



Towards a Creative Response to Troubled Times – Introduction to Buddhism Course

The Love Aspect of Awakening

So far on this course, we have looked at the Buddha's Awakening, and the teachings and practices that he taught for its attainment, primarily in terms of awareness. We have been developing awareness through the practice of mindfulness of breathing and mindfulness of daily activities.

As well as being described as a state of radiant awareness, Awakening is also spoken of as a state of love and compassion for all living beings.

Solidarity of Life with Life

As well as awareness, the Buddha embodied a deep solidarity of life with life. This is the kind of attitude that he expressed in his words and actions. Another way of thinking of this attitude of solidarity is as living from an awareness that other people are *real*. In other words, to recognise that their experience of life is to them as real and vivid as our experience of our life is to us.

In one teaching the Buddha uses the example of the love a mother has for her only child as the attitude we should endeavour to develop for all beings.

*As strongly as a mother, perhaps risking her life,
cherishes her child, her only child, develop an
unlimited heart for all beings.*

(from the 'Metta Sutta' translated from the Pali by Ratnaprabha)

Metta-Bhavana

This attitude of well-wishing that arises from a deep solidarity of life with life is known in Buddhism as *metta*. *Metta* is a Pali word and is related to the word for friend, so it implies friendliness, but it is friendliness raised to a much higher pitch of intensity. The word is sometimes translated as 'loving-kindness' which gives something of the flavour of *metta* but can sound a bit tepid. Because there is no English word that adequately translates *metta* we most often leave it untranslated.

Like awareness, the quality of *metta* can be cultivated. This is strongly suggested in the teaching above about the mother and her child. The meditation practice where we do this is called the *metta-bhavana*. *Bhavana* means development or cultivation, so the *metta-bhavana* is the development of loving-kindness.

In the practice we include others in the concern and care we have for ourselves. The practice leads to the complete transcendence of the usual experience of self and other and moves us towards the heart of the Buddha. *Metta* is the indispensable means for removing the painful thorn of hatred and resentment from our heart and is an essential element of the creative mind.



The Stages of the Metta-Bhavana Practice

The metta-bhavana practice has a number of stages in which we move progressively from concern for ourselves to concern for all beings. As with all meditation practices we begin by developing a broad sense of what is happening by tuning in with our surroundings, our body, our emotions and our thoughts.

1 – *ourselves*

The practice starts with connecting with a sense of self-cherishing. This is a matter of simply recognising and dwelling with the most basic desire that we have for wellbeing, fulfilment, freedom and personal growth. One good way of expressing this desire is by saying to yourself one or more of the following phrases:

'May I be well'
'May I be fulfilled'
'May I be free from suffering'
'May I grow and develop'

It is important not to repeat the phrase in a mechanical way. Just say the phrase and notice the response, giving your attention to any feelings of warmth, openness or kindness that emerge without worrying too much if it feels that nothing much is happening.

2 – *a good friend*

In this stage, you bring to mind a good friend. You can bring them to mind in whatever way feels most appropriate to you. You can bring them to mind visually, or through thinking of the sound of their voice, or the type of things that they say. Alternatively, you can evoke a sense of their physical presence in front of you.

The general advice in this stage is to avoid picking someone who you are sexually attracted to, not because that is a bad thing necessarily, it just makes it simpler when you are first learning the practice.

So first of all you bring your friend to mind and notice how that feels. Then you reflect that, just like you, they desire wellbeing, fulfilment, freedom and personal growth. You can then give expression to that desire in one or more of the following phrases:

'May you be well'
'May you be fulfilled'
'May you be free from suffering'
'May you grow and develop'

As in the first stage, simply say the phrase and notice the response, giving your attention to any feelings of warmth, openness or kindness that emerge without worrying too much if it feels that nothing much is happening.

3 – *a 'neutral' person*

The person you bring to mind in the neutral person stage is someone for whom you do not have strong feelings of attraction or aversion. They are neither friend, nor enemy. It is someone whose life overlaps with yours but who is not particularly significant to you. They might be a person who is in your class at college, who you buy your milk and newspaper from each day, or who works in the office next door.



So pick a person of this kind and bring them to mind noticing how that feels. We have to be vigilant in this stage as the tendency is to wander off into thoughts about something, or someone, more interesting to us. So it's important to try and keep the sense of the person as vivid as possible, remembering that their experience is *real*.

You can then employ the phrases as in the previous stages.

4 – a 'difficult' person

The person you bring to mind in this stage is someone that you find difficult – someone who rubs you up the wrong way, who habitually irritates you or who makes your life painful in some way. Traditionally this stage is described as the stage of the 'enemy'. However, when you are first taking up the practice it is a good idea to leave anyone who has made your life extremely difficult in the wings for later on when you have more experience. It is worth noting that the person you choose for this stage might be a friend or family member with whom you have a current difficulty.

The method is the same in essence as the previous stages. In this stage however, the skill we are learning is to stay with the painful stimulus of being with the person – and being reminded of whatever painful event may have happened in relation to them – without giving way to hatred and resentment. It is a practice of staying in the gap between stimulus and response, and moving from reactive mental patterns to creative mental patterns.

5 – each of the four people together, then metta for all beings.

In this stage, we bring to mind the people from each of the four previous stages. We hold them in our mind and look to include each person equally in our metta. Then we progressively include all beings everywhere.

