



# Introductory Meditation Course

## Week 6



### 1. What we've covered on this course

We hope that, over the 6 weeks of this course, we've given you a good enough idea of what meditation is, and how to approach it, to enable you to develop your own meditation practice in the months and years to come. This is a brief summary of the most important topics we've covered:

#### **Posture**

This is the starting point of successful meditation, because the way we perceive our body is crucial in developing our self-awareness. We learned how to sit or lie down in a position that ensures that we are both comfortable and alert. In other words, we can be both at ease with our body and alive to our experience.

#### **The role of the body**

In a sense, meditation involves the body just as much as the mind. Our self-awareness can begin with a better awareness of our body, using the body scan. When we do the Mindfulness of Breathing, we can try to have a sense of the whole body breathing (this is related to the points on 'Breadth and Focus' below).

#### **'Doing' and 'being' modes**

The premise is that in our culture we tend to be goal oriented - we are constantly trying to 'get from A to B'. There is nothing wrong with this, but with it can come a certain attitude to life that we can bring into our meditation practice. For example, we feel stressed (A) and we want to be calm (B). The paradox of meditation is that, to get from A to B, we need to stay with A and then B will arise. During meditation and in our daily lives we can recognise the components of stress in terms of the body and its sensations. If we simply recognise these as they are, over time they begin to lose their power over us. Moreover, they do not last, and with this recognition comes an attitude of lightness - we begin to take our experience less seriously.

#### **Dealing with distractions**

Distractions will always arise, whether internal or external – there's nothing we can do to stop them. However, we can accept them with an attitude of letting them come and go (as they will), without hanging onto them. Hanging on can involve craving for sensations we find attractive, but alternatively we can 'hang

on' in a negative sense, by cultivating feelings such as aversion, dislike or anger.

In all these cases, we can acknowledge the mental experience, but try just to allow it to pass.

### **Developing positive emotions**

If the Mindfulness of Breathing enables us to understand ourselves better at a bodily level, the Metta Bhavana extends the practice by investigating – and taking the opportunity to change – our feelings and attitudes towards people. It's important to remember that, however imperfect or uncomfortable our current emotional experience may be, there are endless opportunities to learn from them and do things a little bit differently in the future. The role of 'self-metta' in the first stage of the practice is key here, because we can only ultimately change ourselves – so cultivating a more positive, patient and caring attitude to ourselves will undoubtedly improve our relationships with others.

Apart from ourselves, the other particularly challenging object of our meditation is obviously the 'difficult person'. When we feel negatively towards such people (as we certainly will!) the model of 'dwelling in the gap' can help us to differentiate between that natural response and a more deep-seated inclination to make a habit out of our negativity.

## **2. Metta Bhavana - Stage 5**

### **Applying equanimity to our well-wishing**

The final stage of the Metta Bhavana allows us to become truly ambitious in our cultivation of positive emotion and well-wishing, as we do our best to apply these qualities as widely as we possibly can. We start by bringing back to our mind's eye the four people on whom we have already concentrated, perhaps imagining them all being present in the same room. The important point at this stage is that, however able to feel positive emotion and well-wishing we feel we are, we try to apply them in an even-handed way to all four recipients – not forgetting ourselves! Having reached this point, we can go further if we wish, expanding the 'target' of our metta to an increasingly broad group of people. We can do this however we like – there are no rules – but the best approach is to engage our imagination and, if we feel so inclined, to let it go free! We can even include non-human beings and perhaps inhabitants, as yet undiscovered, of places beyond this planet!

This stage of equanimity is an expression of the important Buddhist principle that there is no point in seeking happiness just for ourselves – we have the capacity, as humans, to seek it for all living beings.

### 3. Just Sitting

Just sitting is, in a sense, just as its name suggests! We can see it as a practical application of 'being mode', as we sit with no agenda and no technique as such, simply trying to be as open and accepting as we can to our various experiences in the present moment. Although Just Sitting is sometimes used as a meditation practice in its own right, especially in certain schools of Buddhism, a period of it can also very usefully be added to the end of a more structured practice like the Mindfulness of Breathing or the Metta Bhavana. In this way we allow ourselves an empty, receptive space, ideally without preconceptions, in which we can 'process' the impact of the preceding meditation. This processing doesn't necessarily happen at a conscious level, so it's particularly helpful to have no expectations of Just Sitting – just to be open to whatever comes our way!

### 4. What next ?

#### Going Deeper with Meditation

If you decide to come to the 'Going Deeper' course you will be able to develop your relationship with both the Mindfulness of Breathing and the Metta Bhavana. You will also do a little bit more **just sitting** which, as you might know, is a deliberate application of 'being mode'! The next course starts on **Wed 05 May** (same timings as for the present course) and will run for 6 weeks.

#### Learning about Buddhism

Although this has been a practical course with relatively few references to Buddhist teachings, you may have developed an interest in finding out a little bit more about the belief system that gave rise to the meditation practices that we've covered. If you'd like to do so alongside others who are new to Buddhism, on a course led by a member of the Western Buddhist Order, then we recommend 'Buddhism and Meditation 1'. This is another 6-week course and, as its name suggests, will give you a mixture of theoretical Buddhist teachings and plenty of practical meditation. The next course starts on **Tue 04 May** (same timings as for the present course).

#### Day Retreats

From time to time we run intensive one-day courses that we call 'day retreats', as they provide an opportunity to immerse yourself in the subject matter, very much free from the distractions of everyday life! There are days that are suitable for people who have completed these courses, in both further meditation and introductory Buddhism (the latter also features a significant amount of meditation).

The next day course in **introductory Buddhism** will be on **Sun 23 May** (10.30-16.30)

## Reading

Although many books on meditation are available in the bookshop, we particularly recommend:

- For body awareness meditation: **The Body** (Paramananda, Windhorse Publications)
- For the Mindfulness of Breathing: **The Breath** (Vessantara, Windhorse)
- For the Metta Bhavana: **The Heart** (Vessantara, Windhorse)
- For a very inspiring, yet practical and readable coverage of Buddhist approach to meditation: **Change your Mind** (Paramananda, Windhorse)
- On mindfulness in everyday life: **Life with Full Attention – a Practical Course in Mindfulness** (Maitreyabandhu, Windhorse)

The first three of these titles have accompanying led meditations on CD, often very popular with students who have finished the course and miss having a friendly voice to lead them in their meditation!

## Web Sites

There are more resources on meditation on the following FWBO sites:

[www.wildmind.org](http://www.wildmind.org): a very comprehensive online guide to meditation, with a lot of different angles and frequent new material

[www.fwbo.org/meditation.html](http://www.fwbo.org/meditation.html): background reading on Buddhist Meditation

If you want to keep abreast of the Manchester Buddhist Centre's courses, events and activities in general, try our web site – and perhaps add it to your favourites!

[www.manchesterbuddhistcentre.org.uk](http://www.manchesterbuddhistcentre.org.uk): information about the centre's many activities

*Good luck, and maybe see you again before too long!*