



Introductory Meditation Course

Week 4



1. What is the Metta Bhavana?

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.

2. It's an extension of techniques you've already learnt

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.

3. 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.

4. 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

5. Ways of cultivating metta

There are lots of ways of working in the practice, and more possibilities will come to you the more you do it. The key point is to explore ways to engage our imagination and look for a 'heart response'. Here are some possible approaches:

Traditional way – 4 Phrases

You drop into your meditation, rather like a pebble into a still pond, the phrases:

- “May I be happy”
- “May I be well”
- “May I be free from suffering”
- “May I grow and develop”

Each time you drop in one of these phrases you give it time to affect you. Remember that the object of the practice is not to experience great waves of bliss (you probably won't!), but gradually to change your emotional responses. It is therefore our intention that is important – ultimately, to want the best for ourselves and all beings in equal measure. Don't be concerned with how much you are feeling right now – as ever, stay with your bodily experience and trust that the phrases are having an effect.

Images, memory, words

You could remember a time when you were happy and at ease, and try to evoke just how you felt at that time. You could bring to mind an image that has a positive effect on you – like a clear blue sky or a sunlit meadow. Alternatively, you could reflect on a word that evokes a positive response in you – examples might be “spaciousness”, “kindness”, “warmth” or “tenderness”.

Questioning

You could ask, “How am I?” then wait for a response, which could be in either words or images. You can then respond to whatever you find with kindness. Alternatively, you can cultivate something that addresses your immediate needs – for example, if you feel dull, you can say to yourself “brightness” or “light” and try to experience the emotional quality of the word.

The body

The body is an important anchor in the practice because our emotions are experienced in the body. So we can start by bringing awareness to areas that tend to give physical expression to our emotions, for example our heart or solar plexus. We can investigate how they feel and then 'give space' to whatever is there. If we do this with a sense of kindness, we shall gradually experience a 'softening' of the area.

The breath

Another anchor in the practice is the breath. If we find that our attention is drifting a lot during the Metta Bhavana, we come back to the body and then to the breath. We can also use the breath in a more specific sense by imagining

that the in- and out-breaths are the carriers of specific qualities. For example, we can breathe in kindness and breathe out tension. If we feel pain (either physical or mental), we can perhaps imagine it as black smoke that we breathe out. When we breathe in, we can imagine breathing purifying white light. We could breathe out red anger and breathe in a calmer, more forgiving colour – and many other such examples.

Love after love

*The time will come when,
with elation,
you will greet yourself arriving at your own door,
in your own mirror,
and each will smile at the other's welcome and say,
sit here.
Eat.*

*You will love again the stranger who was yourself.
Give wine.
Give bread.
Give back your heart to itself,
to the stranger who has loved you all your life,
whom you have ignored for another,
who knows you by heart.*

*Take down the love letters from the bookshelf,
the photographs,
the desperate notes,
peel your own image from the mirror.
Sit.
Feast on your life*

By Derek Walcott,
In *Collected Poems 1948 -1984*, New York, Farrar Straus Giroux, 1986

6. Homework

Try to meditate 6 out of 7 times a week.

Alternate the Mindfulness of Breathing with the Metta Bhavana.

Try to do an act of 'self metta' every day – and try not to feel that it's self indulgent!