

Triratna Dharma Training Course for Mitras – Foundation Year

Part 3: Exploring Buddhist Practice – Meditation

Week 6: The Mettā Bhāvanā

Introduction

In this last session of this part of the course we get some advice on how to do the mettā bhāvanā practice. Paradoxically it may be more difficult to suggest useful ways to be creative in this practice than for the mindfulness of breathing – at least in a short text – precisely because the scope for creativity is that much greater, and people’s responses are so different. To describe the different approaches to this practice used by even a small sample of experienced meditators would need a book, and many methods would only ‘work’ for someone of very similar temperament.

In this condensed extract Bodhipaksa gives us a framework for experimenting with the mettā bhāvanā practice that should provide something for everyone, and give us a springboard for developing our own creative approaches to the practice. He also looks at the nature of mettā, talks about how we cultivate emotions, and examines some general methods we can use to change our emotional state.

Cultivating Loving-kindness

(Text condensed from ‘Wildmind’, by Bodhipaksa, Chapter 5)

The idea of cultivating emotions might strike us as odd: after all, don’t emotions just happen? From a Buddhist point of view this is not the case. Emotions are habits, and are actively created. It seems as though they have a life of their own because we aren’t conscious of how we create them. If we can bring more awareness into our emotional life we can consciously cultivate the emotions we want to experience and discourage those we don’t want. This is what we aim to do in the Mettā Bhāvanā – to cultivate the positive and discourage the negative.

We cultivate emotions all the time

An example of how we unconsciously generate emotions is this: imagine you’re with a group of people, and you get to talking about all the things that are wrong with the world. As the conversation goes on, and we get more and more involved, the chances are that we get angry, or depressed, or feel self-righteous. By focusing on things that anger or depress you without creatively trying to see what you can actually do about these issues, you actually cultivate these emotions.

In the Mettā Bhāvanā, we consciously generate thoughts that are likely to give rise to positive emotions. Over time, and with practice, this has a nurturing effect on our faculty of love. We encourage the development of our patience, kindness, and understanding, and in this way we become more loving.

What mettā is

- Mettā is a recognition of the basic solidarity that we have with others
- Mettā is empathy. It's the willingness to see the world from another's point of view
- Mettā is wishing others well
- Mettā is friendliness, consideration, kindness, generosity, patience, understanding, considerateness, love, helpfulness
- Mettā is the basis for compassion. When our mettā meets another's suffering, it transforms into compassion
- Mettā is the most fulfilling emotional state we can know. To wish another well is to wish that they themselves be in a state of mettā
- Mettā is the fulfilment of the emotional development of every human being. It's the potential emotional maturity inherent in each one of us
- Mettā is more than just an emotion. It's an attitude. We can act out of an attitude of mettā even when we do not ourselves feel happy, or even when we don't subjectively feel loving
- Mettā is the answer to almost every problem the world faces today. Money won't do it. Technology won't do it. Where there is no good will, there is no way to make positive change. Mettā can positively transform the world like no other quality

What mettā isn't

- Mettā isn't the same as feeling good. When we feel mettā we do generally feel more joyful and happy, but it's possible to feel good and for that not to be mettā. We can feel good but also be rather selfish and inconsiderate, for example. Mettā is an attitude of actively caring about others.
- Mettā isn't all or nothing. Just as our anger can reveal itself in many intensities from mild irritation to fury, our mettā can make itself known as anything from polite behaviour to a passionate love for all that lives.
- Mettā isn't something new or unknown to us. We all experience mettā. Every time you feel pleasure in seeing someone do well, or are patient with someone who's a bit difficult, you're experiencing mettā. In the Mettā Bhāvanā you are cultivating what is already there.
- Mettā isn't a denial of your experience. To practise mettā doesn't mean 'being nice' in a false way. Even if you don't like someone or disapprove

of their actions, you can still have their welfare at heart. This is one of the greatest miracles in the world, since it liberates us from the endless round of violence and revenge, whether on a global or personal level.

Emotion is a river

Rivers carve valleys. Water cuts channels that grow deeper with every passing year, and the channel then defines the course of the river. The river creates the banks, and the banks create the river. Our emotions also follow patterns. They give rise to thoughts, and our thoughts reinforce our emotions. For example, when we're in an irritable mood, our thoughts tend to find fault. We notice things that we don't like about ourselves, about others, and about the world in general. We overlook the good and the positive even when it is staring us in the face. This sense of being surrounded by faults reinforces our irritability, so our emotions shape our thoughts (the river bank), and our thoughts influence our emotions (the river). It's a disturbingly circular dynamic!

