceptions.

If you can, contemplate what is good about them. Or, remember that this person, just like yourself, wishes to be happy, and makes mistakes out of ignorance. Direct the mettā phrases toward them, whichever phrases you have been using. If saying, “May *you* be free from danger, may *you* be happy,” brings up too much fear or sense of isolation for you, you can include yourself in the recitation: “May *we* be free from danger. May *we* be happy.”

Gently continue to direct mettā toward the difficult person, and accept the different feelings that will come and go. There may be sorrow, grief, anger—allow them to pass through you. If they become overwhelming and you feel unable to contain them, go back to the first or second stage of the practice.

Much of what is separating us from others — whether they are benefactors, friends, neutral or difficult people — is the sum total of unfinished business in relation to ourselves and other beings. The ‘cultivation’ of mettā is, then, primarily about ‘removing’ or, better, letting go of such limitations and waking up to the reality of the other person as just another manifestation of that great stream of life to which we, as they, belong. No matter how you rationalise about the spiritual life — whether in terms of discovery, development, emergence, or revelation — you will see it reflected in your relations with other people. Your communication will provide you with a definite feedback about who you are.

Exercise: The dear friend

Spend a few minutes contemplating the rightness of your wish to be happy. Then, bringing other people to mind: “Just as I, they wish to be happy.”

Then, allow yourself to dwell in loving kindness toward yourself for a few minutes.

Call to mind heart someone you consider a good friend, perhaps saying their name, or visualising them, hearing their voice or feeling their presence—letting them come to mind in whatever way they seem to present themselves to you. As with the benefactor, the traditional teachings advise is to choose someone who is still alive and not an object of sexual desire.

In your heart, let your knowledge be felt that this person, just as you, has an innate urge to be happy.

Can you allow this person to be fully welcome and part of your universe? Could they come even closer ... be more present...take more space? What is missing or limiting? How are your present natural responses to the friend.

As in the previous stage of the benefactor, you may wish to contemplate certain likable qualities and acts of goodness of this person. Then, by silently repeating the same mettā phrases that you have used for yourself, explore whatever responses present themselves to you, allowing them to be there and to pass away in their own time. If your mind wanders off into stories or plans, gently return to the repetition of the phrases. At times, you may be surprised by the sense of ambiguity in your experience — or even shocked by flashes of resentment towards people you had assumed you were feeling friendly towards.

Explore the qualities of your feeling responses towards your friend. What kind of ‘liking’ or ‘friendliness’ is there? Where is your ego invested — just watch and take note of whatever feelings of attachment, pride, wanting, etc. may be there. Noting them and letting go; inviting and welcoming the friend as they are, not as you want them.

In the friend-stage of the mettā bhāvanā — as in other stages to come — it is good to make a deliberate decision whether you will be staying with just one and the same friend throughout the stage or whether you will allow different friends to come to mind. Both approaches are possible. Test them out.

With a certain degree of experience in the mettā practice, though, I think there is no need any longer to shy away from bringing people we ‘love’ into the practice — whether spouse, girl- or boyfriend, children. After all, tradition holds that it is one of the aims of this stage of the practice to overcome the limitations of ‘pema’, i.e. to let go of our attachments and cravings and give space to a more selfless appreciation and a genuine, selfless sense of well-wishing for our friends. How should that be possible if we don’t even dare to call our loved ones to mind in our meditation?

Tradition suggests various approaches to the cultivation of mettā for others, only one of which is the sequence of four further stages — friend, neutral person, difficult person, breaking down of barriers/limitless radiating out—that we generally take up in the FWBO. But it is often recommended that the first person other than oneself who is brought into focus, should be someone you really admire and love, not simply a dear friend, but a person who elicits your admiration and respect for the excellence of his or her life and deeds. Such a person is called the ‘benefactor.’

Exercise: The Benefactor

Start with the basic reflection, turning it over, feeling its truth in your heartmind: “I wish to be happy ... just as I, so all living beings wish to be happy.” Make the reflection specific by bringing a few people to mind. (Remember, you are merely contemplating an existential truth—this reflection is not about bringing forth a sense of well-wishing, but merely about remembering in your heart the inner urge of all living beings to be safe and free from harm. If well-wishing is sparked of by this contemplation, fine. If it isn’t, fine.)

Let that reflection pass over into a broad experience of yourself as you are now and lead you into a few minutes of the first stage of the mettā bhāvanā. You can use the mettā-phrases or images as seems appropriate, always making sure that you stay truthful to your actual experience, not manipulating it in any direction.

When you feel ready, call to mind someone whom you admire and feel grateful towards. Maybe he or she has acted as a kind of mentor, a good friend or teacher in your life. Someone who’s helped you to become what and who you are now, whether in a more worldly or spiritual sense. But it is as well to choose a person whom you haven’t met at all — perhaps a great spiritual teacher, a social activist, an artist or thinker. Whoever you choose, for the sake of keeping things simple, choose someone who is still alive and towards whom you don’t feel sexually attracted.

Once again, remember that the practice is not about ‘creating’ an artificial response — it is okay if you don’t actually feel grateful or respectful to start with. Just allow the benefactor to be present in the open space of your mindheart — with the gentle intention of opening into the existential connection of heart with heart, the thread of the one life vibrating in you both.

You may wish to contemplate the benefactor in his or her goodness, calling to mind specific kind acts or virtues of his. In doing so, once again leave space for your natural responses to arise (or not arise). Always staying with your experience, accepting whatever will come up. It may well turn out to be much more ambiguous than you would have expected. This, too, is okay. If feelings of gladness or gratitude or respect arise, allow them to be there — enjoying them, dwelling in them without a sense of grasping.

