

Introduction to Lovingkindness (Mettā) Class 4 of 4

Mettā towards all beings and Unspecific Mettā,

handouts and class recordings available at AudioDharma.org

When engaging in unspecific Metta, there are multiple ways to practice it. One useful distinction for many practitioners is to consider whether it's easier to relate to the practice in terms of its recipients, or in terms of cultivating a field of goodwill in the minds towards all experience

To cultivate an open heart towards all beings is one of the beautiful aspirations in Buddhist practice. In Buddhist scriptures, this way of being is referred to as sublime. In daily life, appreciation for the lovely can mature into a larger ethical aesthetic of non-harming. The intention to cultivate the conditions of non-hatred, non-harming, can begin the process of moving through the world in a beautiful way.

Another ancient form of cultivating unspecific Mettā is to practice with no recipient in mind, instead cultivating a general sense of goodwill, a field of friendliness, towards all that arises in our experience. Unconditional Metta does not mean we have to agree with, condone, or even like those who intersect with our experience. It also does not mean encouraging or squashing afflictive emotions, such as ill will. Rather, it is an invitation to hold the process of experiencing all emotions with kindness and compassion. Cultivating Metta offers the opportunity to cultivate an overall ethical perspective and way of being that is calmer, more content, and committed to wishing the best for all.

For reflection:

- In what life situations might the perspective and practice of Mettā be helpful?
- How does lovingkindness relate to my own personal sense of ethics?
- What do I notice about the effect of this practice on my heart and mind?
- How might my heart's orientation contribute to a larger whole?

For further exploration:

Classes:

"Soft" Mind and Receptivity with Susan Ezequelle, Tuesday July 7th and July 14, 9:30am-11am, IMC.

Compassion Cultivation Training with Robert Cusik, in Palo Alto, Saratoga, and Stanford.

<http://thecompassiontrain.com/new-courses/>

Texts

Anguttara Nikāya #3.65, "Kalama Sutta" <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/lib/authors/soma/wheel008.html>

Buddhist Ethics: A very Short Introduction. Damien Keown. Oxford University Press.

Tevijja Sutta, Digha Nikaya #13. Walshe (trns). Wisdom Publications, 1996.

Udana # 5.1, "Raja Sutta" http://www.insightmeditationcenter.org/documents/Passing_It_On_2012.pdf pp 72-75.

"When Pretending is the Remedy," *Scientific American Mind*. (when doctors express kindness while prescribing a placebo, patients heal faster) http://www.cf2.org/docs/misc/samind_2013_03.pdf#page=36

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Meditation Suggestions: Mettā towards all beings and Unspecific Mettā

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Sitting comfortably, set the intention to cultivate goodwill. Settle into your body and breathe easily, attending to your heart center, perhaps breathing in and out of the heart, or with your whole body. It can be helpful to spend some time appreciating the intention itself. Feel free to experiment with this meditation, using any of the approaches we've covered in the course, or that you've discovered on your own.

- When practicing unspecific Metta or goodwill towards all, it can be helpful to start with a happy memory, the benefactor, or a “Metta muse”, to incline the heart towards warmth and kindness.
- Focus your intentions in a way that works for you. Some people find simple energetic intention is better for unspecific Metta, others prefer short or creative phrases.
- Let the results resonate. Acknowledge all that is. If kind feelings arise, encourage them.
- Then turn that kind regard towards all of experience in a general way.
- If cultivating for all beings, begin to expand the wish for non-hatred, non-delusion, the best for the larger picture, outwards...
- Later, take time to wish yourself well.
- Near the end of this meditation, let go. Allow breath, feelings, sensations, to come and go. Noticing arising and passing of mindstates, contrast between mettā and other attitudes in the heart. Allowing, gently, whatever is.
- **Closing Reflection:** We are all interconnected by this wish: Everyone wants to be happy, avoid suffering. All people, all beings. By opening our hearts to more receptivity, kindness, and appreciation we transform ourselves, and the lives we touch. Take a moment to appreciate the generosity of cultivating an open heart.

Cultivating the habit of Metta

There are many ways to view lovingkindness practice. One way is to consider Metta meditation as a conscious choice to form new habits of mind, tendencies that condition us to be able to access inner resources of goodwill, strength, resiliency, and kindness within.

Good or bad, habits are the unnoticed subroutines of our lives. Some habits of mind are very subtle. They operate as untested assumptions, or filters, through which we see and respond to the world. The subroutines of habit inform -- and form -- the contours of our brains, lifestyles, and personalities. They are building blocks of our conditioning. Because we mirror each other, how we regard ourselves and our experience influences how we perceive, respond to others, and in turn are received.

Metta practice harnesses the brain's natural process of habit formation. Recent fMRI studies show that neural density gradually increases in response to where we repeatedly focus: that to which we attend increases. This neurological process helps explain why cultivating lovingkindness has effects over time. Developing Mettā can feel like working against the grain, however the brain's Metta-related neuronal real estate is growing -- whether or not we feel kind and loving in that day's meditation. The mind and the heart begin to incline towards beneficial ways to openly, spontaneously respond.