As in the previous stages, there is a lot of scope to engage creatively with this process of developing metta for all beings. For example, we could think of them visually, located in space around us, or we might move geographically around different parts of the world. Whatever way we do the practice, it is important to include non-human beings as well. As the Buddha says in the *Metta Sutta*:

*And think of every living thing without exception:
the weak and the strong, from the smallest to the
largest, whether you can see them or not, living
nearby or far away, beings living now or yet to arise –
may all beings become happy in their heart of hearts!*

*Develop an unlimited heart of friendliness for the
entire universe, sending metta above, below and all
around, beyond all narrowness, beyond all rivalry,
beyond all hatred.*

So far we have learned about the principle of *metta* and a way of cultivating it through meditation. As we have heard, the word *bhavana* – as in *metta-bhavana* – means cultivation, and strongly implies the idea of 'training'. We can say then that meditation is concerned with training the mind. One of the reasons for undertaking this training is that the mind is the ultimate source of happiness. It is one of the key principles of the Dharma that happiness comes ultimately from our state of mind, not from external things.

We particularly notice this with the state of hatred or resentment. When we are in this state, it profoundly undermines our ability to enjoy life in even the most ordinary ways. We could be in good health, enjoy freedom



and wealth, but if we are in a state of hatred we will not be happy. Conversely, we might have many serious difficulties in our life but if we are consistently in a state imbued with *metta*, we will be much happier in facing them. One of the advantages of *metta-bhavana* in particular, and Buddhist meditation generally, is that they give us the most effective means available to develop and guard our wellbeing and happiness.

Ethics

You could say that in meditation we are trying to train the mind, whereas with ethics we are trying to train our actions. The two are entirely interrelated because actions express what is in the mind, and the mind expresses itself in action. Ethics and meditation, together with wisdom, make up the three primary aspects of the path of the Dharma. (We will look at wisdom next week.)

Training in ethics is crucial because what we do moment by moment creates our character. As Oscar Wilde says:

'...every little action of the common day makes or unmakes character, and that therefore what one has done in the secret chamber one has some day to cry aloud on the housetop.'

Training of any kind means putting principles into practice. For example, if we are learning a musical instrument like the guitar, there is the principle of co-ordination. We have to train the fingers of the left hand and right hand to work together.

In the Buddha's teaching the principle of *metta* is not just to be meditated on and thought about, but *lived* from. It needs to be expressed through what we say and what we do, and thereby inform all of our behaviour. The principle of *metta* is the cornerstone of Buddhist ethics and represents the first of five training principles, commonly known as the five precepts.

Each training principle involves both encouraging creative behaviour and discouraging reactive behaviour, so they are usually formulated in two ways: 'positive' and 'negative'.

The Five Precepts

1. *metta / abstaining from harming other living beings*
2. *generosity / abstaining from taking the not given*
3. *stillness, simplicity & contentment / abstaining from sexual misconduct*
4. *truthfulness / abstaining from false speech*
5. *awareness / abstaining from drink & drugs which cloud the mind*

By practising these five training principles, we are trying to cultivate and live from the perspective that we are much more interrelated with other people and the world around us than we realise.

'Skilful' & 'Unskilful'

The emphasis in Buddhist ethics is on putting principles into practice and training in creative modes of behaviour. It is not about following rules laid down by a personal creator god. Because of this we tend to talk about actions being 'skilful' – creative, tending towards growth, based on an appreciation of interrelatedness – and 'unskilful' – reactive, tending towards regression, based on ignorance of interrelatedness – rather than as being 'good' or 'bad'.



This language also suggests that ethics is more of the nature of acquiring a skill, rather than following rules. Buddhist ethics is about educating and refining an innate faculty we have within us that discerns what actions are skilful and what actions are unskilful.

Home practice this week

1. Practice the metta-bhavana and the mindfulness of breathing. Do two sessions of metta-bhavana for every one session of mindfulness of breathing.
2. Practice the first precept by really paying attention to people when you are with them. For example, by *looking* at people when you are interacting with them whether in person, or online.

A teaching on metta from the Buddha:

Metta Sutta

(translated from the Pali by Ratnaprabha)

If you know what is truly good for you, and understand the possibility of reaching the state of perfect peace, then this is how you need to live.

Start as a capable person who is upright, (really upright), gently spoken, flexible and not conceited.

Then become contented and happy with few worries and an uncomplicated life.

Make sure your experience is calm and controlled, be duly respectful, and don't hanker after families or groups. And avoid doing anything unworthy that wiser people would criticise.

(Then meditate like this:)

"May all beings be happy and feel secure. May all beings become happy in their heart of hearts!"

And think of every living thing without exception: the weak and the strong, from the smallest to the largest, whether you can see them or not, living nearby or far away, beings living now or yet to arise – may all beings become happy in their heart of hearts!

May no one deceive or look down on anyone anywhere, for any reason. Whether through feeling angry or through reacting to someone else, may no one want another to suffer.

As strongly as a mother, perhaps risking her life, cherishes her child, her only child, develop an unlimited heart for all beings.



Develop an unlimited heart of friendliness for the entire universe, sending metta above, below and all around, beyond all narrowness, beyond all rivalry, beyond all hatred.

Whether you are staying on one place or travelling, sitting down or in bed, in all your waking hours, rest in this mindfulness, which they say is like living in heaven right here and now!

In this way you will come to let go of views, be spontaneously ethical, and have perfect Insight. And leaving behind craving for sense pleasures, from the rounds of rebirth, you'll finally be completely free!

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