

## **Metta Bhavana - Introduction and Basic Tools**

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### **General Advice on Meditation**

On this tape I'm going to introduce you to the second meditation practice, and this is called the "Metta Bhavana," which means, "The Development of Friendliness."

I've just got one or two general pieces of advice, before we start.

First of all, if you've decided to give meditation a try, why not do it properly? Why not give your practice the best conditions for success? I expect it's obvious that you need as much peace and quiet as you can get to meditate undisturbed. But it would also help very much if you practice at least once every day. And, if possible, that should be at the same time every day. It doesn't matter when exactly you do it. It's just that if you're regular, progress in meditation will come much more easily.

To see if meditation is right for you, I suggest giving yourself a month to experiment with it. After that, you can review any progress that you've made. And then, if you decide that you'd like to take up meditation seriously, you'll need some personal guidance. This tape can't tell you everything you need to know. So then is the time to find out about Buddhist meditation classes in your area. It isn't just that you need to learn more from an experienced teacher. It's also important that you find support and encouragement by getting to know other people who meditate.

The other general piece of advice is to learn to become more aware, both in meditation and outside it. When you're meditating, of course, be aware of what you're trying to do. Keep reminding yourself that you're focusing on the breathing or developing friendliness, but also be aware of what is happening inside you. Notice your feelings. Notice your emotions. Notice your thoughts. And notice your body. Be aware of how you are holding yourself, how you are moving and what you are actually doing physically. If you can be aware in all these ways outside meditation too, you'll find that you're much better prepared for when you sit and meditate.

### **Introducing the Metta Bhavana**

So, now I'll introduce the second meditation.

As I said, it's called the Metta Bhavana. "*Metta*" means "friendliness" or "loving-kindness," and "*Bhavana*" means something like "developing" or "creating." So this is the meditation that develops qualities like friendliness and kindness towards others. And, if you think about it, these are very, very important human qualities. The Buddha was an extremely wise man, to say the least. But as well as being a wise man, he wasn't irritable and grumpy, as sometimes very clever or intelligent people can be. In fact, he was known to have been very generous, warm and friendly. When he taught, he would always adapt his instruction to the temperament and spiritual needs of the person he was speaking to. And, in Buddhism, this quality of friendliness is considered at least as important as concentration for our spiritual development. In

fact, for many of us it may be even more important. I'm sure you know from experience that if you're in a grumpy, irritable mood, your understanding is narrow and limited, but when you're in a good state of mind, it's easy to listen. It's easy to consider things objectively. It's easy to understand. And it's also easier to actually feel kind and friendly. Meditating on loving-kindness is a way you can actively cultivate healthier emotional states of mind.

Something that's very interesting about this meditation is the way it starts. Right in the beginning, right at the very first stage, we're asked to develop loving-kindness towards ourselves. It's as though the practice is telling us that, if we want to befriend others, we must first learn to befriend ourselves.

### **The Structure of the Meditation and the First Stage: Metta for Oneself**

At this point, I'm going to give quite a detailed description of each stage of the meditation, so don't expect to take it all in at once. The Metta Bhavana is more complex than the Mindfulness of Breathing. So I'm giving you all this information to refer to later. When I've given this detailed description, I'll lead you through the practice itself. What you're doing throughout this meditation is developing *metta*, or loving-kindness, and you do that in five stages. You first develop *metta* towards yourself. Then you develop it, in turn, towards a good friend, someone who is emotionally neutral to you, and towards someone you find difficult. Then you imagine all these people together, developing *metta* towards them equally. And finally, you radiate the *metta* outwards to include everyone in the whole world.

Now, to do all that, you need to be well prepared. So, when you sit down, you spend a little time settling down, collecting your thoughts and getting in contact with whatever you happen to feel at the moment. And in Stage One this is very important, at this stage when you're concentrating on yourself. So be aware of any emotions you feel. Maybe you feel joyful. Maybe you feel rather sad. Or maybe you couldn't describe what you feel in words. And that doesn't matter. In fact, don't even try. Just experience whatever's there. You may not feel anything at all, just a blank. Again, it doesn't really matter. Just feel blank - that's how you feel. While you're experiencing whatever it is that you feel, generate friendliness and kindness toward yourself, and keep your attention as constantly as you can on that feeling.

### **General Points on Developing Metta**

Now, before we go on to Stage Two, there are a few points that might be helpful in actually developing kindness and friendliness.

When the experience you have at first is pleasant and enjoyable, you're going to find it easy to feel kind and friendly. But when it's painful or just blank, there's probably more of a tendency to react negatively. But remind yourself that these reactions are really just habits. They're habits that you can change. So watch out for these reactions. Be patient, and whatever the circumstances, keep developing the *metta* as best you can.

And the *metta* might be rather weak at first. And that doesn't matter. Don't be put off, because it's more difficult when you're starting from cold. Metta Bhavana is like

trying to get a flame from a smouldering ember. You need to use your imagination to coax some new positive feeling into existence. It might help if you say to yourself, “May I be happy and well,” or something like that – any phrase that calls up a positive emotion quite genuinely. And don’t just repeat any words that you might choose. Don’t just repeat them automatically. Consider their meaning, and allow yourself time to actually respond to what you say.