If you wish you can bring to mind one or another of your benefactor’s specific aims and aspirations. Or, silently repeat the mettā-phrases, holding them with your experience of the person — once again without pushing things.

The meaning of friends

During the day, think about what friendship means to you. What is it that you value most in a friend and what you would most like to offer others as a friend? Who are the people you consider to be your friends? Why is that so? What are their qualities? When do you feel ‘welcome’ or ‘at home’ with someone else? What are the duties, what are the joys? How do worldly and spiritual concerns come into your experience of friendship? What in your own experience, limits yours or other’s capability of being friends? What do you fear, and how do you avoid going deeper? — Is there anything you wish to change?

Even our friendships tend to be less straightforward than we would like to think. The more active and engaged they are, the greater the likelihood that there will be a variety of mixed emotional responses in our experience. Such feelings and emotions are quite normal and it is good to bring them to light, allowing them to be explored. Neither pushing them away nor trying to change them; we can trust that at tending to them with an open, accepting awareness while at the same time repeating the mettā phrases as a gently challenging counterpoint will suffice to dissolve whatever had been preventing natural loving kindness from blossoming forth. (In any case, that should be one’s first choice. If necessary, one can always decide to employ some more active means later.)

Remember that the mettā bhāvanā is not about artificially creating something and then making yourself believe that this is what you genuinely feel or ‘emote’. Rather, it should be a constant opening and re-opening of yourself to the truth of your actual experience in relation to yourself or another person. Whatever means you use, whether images or phrases, they are meant to support this opening. They may call up deeper layers of your experience, some of which will be happy and others not, some loving and others not. Again and again opening to your actual experience will change your whole relationship to life. An underlying selflessness may emerge (after all, none of us is an entity existing in independence, cut off from the greater stream of life). In this way, mettā, that “sense of love that is not bound to desire, that does not have to pretend that things are other than the way they are, overcomes the illusion of separateness, of not being part of a whole. Thereby mettā overcomes all of the states that accompany this fundamental error of separateness — fear, alienation, loneliness, and despair — all of the feelings of fragmentation. In place of these, the genuine realization of connectedness brings unification, confidence, and safety.” (Sharon Salzberg)

While it is a necessary basis for the cultivation of mettā for all beings, the love we experience towards ourselves is, in a sense, no more than a mere prelude to the practice. By its very nature—happiness—all the more in the form of mettā, aims to radiate out. It ‘wants’ to touch and include other people. In order to support this natural tendency, we bring such people to mind.

How to be aware of another person?

To begin with, it may be best to refrain from using any particular method other than gently ‘calling’ the other person (to mind) and experiencing what will happen then. There may be images or not, voice and words, memories of situations, thoughts connected with the other person, a feeling response ... whatever, just ‘let’ the person come in their own way rather than creating some mental representation of them in your way. (In a sense, even that will be ‘your’ way, since what we are calling to mind is likely to have much less to do with the other person than with our projections of them.)

Essentially, we want to find a way to truly welcome other people into our universe. The more that happens, less exclusive and boxed will our world will be. You may first be aware of the other being in a rather selective and partial manner. Your ‘seeing’ them will be determined both by your psychological type and by the extent of (unfinished) business between you and them. To truly allow them to enter your heartmind, you must find a way of remaining open — or re-opening again — neither denying your actual responses nor identifying with them. Just gently letting that person appear.

There is something very mysterious about living beings — each of us being in one sense absolutely unique, special, and separate, yet nonetheless rather much the same as, or even one with each other. In my own experience, bringing a person to mind seems to happen as a relaxing into, a dwelling in their presence no less than as inviting them into my world. It’s not necessarily understanding, and certainly not rationalising about them, but allowing them to be there, even as an indispensable part of ‘my’ world. If it goes well, it’s a heartfelt, joyous and spacious affirmation of their being alive.

The less you identify, the more mental space will there be for them ‘as they are.’ Strangely, at the same time, the more deeply connected will you feel with them. Outside of mettā bhāvanā, you may have had glimpses of this opening of awareness and merging of hearts during moments of genuine communication — when, quite suddenly perhaps, the boundaries of your normal sense of selfhood did melt away into a deep sense of oneness with the other that seemed accompanied by a kind of re-cognition. It seems as if we had known each other all along, since before the beginning of individual time. Not that we necessarily know any details about each other — it’s not even particularly useful to immerse oneself in particularities. Rather, there is a deep, existential knowing and welcoming, a recognition that may be attended by a release of tension or a lifting of weight. A lighting up of the heart area, a widening and reaching out. It is that there is a melting away of ego in this — at least the beginnings of it.

At other times, though (and perhaps much more often), we may be painfully aware of how separated we feel and how hard our heart has grown. That is okay; once again it’s good to notice this, we can welcome even this painful experience into our awareness. In due course awareness will release that pain. Awareness is revolutionary. Just allow the other person to be there with whatever responses arise within you—getting a sense for their presence and what they mean to you. Not thinking *about it*, but *experiencing without judgment*.

If you think of mettā as this act of allowing yourself and others to be fully present and increasingly welcome in appreciative awareness — with no need to artificially change them — a change will naturally occur. In time you will begin to understand on a deeper level why the Buddha has spoken of mettā as the ‘liberation of the heart.’

The second stage: Benefactors and Friends