



**the urban retreat 2013**

**course material for day 6: thursday**

## introduction

Yesterday we explored stage three of the metta bhavana practice, the “neutral” person, today we come to stage four where we try to cultivate loving-kindness for someone that we find difficult, irritating or awkward, or even someone who has been hostile to us, or caused us pain or distress. How have you found this so far? What has tended to happen when you've got to this stage of the meditation?

As you can see, through the way the stages of the practice unfold, it gradually gets more challenging! It asks more of us. It asks that we become “bigger”. Some people might think meditation is about “switching off” and sitting calm, peaceful and relaxed? But, if so, why do we deliberately bring someone we find difficult into our meditation?!

Well, the Buddha was quite uncompromising about this. Here is a famous quote from him:

*“He was angry with me, he attacked me, he defeated me, he robbed me*

*– those who dwell on such thoughts will never be free from hatred.*

*He was angry with me, he attacked me, he defeated me, he robbed me*

*– those who do not dwell on such thoughts will surely become free of hatred.*

*For hatred can never put an end to hatred; love alone can. This is an unalterable law.*

*People forget that their lives will end soon. For those that remember, quarrels come to an end.”<sup>1</sup>*

Negative emotions hurt us and they only repeat the cycle of negative emotion. But if we can overcome anger and hatred, we suffer less and there is much more chance of us being able to have a helpful, even transformative, effect on the situation from which that anger or hatred arose. Some of the most inspiring stories you hear from people who've done the metta bhavana practice are from people who have really faced and transformed difficult emotions in stage four. I know people who after many years of painful, difficult relationships with parents have been able to come to more understanding and patience. I've read stories of victims of violence being able to forgive their attackers, and even of someone who committed a violent crime using his time in prison to meditate, facing up to a lifetime of hatred that he felt towards himself and others, and finding love and forgiveness in his heart.

At some time in your life, your practice of metta bhavana might involve confronting strong emotion like that. Mostly, however, it is more small-scale, even rather petty, irritation, impatience, or intolerance that we are dealing with – the everyday ways we act with less kindness than we might, and in which we try to wrap ourselves up in a protective

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<sup>1</sup> From 'The Dhammapada', [see here for some translations](#).

layer of indignation or indifference, because we've been hurt or feel unduly criticised. This is what we are usually working with in stage four of the practice.

### suggestions for practice

Here are a few pointers for how to work in this stage of the practice.

Firstly, **try not to block out, or move away from, your experience.**

This can be a tendency, especially if that experience is uncomfortable or even painful. In a way, it is understandable that we don't want to contemplate people and situations that we find difficult. But, as you bring the difficult person into awareness, try and stay with whatever arises. Notice what happens in the body, in the heart, and in the mind. If the body goes tense, the heart a bit tight and closed, or the mind kicks-off into “blaming”, then feel what that is *actually like as an experience*. We need to contact the energy bound up in the ill-will; it needs to be “available” for transformation.

Secondly, **try not to over-identify with any thoughts and narratives that arise.** Try and create space and distance. This might sound like it is contradicting the previous point. Just now I emphasised staying with experience, and now I am saying create distance from it! But what I mean is acknowledging and experiencing thoughts and emotions, whilst trying not to get over-identified with them, and then swept away by them. They are your experience, but only what you are experiencing right now, and this can change. You don't have to believe all the stories that run through your mind!

Thirdly, **if there is the “heat” of negative emotion present you can gently work with that.** For example, you can imagine your breath being cool as you breathe in, and ill-will calming and releasing as you breathe out. Make sure you are doing the practice in a spirit of self-metta, not berating yourself for any feelings of anger or irritation, but doing the practice with kindness and understanding. Sometimes people can get into irritation about their irritation – which really isn't helpful!

Fourthly, **try and see the difficult person more fully.** When we discussed the neutral person stage, we said that they can sometimes become like 2D cardboard cut-out figures, rather than real people. We can also view the person we find difficult in this partial way, except that the 2D cardboard cut-out has all their negative features blown up large! Try and consider them more fully, truthfully, and kindly. Even try and understand their fears and struggles and the possible reasons why they do the things you find difficult, even if those things they do *are* objectively unkind and unreasonable. This may not be comfortable or easy, but in doing it you are creating the conditions for your own freedom from hatred. And the more free of hatred we are, the more we can be a source of good in the world.

Now try the [led meditation](#) – which takes you through the whole practice, with a special emphasis on the fourth stage. Don't forget you can post up comments and questions [if you log in to the space on The Buddhist Centre Online.](#)

And, once again, we've got a suggestion from Subhadramati about how to translate the meditation practice real as you go about your life.

### **daily practice: harmonising speech**

Over the few days or week or so, practice abstaining from talking badly about anyone behind their backs or gossiping. A good rule of thumb is not to say anything that you wouldn't want the person themselves to hear. At the same time, if you hear someone complimenting or rejoicing in someone when they're not there, then pass it on.

After practising this for a while, review your practice:

- \* Was it easy or difficult to refrain from gossiping?
- \* What effect did it have?
- \* Did you manage to pass any compliments on?
- \* How did that feel?
- \* What effect did it have on the person you passed the compliment on to?

You could also maybe do the following reflection on the way to work, or during a quiet moment in the day: Bring to mind someone you like, and then recall one positive quality of that person or one positive thing they've done, and spend some time reflecting on that.

Now think of someone you know but don't get on with that well – not

someone you really hate or fear, as this might be too difficult. Again, bring to mind one positive quality of that person, or one positive thing they've done, and spend some time reflecting on that.

If it is appropriate, find a way of rejoicing in that quality to one or both people, perhaps verbally or by sending them a card.

You might also find a few moments to turn your mind to the last stage of the metta bhavana; how do you find that? What tends to happen during the meditation? That will be our focus for tomorrow.

Until then, there is also the [daily talk from Vessantara](#), as well as other talks and [a daily film](#) highlighting some aspect of loving-kindness in action in the Triratna Buddhist Community.