How do we ever escape from a mood once we get into it? Why don't we get into a particular mood and just stay there? Thankfully, there are other influences on our feelings that can break in to the cyclical patterns that I've outlined above. We'll look at five of these in turn: the environment, the body, the will, thoughts, and communication.

Emotions and your environment

If you want to change how you feel, you can alter your environment. You can make your environment supportive of your efforts to develop mettā by creating a beautiful space in which to meditate. You can make a shrine that expresses your ideals. Candles, incense, flowers, and images that are meaningful for you can all help to uplift your emotions. Keeping the space tidy will help you to have better mental states in meditation, as well as helping you to keep the positive mental states that you develop. What you see when you open your eyes after meditation can have a strong effect – we are often more sensitive after meditation than we realize.

Emotions and your body

How you hold your body has a big effect on how you feel. So in setting up our posture for meditation it's not just a matter of being comfortable – you're working on your emotions through your body. It's important to be aware of your body outside meditation too, and to make sure you're setting up physical conditions that will support positive emotional states.

Emotions and your will

At every moment of your existence you have some degree of choice about how you feel. Whether you realize it or not, you can let go of negative emotions and find more positive responses. Sometimes we see venting our emotions as the only

alternative to bottling them up. But there is another option: that of fully experiencing your emotions and learning to work with them: transforming them through awareness or, when appropriate, learning to express them more skilfully.

Emotions and your thoughts

Thoughts and feelings are deeply intertwined. Everything we think has some effect on how we feel. It's therefore essential that we learn to cultivate more mindfulness so that we can choose which thoughts to encourage and which to discourage. Over time, these thousands of small changes create a huge change in our emotional life. Listen to the stories you tell yourself, and ask whether they are helpful. If not, change them.

In the *Mettā Bhāvanā* we encourage the conscious development of thoughts that will give rise to positive emotions, rather than those that will reinforce negative emotions. The most widely used thought in the *Mettā Bhāvanā* practice is, 'May I be well, may I be happy, may I be free from suffering.' The thoughts that we'll use to cultivate *mettā* aren't always verbal ones. We can also use visual imagery, such as a light radiating from your heart. Or we can use words and imagery together.

Emotions and your communication

Our communication has a powerful effect on our emotions. One way to change a mood is to talk to someone. When the emotions we express are positive, they become stronger through communication. Through communication we often get more in touch with our emotions. Communication need not be verbal. Non-verbal communication – a touch or a hug – can have an enormous effect on how we feel.

In the *Mettā Bhāvanā* we imagine we are communicating with others, and we actually communicate with ourselves. We call others to mind and we wish them well. We might imagine communicating our appreciation to a friend. We might call to mind someone we're in conflict with and imagine apologizing to them. We might imagine non-verbal communication as well.

Nurturing seeds of emotion

We all experience *mettā*. This practice takes our seeds of *mettā* and nurtures them so that they grow and send deep roots into the soil of our being. For those seeds to grow, we need soil and water. The soil is our awareness. The rain is the variety of methods we can use to develop the seeds of *mettā*. There are four main methods that I've found useful: the use of words, memories, creative imagination and body memories. Some of these will work for you, and possibly others won't. It's best to try a few methods and see which suit you, but make sure you give any method time to work. Like seeds germinating in response to water, your emotions might take time to unfold in response to the method you choose.

Using words to cultivate mettā

The use of phrases is the classic way of doing the Mettā Bhāvanā meditation, and I use this method more often than any other. The traditional phrase for the first stage is ‘May I be well, may I be happy, may I be free from suffering.’ You need to say the phrase to yourself as though you mean it. You will also need to remember to keep your focus on your emotions: repeat the phrase, over and over, but observe its effect on how you are feeling. Leave time between each repetition of the phrase to absorb its effect. I often fit the phrase in with the rhythm of my breathing and say, ‘May I be well,’ on an out-breath, and for the next in-breath, out-breath, and in-breath, I tune in to my heart and see what effect it has had. Then on the next out-breath I say, ‘May I be happy’. Then two out-breaths later I say, ‘May I be free from suffering.’

When you’re thinking these words, you’re being active. When you’re listening for the effect they’re having, you’re being receptive. This practice needs you to be both active and receptive. You are actively working with your emotions, and receptively being aware of the effect of your actions. Both are equally important. Without active cultivation, your mind will tend to wander aimlessly and your emotions will follow old, habitual patterns.

Incidentally you might try saying the phrase to yourself on an in-breath instead of an out-breath. This produces quite a different effect. Try both methods and see which works best for you.

