

Four Week Introductory Course on Metta **3rd Week – Loving-kindness Towards Neutral Persons**

by Gil Fronsdal

Breaking Down the Barriers of our loving-kindness:

It is usually easy to have kind, positive regard for people we love or are our friends. Focusing on and developing our goodwill toward these people is an important foundation for a fully developed loving-kindness practice. The stronger this foundation is, the stronger basis we have for then expanding our loving-kindness towards people we normally would not feel kindness. This expansion begins a profound process of universalizing our friendliness and love so we can eventually feel the same level of strong goodwill towards all people. In Buddhism this process is called “breaking down the barriers.” Some people find this aspect of loving-kindness practice challenging because it requires opening one’s heart to people one would either not be inclined to feel loving-kindness towards or perhaps would even have resistance to doing so.

So that the growth of our loving-kindness can be realistic, it is very useful to become mindful of the attitudes, beliefs and feelings that interfere with our loving-kindness. Is there fear of caring for people outside of our circle of friends and family? Do we tie our goodwill to what others can do for us? Are we reluctant to offer kindness to someone who hasn’t done something for us? Do we believe love should be easy and so are reluctant to make effort to feel loving-kindness towards those it doesn’t come easy? Do we not have sufficient self-love to be able to relate to others with positive regard?

In preparation for “breaking down the barriers” it can be useful to reflect on attitudes and understandings that encourage us to see others with loving-kindness. This can include considering the similarities and interconnections that we have with others. It may involve learning to see beyond surface appearances to the deeper emotional, psychological, and perhaps spiritual dimensions of people. Learning to relax is also very helpful for expanding loving-kindness because goodwill tends to flow more easily from a calm heart. One of the beautiful results of loving-kindness practice is to discover that our friendliness and love of others does not have to be tied to how others feel about us or to qualities of character they have. It can flow from the openness of our own hearts beyond the circles of people we usually have goodwill toward.

The Neutral Person:

After practicing loving-kindness meditation toward oneself, benefactors, and friends, the next step is to choose a neutral person as the focus of the practice. A neutral person is someone we do not know sufficiently well to have feelings for or it can be someone we know but have no particular feelings of liking or disliking. It is often nice to choose someone you encounter on a regular basis but have never gotten to know. For example, a mail carrier, a store clerk, or perhaps a co-worker with whom we have never talked.

Some people find they never have neutral feelings for anyone. There is always at least a subtle liking or disliking. If this is the case choose for the neutral person someone you don't know well, have never had any significant personal contact with, and toward whom the liking or disliking is minor, without charge. If, while doing loving-kindness toward a neutral person, you begin to feel enough warmth towards the person that you don't feel neutral anymore, continue doing the practice towards them – this result is one of the purposes of the practice.

Practicing Loving-kindness Towards the Neutral Person

Loving-kindness towards a neutral person should be practiced after practicing loving-kindness towards oneself, a benefactor or a friend. If there is enough time you can practice with all three of these categories. Once a clear attitude or feeling of loving-kindness is established then focus your attention on the neutral person by bringing to mind the three aspects of loving-kindness practice: an image or impression of the person, your intentions wishing him or her well, and phrases which give expression to those wishes. When these three elements are present begin to repeat the phrases while trying to find a way to have as much goodwill for the neutral person as you would towards a friend or benefactor.

For some people, cultivating loving-kindness towards neutral people is challenging because of the absence of pre-existing warmth or friendship. Having this challenge is not a mistake: one of the purposes of doing loving-kindness towards the neutral person is to learn how to see him or her with warm, positive regard. It can be helpful to consider that the neutral person has joys and sorrows just as you do. You might also imagine the person happy, perhaps with a smile on his or her face. It may also be helpful to imagine the person being loved by his or her parents or friends. If the neutral person does something useful for you, e.g. deliver your mail, help you buy things at a store, or contribute to the overall success of your place of work, it can be easier to have goodwill for the neutral person if you reflect on the benefits you derive from them. Some people find it easier to have loving-kindness for neutral people if they remember the practice is private – the neutral person never needs to know they are the recipient of your goodwill.