

## *Practising forgiveness*

1. Feel the area of your heart, perhaps imagining it opening up like a blossom, becoming soft and warm, radiating out a sense of tenderness and wellbeing into your body.
2. Call to mind a friend, someone you like. Let them be there, right at the centre of your heart. You are going to explore how your relationship with this person might unfold if you were able to be more forgiving towards them — even though you may not be aware of any sense of resentment towards them anyway.

Silently, from your heart, address this person saying: “I forgive you. I forgive you. Occasionally, intentionally or unintentionally you did hurt or insult me, but I wish to forgive you for the pains I have experienced in relation to you.”

Open yourself to whatever feelings come up, grasping none, just noticing and allowing them to come and go in their own time, staying with them with heart and mind wide and open. Don't judge yourself for the difficulties you may experience.

If it hurts, let it hurt. Letting your heart open to them. “I forgive you.” You might wish to add further sentences that come to mind, perhaps affirming your wish to forgive or acknowledging the difficulties you are experiencing in doing so.

3. Now, ask your friend's forgiveness for whatever pains you may have caused them in the past, whether knowingly or unknowingly: “Please forgive my anger, my impatience, and all the sorrows I have caused you through being unmindful or careless of your needs and feelings. Please forgive even those minor everyday irritations that usually we don't even bother to mention between us.”

Take note of whatever limits your ability to accept your friend's forgiveness. If there is resistance in you, just notice and let it be there. Don't allow resentment towards yourself—guilt, a sense of unworthiness—block your receptivity. Keeping the heart soft, let that unworthiness come up ... and let go.

Are you able to grant yourself the blessing of being fully forgiven? You cannot force forgiveness. You cannot 'do' letting go. It will happen quite naturally. You may wish to say something like, “You and I wish to be happy. It is good to forgive each other. I am happy to accept your forgiveness; I am happy to forgive you.”

4. Finally, addressing yourself with your own name, you might say: “XXX, I forgive you. I forgive you. I forgive your carelessness and impatience and all the pains you have caused yourself, knowingly and unknowingly.” Or, “I forgive myself. I forgive myself. I forgive my carelessness and impatience and all the pains I have caused myself, knowingly and unknowingly.”

Make room in your heart for yourself. Watch those thoughts of bitterness, harshness, self-denigration. And see the freedom in self-forgiveness.

Attending to your heart and allowing it to widely open you accept all the difficult sides of yourself, your anxiety and confusion, your cravings and aversions. Say to yourself, “I wish to learn to accept myself as I am, and I wish myself well. I forgive myself.”

Again, as mentioned above with regard to the sentences in general: Don't expect to necessarily feel a strong response in your heart; just gently repeat the sentences allowing them to do their own work without you interfering.

*“When you can look at your mind and still keep your heart open, business is finished. It isn't that anger or fear, doubt or confusion are absent. There's just no pulling or pushing. No loss or gain. But just a going beyond holding, in a soft awareness that meets each moment with compassion instead of fright. With quietude and stillness instead of agitation and grief for a life that has dissolved behind us.” (Stephen Levine)*

in your awareness as you are bringing various persons to mind. Just allow the sentences to be there and allow heartmind to respond — in whatever way it will. Don't try to produce mettā. It would be pretty useless anyway. Just explore your response as it comes up. Stay with that response in open awareness, yet keep your mettā phrases (to start with perhaps just one for quite a while) present, repeating them as if they were pearls on an endless thread quietly running through your mind — in ever the same sequence and with ever the same wording. In this way, the phrases will gradually call up deeper, previously unconscious layers of your emotions that would not easily reveal themselves unless being 'provoked' in this kind of way.

As regards the choice of sentences, it may be best to try out for yourself what sounds acceptable. Once you've made up your mind, stay with your (sequence of) sentences for a while. Just continue repeating them, without any expectations of mettā whatsoever, simply allowing your responses to unfold.

### **Going deeper**

There is no need to be content with the first glimmerings of self-mettā. Yet there is no need—even no chance—of forcing it either. Rather, occasionally, ask yourself, 'What is limiting love? Where do I resist, grasping and holding on to past desires, fears, resentments, images of how I think I should be?'

Gently letting go of these, relax into the space of the heart. Remember how painful it is to keep yourself out of your heart.

Apply these suggestions for going deeper in the later stages of the mettā bhāvanā as well: opening the heart to include other people, experiencing your responses, gently exploring the limitations ... and, when the time has come, moving beyond the limitation even of holding on to ideas of 'I', 'others' etc.

### **Meeting the 'shadow'—allowing for (self-) forgiveness**

Don't be surprised if occasionally you find antagonistic emotions coming up in response to the sentences. You should rather be surprised, and perhaps even sceptical if it is all smooth sailing. That may well be an indication of your subconsciously trying to be 'nice.'

At times the mettā-phrases may call up rather strong reactions. You may become aware that you aren't at all willing to wish yourself or others well. Or that you are holding on to old grudges, or grief. Be alert: when resentment arises, we tend to dive right into it. We lose our natural space and identify with whatever may have come up.

Antagonism of one kind or other is quite normal and you can welcome it as a sign of the practice working. You are touching layers of yourself that perhaps have been hidden. You are in the process of finishing unfinished business. How good! You can probably trust that you are strong enough to allow these unpleasant emotions to arise — mature enough to acknowledge that there are still some limitations to your love of yourself (or others). If, for the moment, you feel overwhelmed by them, that's okay as well.

