



Metta and the Metta Bhavana

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’ while ‘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 complementary 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, and involves having an openness and emotional positivity for ourselves and other people.

Metta, or loving-kindness, is an emotion – a desire in our heart for someone’s well-being and happiness. To cultivate loving-kindness is to develop positivity and warmth, to leave behind harmful emotions, and to connect with people at a deeper level.

Metta is powerfully transformative, and can change how we see and experience the world. To cultivate loving-kindness is to grow out of self-centredness and emotional negativity, and into being able to have harmonious and satisfying relationships with other people, as well as with ourselves.

At its core, metta isn’t very complicated – it begins with simple feelings of friendliness that we experience when we meet people in an open, friendly way. It is important to realise that metta isn’t something alien to our experience, but something you do anyway in much of our lives.

To cultivate it, we become aware of this positive emotion, bring our attention to it, and we allow it to strengthen and deepen, so that we can consistently act out of metta when relating to ourselves and to others.

The Metta Bhavana Meditation Practice

Metta is a quality we can cultivate, just like mindfulness. In the ‘Metta Bhavana’, the ‘Development of Loving-Kindness’, we cultivate metta both for ourselves and other people. This is a powerfully transformative practice, which can radically change how we relate to ourselves and to the world around us. It’s also a particularly good antidote for irritability, ill-will and hatred. It’s also useful for relieving anxiety and stress.

Ultimately, the Development of Loving-Kindness is a wisdom practice. Wisdom, from a Buddhist perspective, means seeing that other people are no different from ourselves, in that they too want happiness and fulfilment, just as we ourselves do. Developing loving-kindness can help us to see this for ourselves.



Stages of the Practice

1. Develop metta for 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. Ultimately metta transcends the distinction between self and other, but methodologically we start by developing metta for ourselves.

2. Develop metta for 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 for a neutral person

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

4. Develop metta for 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! For the duration of the practice we try and put the difficulty aside, and instead 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 blossom as stronger feelings of metta.

5. (a) Develop metta for each person equally

(b) Develop metta for 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.

Picking People in the Stages

It's best to take some time before the practice to pick suitable people for the stages. If you're picking people during the practice, it is good to choose someone quickly, so as not to waste time in the practice. When choosing people, keep it simple while you are still learning the practice. As you get used to the practice, you can vary the people more, but in the early stages, much of the practice is seeing what metta actually is in your experience, and keeping the emotions involved as uncomplicated as possible.

So don't choose someone to who you are or were sexually attracted. Don't choose people who have died, for the first few weeks at least. Don't pick someone abstract (e.g. a historic figure). For a friend, we would recommend someone roughly the same age and gender as you. For the difficult person, we'd recommend someone you can handle and be able to keep your calm. As time goes on, you can vary the people you choose more.



How to Connect with Metta

There is always some aspect of kindness in our experience that we can get in touch with; some sense of openness, receptivity, connection to which we can bring our awareness. By bringing our awareness to this spark, we can allow it to grow and deepen within us, fanning the flames of our kindness.

We start cultivating loving kindness by connecting with metta for ourselves. This can start with a simple and open kindly acceptance of where we are now – kind acceptance of the four foundations of mindfulness in particular. We can be open and allow our bodies into our awareness with kindness. We can feel a tenderness to the aches and pains our body has within it. Our body is our oldest friend, you might say, and though it isn't perfect, it does allow us to do so much. We can open with kindness to how we're feeling, to pains and pleasures in the body. We can allow in with kindness our ever changing emotional experience. And we can respond with kindness for whatever thoughts are there as well.

Dwelling in this kind acceptance of ourselves, this intimate tenderness for and receptivity to ourselves, is a great way into metta – in fact, doing this is itself an act of metta. There is nothing wrong with this healthy self-interest, and there is never a reason to be unkind to yourself. And seeing this with metta can really change how we relate to ourselves.

When we're bringing other people to mind, we can simply stay in touch with this sense of positivity in ourselves and hold this with our sense of the other person. This will naturally deepen into a more mettaful connection with the person. Seeing people clearly, with a warm heart, will allow empathy and kindness to flow. We can also simply try to see the person as a person, with likes and dislikes just as we have. When we truly see the person as a person, empathy will usually arise, and love will flow.

Using Phrases to Stimulate Metta

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 simply wishing them good health. 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, will in fact 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 in ourselves when that particular person 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 selfless love for people.

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 one of the most robust and positive states 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: Using 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.

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: Well-Wishing and Using the Phrases

With a more 'active' approach, we can wish people well directly, and using the phrases can help in this process. 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 metta to flow. 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 naturally.

All of this depends, of course, on the strength of your own self-metta. If you're continuously having difficulty feeling metta for a friend or a neutral or difficult person, you need to return to the first stage and establish metta, or healthy regard and acceptance, for yourself. Once this is done to some extent you can move on.

Home Practice

This week practice one of the **Metta Bhavana** (track 3) and the **Mindfulness of Breathing** (track 2) each day, in a ratio of two metta sits for each mindfulness sit.
(If you're using the CD both tracks are on CD 1.)

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