



Introductory Meditation Course

Week 5



1. Metta Bhavana - Stage 4

Choosing the 'difficult' person

It is important to remember, in this stage in particular, to choose someone we can manage. In other words, choose someone who mildly irritates you, not someone who causes you to feel a lot of anger or deep feelings of resentment. As we build up the practice over time, we can then work with the stronger and deeper emotional tendencies involved with people who challenge us more seriously.

As with the previous stages, we are trying to contact the humanity that we share with the chosen person. For example, we can be sure that, just like ourselves:

- they experience pleasure and pain;
- they have hopes and fears ;
- they want to love and be loved;
- they don't want to suffer.

The basic stories of our lives may be different but the emotions that we experience are the same. Seeing this, we can experience a sense of connectedness and a desire can emerge for them to be well, to be happy, not to suffer and to learn from life. If this sounds all too easy, we need to consider what stops us from experiencing a sense of connectedness with the 'difficult person'. There may actually be many contributing factors, but some examples may be:

- They have hurt us in some way.
- They are not acting in a way that we think they should.
- Pride – we think they are better than us or we are better than them.
- Jealousy – they have something that we want.
- Blame – we blame them for negative feelings that are really our own.

In beginning to change our attitude toward this person it is important to remember that we have sole responsibility for our emotional states - **we create them and we can change them**. This may be a very challenging statement to hear, so it's good to examine our experience to see if it is true.

How do emotional states arise? A useful formula from the Buddhist tradition is:

Contact – feeling – craving and aversion – grasping and becoming

So what does this mean in practice?

Contact – what enters through the senses **or** the mind (thoughts, feelings etc.)

Feeling – the sensations that arise in response to contact; whether pleasant, painful or neutral. For example, in dependence on a sight, sound or taste a pleasurable, neutral or unpleasant feeling might arise.

Craving and aversion – these are **possible** responses to our feelings. Craving involves pursuing pleasant feelings, aversion is the ‘pushing away’ of unpleasant ones.

Grasping and becoming – in a sense, telling ourselves a story about the situation. At this stage we are actively cultivating emotions and ‘becoming’ the sort of person who acts in a particular way. For example, when we have **contact** with someone we find difficult an unpleasant **feeling** arises. We immediately experience **aversion** and tell ourselves that our life would be a lot better if this person wasn’t in it (**grasping and becoming**).

2. ‘Dwelling in the gap’

Of the four stages described above, **contact** and **feeling** are ‘givens’ – there is little or nothing we can do to change them. In response to this, when we contemplate the difficult person in the Metta Bhavana we simply notice our resulting feeling ‘tone’, which may well be unpleasant.

However, the next stage is of crucial importance. In response to an unpleasant feeling, we can choose whether or not to experience aversion (or, in the same way, whether we experience craving in response to a pleasant feeling). If we can learn not to ‘choose’ aversion and craving in the short term, in the longer term we reduce our grasping and becoming – in other words, we gradually free ourselves from these reactive habits and become freer and more creative in our dealings with the world. Sometimes we talk about ‘dwelling in the gap’ between our feelings and our habitual responses to them – we can learn to stay in that gap, without automatically moving on to the next link of craving and aversion.

In practice, we can watch what happens when we bring the difficult person to mind and initially just experience the discomfort. We can respond to this with a sense of kindness. We can also notice how we add to our raw experience of discomfort by trying to push it away (aversion). We may also notice that we are telling ourselves a story about the person, thereby moving into the stage of grasping and becoming. When we notice these things happening we can gently bring our awareness back to ourselves and see what is going on. For example, we may have become tense in the shoulders or chest - we can breathe into this tension with kindness. We can also try to be clear what emotion we are actually feeling. We could say to ourselves “I am aware that

something in me is feeling angry, sad, frustrated, afraid (etc.)". Once we have identified these bodily feelings and emotions it becomes easier to try to let go of them.

3. A few more reflections

When the person with whom you have difficulty does something you don't like, ask yourself what emotional state they seem to be in. You might suspect that they are feeling emotions like anxiety, stress, anger or frustration. Then ask yourself whether this is a pleasant state to be in. If you reflect on how you behave less than ideally yourself when you are subject to emotions like these, it may become easier to feel some empathy for the difficult person.

In the Metta Bhavana, you could imagine that you breathe in their negative emotions and breathe out kindness towards them.

*First he will diligently foster the thought
that his fellow creatures are the same as himself.
All have the same sorrows, the same joys as I,
and I must guard them like myself.
The body, manifold of parts in its divisions of members,
must be preserved as a whole;
and so likewise this manifold universe has its joy in common.
Although my pain may bring no hurt to other bodies,
nevertheless it is a pain to me,
which I cannot bear because of the love of self;
and though I cannot in myself feel the pain of another,
it is a pain to him which he cannot bear because of the love of self.
I must destroy the pain of another as though it were my own,
because it is a pain;
I must show kindness to others,
for they are creatures as I am myself.*

- Shantideva - the Bodhicaryavatara

4. Homework

- Try meditate 6 out of 7 times a week, alternating the Mindfulness of Breathing with the first 4 stages of the Metta Bhavana.
- Notice the formula **contact – feeling – craving / aversion – grasping and becoming** in your daily life and look for as many opportunities as you can to 'dwell in the gap' between feeling and craving or aversion.