
The Metta Bhavana Meditation Practice

The Metta Bhavana is the second of the two meditation practices we teach at the Dublin Buddhist Centre. Metta can be translated as 'loving-kindness' and 'Bhavana' means 'development'. So the Metta Bhavana is the 'Development of Loving Kindness'. The Mindfulness of Breathing calms the mind down and integrates the energies, and the Metta Bhavana takes that energy and directs it towards the development of positive emotion. This positive emotion can then in turn provide a basis for the further development of mindfulness. The two practices thus form a complimentary pair.

What is metta?

Put simply, metta is the wholehearted desire for the happiness and welfare of another. It consists of wanting the best for someone in their own terms. It includes the qualities of kindness, friendliness, confidence and non-reactivity.

Imagine you are walking down a road in Connemara. It is early morning and there is no one else about. As you walk along the road, you notice another person approaching you from the opposite direction. It takes a while for you to finally pass each other, but when they eventually approach you, what would you do?! Well, it is a beautiful morning, the sea is calm and the mountains behind you are clear of clouds and rain, and you naturally feel content and happy. So you say hello! Maybe even comment on the lovely morning, and then pass on.

This simple friendliness and general well-wishing response to a stranger is metta. It is important to realise that metta isn't something alien to your experience, but something you do much of your life. What we do in the practice is become aware of this positive emotion, bring our attention to it, and in this way strengthen it, so that we can consistently act out of metta when relating to ourselves and to others.

Stages of the Practice

1. Develop metta towards yourself

We start the practice with ourselves, simply contacting feelings of acceptance and kindness for ourselves, without any feelings of irrational guilt for doing so. A healthy self-regard is very important for developing metta towards others. It is very hard to develop metta for other people if you are busy feeling negatively towards yourself! Ultimately metta transcends the distinction between self and other, but methodologically we start by developing metta for ourselves.

2. Develop metta towards a good friend

In this stage we call to mind a good friend, someone we naturally have feelings of love and kindness towards. Generally our response to a friend is one of

metta, so we bring our awareness to this positive emotional response and by doing so allow it to grow and develop.

3. Develop metta towards a neutral person

Here we call to mind someone we have no particularly strong feelings for. This could be your postman, someone at work you don't know very well, someone you see regularly but do not have occasion to get to know. There are about six billion neutral people out there!

4. Develop metta towards a difficult person

In this stage we call to mind someone we find difficult. It is good not to pick your worst enemy here at the beginning, maybe someone a little easier at first! And for the duration of the practice we try and put the difficulty aside and see the person behind the difficulty. They too feel pleasure and pain, have friends and family, they too probably suffer because of the difficulty. So we try and contact feelings of acceptance and openness towards them, that in time will bloom as stronger feelings of metta.

5. (a) Develop metta towards each person equally (b) Develop metta towards all beings everywhere

In this stage we call to mind all four people and try and let the feelings of metta equalise, so that we feel the same openness and well-wishing towards each person individually. Then we allow our awareness, imbued with metta, to expand and include as many people as possible, starting with those in the room around us, spreading out to include all; the people in the city, and eventually, if we can, including all beings everywhere in 'metta-full' awareness.

It is good to choose someone quickly, so as not to waste time in the practice. Another tip is not to choose someone you are sexually attracted to, or were; the emotions can get a bit complicated!

How to contact metta

A good way is to recall a time or place where you were happy and contented. In this state it is much easier to contact feelings of well-wishing and kindness towards yourself and others. Another is to contact a sense of healthy self-interest and expand it to include others. A third is to use our imagination, to really get into the other person's skin, as it were. What is it like to be them? You can imagine them in their own world, going about their business. Seeing people more and more clearly allows empathy to flow.

A traditional approach is the use of the phrases 'May you be well, may you be happy, may you be free from suffering, may you progress'. These phrases represent the quintessence of metta. 'May you be well' is wishing them good health, simple as that. For many people,

particularly those who are ill or older, this may often be the thing they need most. 'May you be happy' is to wish them happiness in their own terms. The more you know someone the easier it is to have a sense of what this would mean. Even for neutral people, we probably know one thing that would make them happier, and we can wish them that. 'May you be free from suffering' is to wish that any discomfort or pain in their life may end. With the phrase 'May you progress' we start to see the person not just as they are, but also as they could become. It involves seeing people's potential, the good qualities that they have, and wishing that these qualities come more to the fore for them.

We are not using these phrases in a naive way – we know that people won't always be happy, won't not suffer, may not realise their potential and will certainly be ill and die. But the act of imagining in detail what they would like in their life helps us see that they are just like us, and empathy can flow. Practising wanting the best for people means that given the opportunity, you would do whatever you could to help make them well, or happy, in whatever way that would be. We start to learn how to respond appropriately to people, seeing where we can help, and doing what we can, even if that isn't always a lot.

Enemies of Metta

The Far Enemy of metta is ill-will or aversion. It is the polar opposite of wanting the best for someone. It comes in various shades, and particularly in the difficult person stage, we have to acknowledge any feelings of irritation or animosity that arise, and then try and let them go.