Let the unhappy emotion be there. It may be shocking, but it's nothing that should be denied. Now is not the time to punish yourself for your imperfections! It's the time to let them be revealed in the healing light of awareness. You can be grateful that you are getting to know them. No need to deny, no need to manipulate. Just stay with your responses, however unpleasant they may at first seem. Exploring them. Using them as an object of investigation. Exploring, yet not identifying with them — they have arisen, they will pass away. And this may take some time—days, months, years ...

Occasionally, you may wish to introduce some gentle reminders: 'How would kindness respond to this? May I learn to receive this in openness.'

Many people find it useful, and perhaps even necessary, to address some such responses in a more directed way. Various Western teachers have suggested a "forgiveness bhāvanā." I'm not aware of this as a traditional Buddhist practice, but I have found it very helpful myself. (Indirectly, it may be possible to design a meditation practice of this kind from the various suggestions concerning the reconciliation of conflict in the Buddhist tradition.)

Here is one such exercise, after Marie Mannschatz, a Western teacher in the Vipassanā tradition. The exercise uses a friend as a 'way in' to developing a forgiving attitude towards yourself. It should be evident that, in time, it may be good to extend the practice to more 'difficult' people, too.:

Remember: To practice bhāvanā in its inclusive sense of ‘maintaining’ in being and ‘cultivating’ growth, you may have to first unlearn your tendency of plunging right into doing. Your practice of the mettā bhāvanā will flourish if you can lightly hold your *intention* of mettā in the unbroken flow of experience. Then, while ‘listening’ to your responses as they arise, you confront them with a very gentle challenge.

### Starting from where you are

In meditation and, ideally, in our other activities likewise, it is essential to first establish and then maintain an expansive yet grounded sense of awareness and spaciousness. Basing ourselves within the vastness of awareness, we will be able to give attention to whatever we do or don’t do—and to develop whatever quality we might wish to develop—without getting caught up in processes of identification or building ego.

To begin with, we therefore need to give ourselves sufficient time to check in with what is going on ‘in’ us as we are now. In a sense, we don’t even have to do anything other than just that. The first (and last) thing is to *be with* our sensing, feeling, ‘emoting’ and thinking right now. This means to become fully present—both in a general and a more specific sense. How *is* being here and now? And which are the more specific sensations, feelings, thoughts, emotions that are being experienced within this greater sense of being?

Practically speaking, “what this means is being *receptive* to exactly what is going on in us from moment to moment—in body, mental activities and emotional activities. Gross emotions usually are easy to contact, subtle ones can be more difficult. So, in becoming aware of our *emotional activities* as part of our setting up, we’re not just looking for fully formed ‘emotional states’—that is, moods—but also for slighter or more subtle emotional impulses that may be arising—for example, things that we’re wishing for, or wanting to do. A desire to move a hand or scratch an itch is an emotional activity too.” (Tejānanda)

It is important to be aware of these arisings not ‘from their side’—not as something we are (which would mean identifying with the knots, lusts, fears ... the various clouds in the mind)—but to be aware of them as arising within an expansive and still space that is somehow before and beyond all separation into ‘I,’ ‘it’ and ‘other’ and their various businesses. (A space we all share in and that can never be ‘our’s.’)

The more we are aware of what is actually going on, the more we will just dwell in direct experience — without interpreting, comparing, judging, doubting. Awareness in itself is a form of love; we fully and openly welcome our experience just as it is in this very moment. It is important that this awareness is something experienced by heart and mind in conjunction—in traditional Buddhist terminology it is a function of *citta*, a term that is sometimes translated as ‘heartmind.’ Even if there is pain, opposition, difficulty in our experience, there is no need to act on it. Just being mindfully aware of these will create a kind of spaciousness around the contents of our experience, and this will have a soothing, relaxing, even liberating effect. Awareness of this kind liberates because it doesn’t try to change anything. The Buddha referred to mettā as the ‘liberation of the heart.’ This liberation comes about quite organically by being aware of whatever there is going on in our experience now and of whatever limits or prevents the natural mettā to shine forth.

### Using phrases in the mettā bhāvanā:

There are various formulations of such sentences — the main principle being that amongst them they aim to cover the complete range of potential wellbeing, i.e. happiness in its material-physical, mental, social, and spiritual aspects as well as the absence of whatever conditions might threaten or diminish happiness.

“May I be well. May I be happy. May I be free of suffering. May I progress. – As I, so may others ...”

“May I be free from enmity, distress and anxiety, and may I guide myself to bliss. – as I, so may others ...”

“May I be free from inner and outer dangers. May I live in security. May I find peace. – As I, so may others ...”

People often develop a habit of employing the traditional phrases in either one of two extreme ways: very directive or merely mechanical. They seem to use them as ‘self-suggestions’ rather than as lightly held expressions of mere ‘wishes.’ This is a very important distinction in as much as self-suggestions tend to impose a kind of urge and pressure that is quite alien to wishes. A self-suggestion *must* become true, otherwise *I* (!) have failed. A wish *may* become true or not — whether it does or not is not under my control, at least not fully so. Self-suggestions are narrow-mindedly attached to fixed results; wishes are free and, therefore, generative of expansive results.

Rather than using the mettā-phrases as self-suggestions, I’d like to suggest you explore the more subtle and receptive approach over the next day or two, if not longer. Here, you use your chosen sentences as wishes spoken in gentle and tender voice — as a kind of ‘mantra’ underlying the emotional responses that are revealed