And yet another approach is to recollect a time when you were very happy, recapture in your imagination what that was like. Or you can consider all the potential which you have as a human being. You can reflect that you could actually realize this potential with the right kind of effort. So, if you find this inspiring, reflect in that way. And what if you don’t find it inspiring? Well, you can just try something else. Experiment. Experiment in whatever way you like. Maybe it would help to reflect on a mental image. What about a flower? Say, a beautiful pink rose opening its petals? Or you could imagine a bright summer’s day. So, do you get the idea? I’m saying that you can explore and use any method you find helpful. These are just a few ideas that I found helpful in getting some positive emotion flowing.

And, as you gradually contact the quality of *metta*, concentrate on that quality with your whole heart and your whole mind. The more you concentrate on any thought or feeling, the stronger it gets. So, once you’ve contacted any degree of *metta*, focus upon it. Put your energy behind it, and over time it’ll get stronger.

### **The Second Stage: Metta Towards a Friend**

So, now we reach the second stage. We shift our focus of attention and develop *metta* towards a friend. The actual person you choose for this stage can affect the quality of the practice. So, as a general rule, don’t choose someone for whom you might have, as it were, parental feelings. By that, I mean they shouldn’t be too much older or too much younger than you are. And it’s also a lot more straightforward if you don’t choose someone for whom you might have sexual feelings. Now, this is actually a good friend of yours. So, developing the *metta* ought to be easy. In imagining them, you might have a visual image of their face. Or it might simply be a feeling about them, or a general impression of them, that you concentrate on. It could even be a memory of a happy meeting in the past.

Now, as you concentrate on them, experience the way that you’re responding to them emotionally. And, when you do this, be honest, because you may not always feel the way that you’re supposed to feel towards a friend. If you can acknowledge your feelings quite frankly, then this meditation can help you transform your habits. So, on the basis of what you honestly feel, you respond to your friend very warmly. You generate the strongest feelings of friendliness that you can. It doesn’t matter how you do that. Just try to do it as strongly and as consistently and as steadily as you can. And every time you notice your mind has lost that focus, just bring it back again and again.

And, in developing *metta* towards your friend, you can use the same methods as in the first stage. As before, you can say, “May he be happy. May he be well,” or use any other method that you find is effective.

### **The Third Stage: A Neutral Person**

Then comes the third stage – a neutral person. Somebody for whom you have no particular feelings. You don't like them. You don't dislike them. They could be somebody you hardly know. Or you might know them very well indeed, but for some reason you just aren't interested in them. Or perhaps they're someone you often see, but never speak to. For example, what about the postman?

As with the other stages, you bring them to mind and notice how that feels. It probably won't be a very distinct feeling, or a very strong one. But stay with what's there, anyway, and look for a more friendly, or more interested, response to them.

Of course, the most likely difficulty with a neutral person is that you just don't feel anything. But there is a way to find more feeling, and that is to concentrate on them. If you persist in concentrating, come back again and again to your impression of them, you will eventually start feeling something. You'll get subtler feelings of pleasure or pain, and then you will feel more able to respond to them.

#### **The Fourth Stage: Metta towards a Difficult Person**

So that's the neutral person.

In the fourth stage we develop *metta* towards a difficult person – someone you're not getting on with – and choose anyone you rather dislike, or who you feel rather dislikes you, or with whom there is some misunderstanding or habitual non-communication. Once again, when you think of them, experience your actual response to them. Don't let your assumptions, about how you think they will make you feel, get in the way. Try to let go any feelings of animosity, and then cultivate a fresh response. Be understanding. Be kind, even be compassionate. You find this person difficult to get along with at present, but don't forget that things can change, and don't resist the possibility that things might change. So, empathize with them. Put yourself in their place, remembering that the way they see their life is certain to be different from the way you perceive it. So, remembering the background and the conditions of their life, it's easier to wish them happiness and well-being.

Doing this doesn't mean you have to compromise yourself with anything they might have done which you feel is objectively wrong. But here you can clarify your own subjective feelings of negativity towards them. You can try at least to drop your side of any problem.

If it seems appropriate, you can choose an out-and-out enemy – someone you really hate. But at first it's wise not to make things too difficult for yourself. If your negative feelings towards this person are very strong, you could end up completely distracted, even making the relationship worse. So, remember that the whole point of the exercise is to generate loving-kindness.

#### **The Fifth Stage: Equalizing Metta for All Four People**

The fifth stage of the Metta Bhavana starts by our concentrating on all the four people we've mentioned so far and developing *metta* equally towards each of them.

If you like, imagine them all sitting around you and then work to equalize your feeling of empathy and friendship. Make it equally strong for both your good friend and your neutral person, towards both yourself and your difficult person, towards both your difficult person and your friend. And this stage can really stretch your imagination, and it really needs quite a lot of practice. So I suggest trying a simpler approach at first, which doesn't involve quite so much analysis and comparison. So start by just imagining your *metta* flowing equally towards each person.

Then comes the final part of the meditation. We allow the feeling of *metta* to flow out beyond ourself and beyond our companions. We send it out to the whole universe. So begin by developing loving-kindness towards yourself and anyone else in the room that you're in. Then start expanding the friendliness in ever-increasing circles to include everyone in the house, then in the area round about, in the whole town, the whole country, the whole continent and the whole world. You're making a sincere wish for everyone in the world, without exception, to be happy and free from suffering. So, whatever beings there are - whether human, or animal or whatever - you try to imagine their lives and wish them happiness. And you expand this feeling as universally as you can possibly conceive. You don't have to stop even with our own world. According to the Buddhist tradition, at least, there are likely to be other life forms in the universe too, so wish them all well. View them all with kindness and encouragement. We are using our imagination to expand our empathy with humanity beyond all conceivable limits – beyond even what we can imagine.