



Manchester  
Buddhist  
Centre

# Introduction to Buddhism Course

## Week 4



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### 1. What is meditation?

This week's class is dedicated to the second stage of the 'Threefold Path' – meditation. As we have already noted, meditation can be regarded as the practice of **mindfulness**. We sometimes define mindfulness in this way:

- Being aware
- in the present moment
- without judgment

Let's now look at each of the three parts of this definition in detail.

### 2. The three qualities of mindfulness

#### a. Being aware

##### **An image for awareness**

You could liken awareness to light. Sometimes the light is dim, sometimes it is bright. It is what helps us to see clearly and to experience what is going on in a fuller way.

##### **Aware of what?**

There are many things that we can be aware of; for example ourselves, other people and our environment. In terms of ourselves, we can become increasingly aware of our bodies, as well as our thoughts, feelings, emotions and motivations. We can become aware of what is coming in through the senses - sights, sounds etc. - and we can also be aware of how these things affect our state of mind.

##### **With awareness comes choice**

Over time we can see what our mind dwells on. What kind of thoughts, feelings and emotions occupy us? In meditation we can notice what we are thinking about and build a sense of where such thoughts will lead, in terms of the mental states that they will produce. This is the first step towards dropping the patterns of thought that lead us into negative mental states.

## **b. In the present moment**

Moment by moment, we can cultivate awareness. This awareness isn't in the past and it isn't in the future. It is right here, right now.

### **Simplicity**

To be in the present moment is to live simply – this is really important!. When we wash we feel the water on our bodies. When we eat we taste our food. We are with the experience we are having.

As the poet David Whyte says in his poem 'Enough':

*Enough.  
These few words are enough.  
If not these words, this breath.  
If not this breath, this sitting here.*

*This opening to life  
We have refused  
again and again  
until now.*

However, how often is this the case? How often, when we are doing a task, are we thinking about something else? This can lead to our energy being scattered, to a state of alienation or a sense of being separate from our bodies. How, then can we become more 'embodied', more alive to the present moment? A large part of the answer is that we can cultivate awareness of the body in general, and specifically of the breath. The body only experiences the present moment - it is thought that keeps leaping to the past or future.

If we are meditating and we begin to replay an argument we had at work we emotionally respond as if we are actually present at work. We need to start by recognising this - thoughts, images and emotions come and go, so we can just allow them to do so.

The difficulty with being in the present moment is that our minds are always moving, looking for stimulation. If we find something boring we wish to distract ourselves from it. There are many things in our lives that are potentially like this. We can sometimes experience our lives as an endless round of chores; things we need to get done before we can relax. If this is the case then we might spend much of our lives running away from our present experience. If you recognise this, you could try giving yourself fully next time you perform a task that you would usually find a chore. If you are washing up, become aware of the sensations of the soapy water. Feel its temperature and, at the same time, watch your mind and emotions. Notice what 'story' you tell yourself about this experience.

### **c. Without judgment**

Not judging our experience means that we bring a kindly attitude to whatever arises. Judgment tends to close down our experience; it limits us, fixes us and cuts us off from what is actually going on.

We judge our experience by having opinions about how we are. This leads to a tendency to want to experience something other than what is actually going on. This can happen both within, and outside of, our meditation practice. We will notice this happening when thoughts arise such as “I can't do this”, “I'm no good, I keep on getting distracted”, or “My mind won't settle”. We may also get into thinking in a way that compares ourselves to others. It's important to recognise here that these thoughts always arise and pass away - we don't have to go along with them. We can acknowledge our thoughts, then gently and patiently bring ourselves back to the object of the practice (the body or the breath).

Our judgements come from our pre-conceived ideas about how things should be: “I should be breathing deeply”, “My mind should be blank” or “I should be more aware”. Instead of this, it is important to approach your experience with a sense of openness and curiosity. Our experience is what it is, this is our starting point and that is fine. What's more, every time we notice that our awareness has become absorbed in thoughts is a moment of awareness - so give yourself a pat on the back! In a sense, what is needed here is to befriend ourselves so that, when we bring ourselves back to the body or the breath, we do so with a sense of kindness.

### **3. 'Models for meditation' - being and doing modes**

Although it's very hard to describe the various experiences that can result from meditation directly in words, it can still be helpful to have some models that help us to understand what's happening when we meditate. These models can also suggest the sort of attitudes that it might be helpful to bring to our practice of meditation. The first of these is concerned with what we might call 'being' and 'doing' modes of living.

We spend a lot of time doing, achieving and trying to change. A lot of our life is spent in doing this and that, in trying to get from 'A' to 'B'. We always want more, dissatisfied with how things are. We can be very goal-orientated and have unrealistic expectations of ourselves. This attitude can easily be carried into our meditation, where what we really need is just to **be** - being with our experience as it is. If we can learn to be with ourselves space opens up - we begin to appreciate life more and become more at ease with life's ups and downs.

#### **The paradox of meditation**

People often take up meditation in order to be more grounded or calmer, to get to know themselves, or to develop qualities like kindness, positivity, letting go and acceptance. How can meditation be used as an agent of these changes?

