

Four Week Introductory Course on Metta 4th Week – Loving-kindness Towards Difficult People

by Gil Fronsdal

Loving-kindness when it is most difficult:

Because love and ill will are incompatible, loving-kindness is the classic Buddhist antidote for ill will. When our loving-kindness is strong, it protects us from developing hostile or angry feelings. When we have ill will, loving-kindness lessens and even removes it. In order for loving-kindness to be an effective antidote to our ill will, resentments, and angers it needs to be well developed. With enough practice of loving-kindness toward oneself, benefactors, friends, and neutral people, the next step in the practice is toward ‘difficult people’. As the value and benefit of loving-kindness become clear to us through the earlier steps, it becomes easier to wish to have loving-kindness toward people we don’t like, feel aversion toward, or are disturbed by. It is when this wish arises that the practitioner starts practicing loving-kindness toward people with whom we have difficulty.

It is important not to practice loving-kindness toward difficult people until one has some desire to relate to these people with kindness. Loving-kindness can’t be developed under the threat of any sense of obligation or by rote, mechanical following of instructions. While wanting to have loving-kindness for someone is not the same as having it, the desire provides the impetus to find a way to have it toward those it does not come easily.

One support for developing loving-kindness toward those we feel antipathy is to reflect on the disadvantages of ill will and anger. Most immediately, ill will is painful for the person who has it. Interpersonally, it strains inter-personal relationships, perhaps even inciting others to direct their anger toward us. And finally, it can be hurtful and disrespectful to those it is directed toward.

Another support is to consider the benefits that come from having loving-kindness toward difficult people. It creates a more peaceful state of mind where wisdom is more accessible. It supports healthier relationships. And sometimes it helps bring about a change of heart in the person it is directed toward. A common experience for practitioners of loving-kindness is that when nothing else seems to help with a strained relationship, directing loving-kindness toward the other party somehow improves the relationship.

The Difficult Person:

The term ‘difficult person’ is a modern, Western rendering of what in ancient Buddhist texts was called ‘the enemy’. The simplest definition of the difficult person is someone one finds difficult to like or feel kindly toward. It can be someone whom you find unpleasant, frightening, or annoying. In the enemy category it can include someone who is hostile toward you or someone toward whom you have hostility. When choosing a difficult person you should first select a person whom you find only mildly difficult so you have a better chance of continuing the process of expanding the range of your loving-kindness. When you succeed in having loving-kindness toward the mildly difficult person then slowly continue expanding into increasingly difficult people.

Even though we use the term ‘difficult person’ it can be helpful to avoid taking this term seriously. It can be much better to understand that there are people with whom we now have difficulty but may not in the future. The classic Buddhist instruction on loving-kindness states that if the practitioner does not have any enemies, he or she can skip this stage in the sequence of loving-kindness.

Practicing Loving-kindness Toward the Difficult Person

The basic instruction for doing loving-kindness toward the difficult person is the same as it is for any other category. First, one brings up the memory or image of the person. Second, one evokes whatever intention of well-wishing one has for the person. And third, while keeping the sense of the person and one’s intentions in mind, one gives expression to these intentions by slowly repeating phrases of loving-kindness.

In practice, directing the practice toward the difficult person may require much more than just doing these three things. There may need to be a period of reflection where one uses one’s imagination to see the person in ways that are more likely to evoke goodwill. It may be necessary to practice some forgiveness toward the person. If strong negative feelings occur, it may be appropriate to stop the loving-kindness practice for a while and instead practice mindfulness toward the feelings. Once the negative feelings have abated, dissolved or been resolved, one can begin again with the loving-kindness practice. Or, alternatively, when negative feelings toward the difficult person predominate, it may be useful to re-establish one’s loving-kindness toward a benefactor or friend. Once an attitude of kindness has returned, one can slowly and modestly, at first, try again with the difficult person.

Some people find it easier to cultivate loving-kindness meditation toward difficult people when they keep the practice private. The difficult person does not need to know and the private practice does not obligate you to treat the person with loving-kindness.

Loving-kindness is one of most beautiful qualities of anyone’s mind. It is quite wonderful when we don’t lose touch with this beauty just because of our difficulties with others.