The traditional phrases are good to use as they so neatly encapsulate what the Mettā Bhāvanā meditation is about, but if you prefer you can just repeat a word like ‘love’ or ‘kindness’ or ‘patience’. Or you can use a series of such words. Or you can come up with your own affirming phrase. I believe it is best to use affirmations that are true. If you say ‘I am happy and content’ when you obviously are not, it will be hard to do it wholeheartedly. On the other hand, if you use a phrase that expresses a wish, such as ‘May I be happy and content,’ it is more likely to be effective.

Using memories

We’re all familiar with the power of memory to evoke emotions. You remember something said to you and feel a rush of warmth and love. You remember doing something foolish and blush with shame. The power of memory is such that our recollections often provoke a stronger response than the original incident.

We can consciously use the evocative power of memory to help us cultivate mettā. Let’s say we’re cultivating mettā towards ourselves. You can recall a time when you felt appreciative of yourself. You might have been in a very good mood, and found yourself at ease with yourself. You might have been in the countryside and felt a great sense of harmony and peace. Or you might have just made a significant achievement in your life.

Recall every detail about that time. Remember what you were wearing, what you saw, how you held your body, any scents you were aware of, what people were saying. Call to mind the details: the texture of your clothing, the brightness of colours, tones of voice. The more vividly you recollect the experience, the easier it will be to re-experience the emotions. The more senses you involve, the more vivid and evocative the memory will be, so remember to use sight, hearing, touch and smell.

Using creative imagination

Again, let's say we're cultivating mettā towards ourselves. Think of an experience that would make you feel well and happy. Sometimes I imagine I'm snorkelling on the Australian Great Barrier Reef. I've never actually been snorkelling, but when I imagine the feeling of buoyancy, and the warm currents of water caressing my skin, the light rippling down from above on to the beautiful corals, and the shoals of vividly coloured fish swimming past, I feel a sense of well-being

In the other stages of the meditation, you can invite others to join you. You're generously offering them the benefits of the environment you've created for them. Again, the point is not simply to have a pleasant experience. Remember that mettā is a desire for well-being and not just a pleasant feeling. What we are doing is wishing ourselves well, and then wishing others well by imaginatively sharing our inner world with them.

By imagining that we are well, happy, and free from suffering, we are actually wishing these states upon ourselves. Our imaginations bring about real changes in our state of mind. We do this all the time – every time we daydream we're cultivating some emotion or other. Sometimes they are creative and helpful, sometimes they are destructive and undermining. What we're doing in the Mettā Bhāvanā is consciously bringing into being the useful emotions of love, appreciation, patience, and so on.

Using your body

We've already mentioned that the way you hold your body has a big effect on the way you experience emotion. You can use this principle in your Mettā Bhāvanā; use your posture to help you cultivate mettā by making sure that you avoid tension or slumping. It's almost as if our bodies have memories. As you sit in your meditation posture, recall what it is like to feel confident, happy, and full of energy. Let your body help you access these states by relaxing and maintaining an upright spine with an open chest. Imagine that your body is full of energy.

Allowing yourself to smile slightly will also make it easier to cultivate mettā. If deliberately smiling feels false, then just allow your face to relax. As the practice of mettā starts to result in perceptible and positive changes in your emotional states, you'll probably start to smile spontaneously.

Questions for reflection and discussion

1. How do you get on with the mettā bhāvanā practice? If you have difficulties with it, what are they?
2. “Don’t emotions just happen? From a Buddhist point of view this is not the case. Emotions are habits, and are actively created.” Do you agree? If this is true, might it mean that we shouldn’t take the way we happen to feel so seriously?
3. “We can act out of an attitude of mettā even when we do not ourselves feel happy, or even when we don’t subjectively feel loving.” Have you ever experienced this?
4. Have you ever needed to be reminded of any of the things Bodhipaksa says that mettā isn’t?
5. Bodhipaksa suggests four methods for developing our seeds of mettā: using words, memories, creative imagination, and the body. Which of these have you tried, and which worked best for you?
6. Do you use the traditional phrases that go along with this practice. What effect do they have? Have you ever invented your own words or phrases?
7. Try co-ordinating the phrases with you breathing as Bodhipaksa suggests this week. Notice and report back on the effects.
8. Do you ever use memories or creative imagination in your practice? If so, share what you have done with the group. If not, try it!
9. Do you have any experience of using the body to access emotions, either in the mettā bhāvanā or in another context? If so, experiment with this in your practice this week, and tell the group about it.