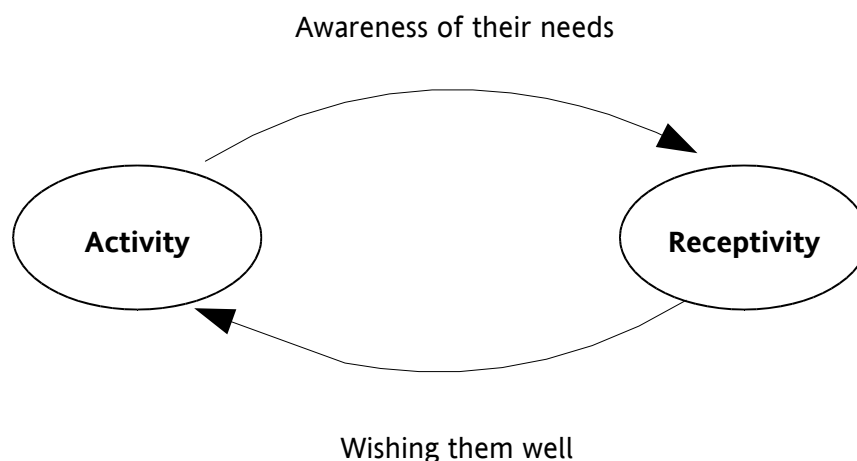
The Near Enemy of metta is sentimental attachment, and this arises particularly in the friend stage. It is where we like the feeling that we have ourselves when someone is around, rather than wanting the best for them. It isn't the end of the world to feel this, but in the practice we try and move towards a more self-less love for people; metta.

Sometimes people mistake metta for being 'nice', and think that it is about letting others 'off the hook', or letting people walk over them. Nothing could be further from the truth! Metta is the most robust state you could be in. It is not sentimental at all! Often the kindest thing one can do for someone may not necessarily be pleasant for them. We are developing robust kindness, not 'nice-ness'!

The Hidden Enemy of metta is boredom and indifference. This can particularly arise in the neutral person stage! Sometimes it can be a real trial to just get interested in the person, just to take them in as a human being at all. Engaging our imagination to see them as much as possible, and simply watching out for our mind wandering helps in this stage.

Activity and Receptivity in the Metta Bhavana

There are two poles to the practice of metta, namely, an active pole and a receptive pole. Both are necessary, and in fact, when the metta is flowing, both are present.



Receptivity and the use of the imagination

It is not easy to be really and deeply aware of another person without any of our ideas about them getting in the way. But with time and practice it is possible. The first step in the process is to try and let go of our ideas about another person, to let go of preconceptions, and try and be as open to them as possible, to be as open to who they really are.

We do this through practising awareness of their needs. We can start by imagining them in their own world, without us around. This might mean imagining them in their work place, or in their home. It is almost as if you are a fly on the wall, becoming aware of what it is like to lead their life, from their perspective. You are trying to imaginatively identify with them, taking what you do know about their life and using these details to imaginatively empathise with them.

One way you might do this is to focus on one of the phrases. Through imagining their world, it might become apparent to you that one of the phrases is particularly appropriate. Thus, if they were ill, you might just focus on wishing them health.

The more and more deeply aware of another we can become, the more the metta will flow. In a way you don't have to do anything else. It is as if the natural human response, when emotionally engaged with another, is to empathise. You just need to practice becoming aware, using your imagination to flesh out the details of their life that you do know, and waiting for the metta to naturally arise.

Activity and the use of phrases

Using the phrases helps in this process. On the basis of a deeper awareness of the other person, we employ the phrases appropriately.

The phrases express the quintessence of metta. The thoughts we have can lead our emotions. If you think thoughts filled with metta, you increase the chances of experiencing the emotion of metta.

There are two things to watch out for with the phrases. Firstly, become aware of how 'loudly' you are repeating them internally. The last thing you want is your own voice clanging around your head! Try and say the phrases 'softly' internally. Secondly become aware of how quickly you say the phrases. Avoid allowing it to become mechanical. One way of doing this is to slow the phrases right down, and savour the effect each phrase has on you. Imagine your mind to be like a still pool, and the phrases, the thoughts of metta, to be like pebbles you are quietly dropping in, allowing them gently float down to the depths. In this way you are suggesting something to your depths, rather than trying to force a response of metta.

As mentioned earlier, once the metta is flowing it unites both poles. Metta is simultaneously active and receptive. It responds appropriately to the person it encounters. Sometimes, though, it can take time for the metta to flow strongly. If this is happening, one strategy is to alternate between both these poles in your practice. Firstly practice becoming aware of the other person using your imagination, and then wish them well in the most appropriate manner, saying the phrases gently and slowly, savouring the effect. Then go back to imagining them in their world, becoming more and more aware of them, before once again gently and quietly repeating the phrases. If you keep up this process with patience, and without grasping after the metta, it will arise of its own accord. Once it does, you can let go of the supports to its arising, this strategy, and simply dwell in metta, bringing your awareness to the metta, and thus clarifying, strengthening, and increasing it.