If 'not being calm' is '**A**' and 'being more calm' is '**B**', we may think we just need to try to move towards B. But the paradox of meditation is that **by just being present with A, B arises**.

This means that meditation is about learning to be more present in our current experience and trying not to judge what is going on, instead accepting it with a sense of kindness. We can apply last week's definition of meditation as 'being aware, in the present moment, non-judgmentally' to our body, thoughts, feelings and emotions. When we bring awareness to something and see it more fully and with a sense of kindness, we can understand that whatever we are observing is constantly changing. In the same way, we can see that our thoughts and emotions are **always** changing – our minds are intrinsically volatile. This opens up the very real possibility that we need never be stuck in a particular mental state. With practice, by being with what is arising, we can just see a given mental state come into being and pass away.

#### 4. What is the Metta Bhavana?

This week we introduce this second meditation practice, which is very important in the Buddhist tradition. 'Metta Bhavana' is a term taken from the ancient Indian language Pali – we tend to use this rather than an English translation, because the latter doesn't fully convey the true spirit of the Pali term. Looking at this a little more closely:

**Metta** – translates (approximately) as 'unconditional friendship' or 'loving kindness'

**Bhavana** – translates as 'cultivation' or 'development'

We can therefore say that the **metta bhavana** is the cultivation of loving kindness – OR developing ourselves through unconditional friendship. It is concerned with cultivating emotional positivity and recognising that qualities like warmth, kindness and empathy are part of our natural makeup.

The Metta Bhavana is, in various ways, an extension of techniques you've already learned. The Mindfulness of Breathing and the body scan are both concerned with cultivating awareness of the body. Both practices require an attitude of coming back to the object of meditation without judgment and with kindness. This non-judgmental attitude is actually a reflection of metta. Metta is the attitude that meets whatever comes into our experience with kindness, openness and patience. It's important to remember that, although our initial response might not involve these qualities, we can choose to cultivate them. Practising the Metta Bhavana involves deliberately cultivating awareness of ourselves and others, and specifically our emotional responses to ourselves and others.

Like all other practices it starts with awareness of the body and of our thoughts, feelings and emotions. We begin by getting a sense of ourselves at present and acknowledging whatever we find with kindness.

## 5. Conditioned and Unconditioned

Metta is said to be 'unconditional loving kindness'. What do we mean by 'unconditional'?

We can better answer this by first looking at what **conditioned** behaviour is. Our conditioned responses are based on our habits of liking and disliking, as well as the mentality whereby we do something for someone and we expect to get something in return. A couple of examples of this might be:

1. You hold open a door for someone out of a friendly intention. Unfortunately, the other person rushes past you and doesn't say "thank you". You feel anger or resentment. If you reflect on this, you might realise you have a hidden expectation - you want the other person to acknowledge that you have put yourself out for him.
2. You buy a friend a present for her birthday. You spend a lot of time thinking about what you are going to buy and then spend a lot of money on it. When you give her the gift she is very happy and tells you how much she appreciates you. When it comes to your birthday you get a card and a small amount of money. You feel disappointed, dwell on the matter and begin to think that your friend is inconsiderate and doesn't care about you. Again, although your motivation at the time of buying the gift seemed to be friendly, you realise that your motive was actually mixed. When your birthday came around you expected your friend to make a similar amount of effort for you.

These two examples show us how we may act in a conditioned way, wanting something in return for what we see as our 'good deeds'.

What, then, does it mean to act **unconditionally**? It simply means that we do things without an expectation of reward. It requires that our kindness is sufficiently robust to absorb the effects of others' actions when they don't act the way we want them to. However, and importantly, it doesn't mean that we become an 'emotional doormat'. If we are upset about something we can still find an appropriate way to express how we feel. In fact, expressing ourselves in this way may be an act of 'self-metta'. Crucially, we need to realise that we cannot directly change others - we can only really change ourselves.

The ideal of metta is that we should always act unconditionally. We probably won't achieve the ideal, but we can certainly work to move slowly closer and closer towards it, and this is a hugely positive aim in itself. Don't be misled - it takes a lot of practice, but this practice has a great starting point when we recognise and acknowledge our conditioned responses. By observing our long-established habits with kindness to ourselves, reflecting on the meaning of metta and practising the Metta Bhavana we can slowly but surely change our habitual behaviour.

## 6. The practice

The practice has 5 stages, in which we cultivate metta towards:

1. Ourselves
2. A good friend
3. A 'neutral' person
4. Someone we find difficult
5. All of the above in equal measure, then finally all beings

During this and the following two weeks we'll be gradually developing our practice of all of these stages.

## 7. Homework

- To meditate 6 out of 7 times a week. You could alternate (a) the Mindfulness of Breathing, stages 1 to 4 and (b) the first 2 stages of the Metta Bhavana.

If you have more time to spare and want to practise a little more deeply you could try these extra exercises:

- Try - both in your meditation and as much of the rest of your time as you can - to practice a broader awareness of your experiences than is normally your habit.
- Try to investigate 'doing mode' by spending about five minutes every day doing nothing at all. This doesn't mean meditating, looking at a view or even thinking something through – it simply means doing nothing! How easy is this to do?