

Metta Week 4: Approaches to cultivation

This week we offer the Reflection, Action and Meditation sections of Ajahn Sucitto's chapter as alternative ways of cultivating Metta beyond the phrase practice described in weeks 1 and 2. These contain some very useful explorations for seeing how Metta is grounded in embodied presence.

Reflection

Give consideration to any acts of goodwill that have been shown to you this day. Do likewise to any such actions that have occurred in the past. Then reflect in a similar way to any such actions — encompassing generosity, loyalty, advice, care, service or forgiveness, that you know have occurred between other people. Dwell on such reflections long enough to establish the emotion and attitude of kindness.

Action

Minimize critical speech about others to a few words that are offered sparingly, merely as an opinion if it seems necessary to warn another of that person's tendencies. Refer to others' apparent weaknesses as degrees of illness or affliction that they have to bear, as in, 'He sometimes gets caught by the tendency to dominate others.'

Notice situations in which you get irritated by other people — maybe they work at a different speed than you do, or with less proficiency. It might also be the case that you get irritable in noisy or crowded situations. Try to use such scenarios as places of *mettā* practice. Staying mindful and grounded in awareness of your body, particularly the soles of the feet, the chest and the palms of the hands, widen your awareness to include aspects of the situation you're in. Acknowledge any tightness in those parts of your body and any mental resistance. Find the limit you can extend to — that is, the amount of irritating phenomena that you can be aware of in a non-defensive and non-reactive way. Stay there, without letting your thoughts, speech or actions distract you from maintaining that abiding place. Meanwhile, extend a warm heart first to yourself and then to all those around you.

Notice aspects of yourself that make you self-critical. Practice in a way that's similar to the previous example, extending an awareness that can be present with those aspects without agitation or constriction.

Notice any boundaries that your mind erects to place yourself or others in categories such as 'friend,' 'enemy,' 'no-account,' 'important person,' 'idiot,' 'genius,' etc. Without discounting the perceptions, move the labels around from person to person and maintain a willingness to accept each one as they are.

Meditation

Begin with several minutes of the above reflection, extending the awareness into how your body feels with the experience of goodwill. Settle into that. Pick up the sense of wishing your body well. Move that warm sense around the body, including places that feel unwell or neutral as well as vigorous. As much of our self-consciousness hovers around the face, it's especially useful to imagine this part of your body being seen by the eyes of goodwill.

Draw your attention out to the surface of your body, to how you sense the skin. Be aware of it like a sheet or a blanket enclosing your person, until you sense a good connection and a vitality gathering there. This is your field of goodwill. Let it fill with the benevolent sense that was described above. This may take a while. When you're ready, imagine that someone you are fond of or respect is going to move into that extended space. Notice if the energy changes, and stay connected to your bodily presence. Maintain the sense of an unstricted field that contains your body, and gradually allow the other person into that without reaching out or feeling self-conscious. When you reach a limit, rest there. Then imagine them moving away while maintaining the same state of mind and energy.

Subsequently, practice this with people you feel neutral about, and those with whom you have difficulties. However, don't let them get any closer or for any longer than your field of goodwill can support!

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Finally, for more teachings and guided meditations on Metta, a reminder to check out some of the Happy Hour sessions on IMC's YouTube channel:

<https://www.youtube.com/user/insightmed/videos>