

GOING DEEPER MEDITATION MORNING

SPIRITUAL RECEPTIVITY

JUST SITTING FROM A BASIS OF METTA

When he first introduced just sitting as a practice, Bhante would say “when you practice just sitting, you just sit!” and leave it at that. This worked for some. For others it has been helpful to have a way in to the practice.

One way in is to use awareness of the breath as a foundation, perhaps devoting 20% of your attention to the physical experience of the abdomen moving with the cycle of the breath.

As we're in the transition from positive emotion to spiritual receptivity in the year's focus on the system of practice, I will introduce a way in to the just sitting practice from metta.

Moving in to just sitting from a base of metta is a more subtle practice than from a base of mindfulness firstly because metta is not a tangible physical sense experience.

Secondly because just sitting is not something we can 'do'. We may begin practising meditation with an active, doing approach: endeavouring to eradicate/destroy and prevent unwanted hindrances, and to cultivate and sustain desired experiences that we relate to as mindfulness and metta.

If we're starting from a position of feeling stuck in unpleasant mental states that we can't do anything about, moving in to a sense that we're not stuck, we can change our state of mind is a move in the right direction.

However, it will involve, at some level, a practice of constructing/fabricating/contriving experience, and the relationship to meditation as something one is doing involves engaging with it with as another thing on the to do list. The degree of openness possible with this mind set is limited.

THE CENTRE OF METTA PRACTICE

The centre of practice or object of attention in the metta practice is more subtle than a physical sensation: it is more a quality of relationship. We have a natural human capacity to be present with one another – most easily with our friends – bringing a kindly awareness to whatever is there, not trying to manipulate or fix anything. This place of being present with whatever is particularly calling one's attention with kindly awareness is the practice of metta.

LEANING IN TO THE PRACTICE

In order to come to a greater understanding of the 'lean' or draw/pull of the mind towards distraction, we can balance this out by a 'lean' in to the practice, in this way coming in to relationship with it, and so getting a feel for the weight/heft of it. The quality of balance in the way of engagement with our current state of mind allows for a sensitivity to its unique experiential texture or signature.

This is different to the quality of balance in which the mind is settled in the practice with no lean away from it – illustrated by the vajra balanced upright – but as hindrances are resolved it settles back in to it.

In the metta bhavana the direction of practice is a move from being being caught up in, preoccupied or troubled by what is on our mind to being with it. Bringing to bear this natural human capacity we have to be with one another and being with whatever is on our mind. This is a turning towards not the content of what is preoccupying or troubling us, but the experience of how it is to be preoccupied or troubled. Bringing a quality of relatedness and taking an interest.

We can introduce a 'lean' in this direction: you might relate to it more as a lean back in to the space around rather than a lean forward towards a particular experience.

Where with the mindfulness of breathing the lean back in to the centre of the practice is an intention to move the centre of attention back to a tangible experience of the breath, with the metta bhavana the movement is from being **in** a hindrance to being **with** it.

Figuratively we can relate to this as

- a move back in to being heart-centred
- a reorientation to realign with our heart-wish
- a step back from being-caught-up-in to being-with

Whichever of these metaphors works best, we can relate to the lean back in to the centre of the practice as bringing in an intention to make this move/reorientation/step

PICKING UP THE QUALITIES OF AWARENESS

With this 'lean' in place, being present with experience, we can pick up on the qualities of awareness:

- presence
- kindly awareness
- spaciousness
- sensitivity
- just happening

BEING PRESENT WITH AN OPENNESS TO NEW EXPERIENCE

Having got in direct touch with the quality of awareness, we can move from being present with particular experience to being present with an openness to new experience: a quality of openness and sensitivity as receptivity

- to what seems strange because it is from beyond the bounds of familiarity
- to what seems 'other' because it is from beyond the scope of what we identify with as 'self'
- to what seems distant because it is from beyond the tight centre of what is clung to

THE THREEFOLD UNHOOKING

There is a connection with the teaching of the threefold unhooking, which Vessantara often includes in his meditation retreats. In the context of metta: from a sense that 'I am feeling metta for my friend' one unhooks

1. from the sense of 'I' leaving 'a feeling of metta for the friend'
2. from the sense of 'them' leaving 'a feeling of metta'
3. from the label 'metta' leaving the experience just as it is, without label.

THE BODHISATTVA PATH

This relates to the Bodhisattva path of the Mahayana: the Bodhisattva is said, at the beginning of his career, to practice compassion with beings as reference, in the middle of his career with *dharmas* as reference (*dharmas* are mind-objects – roughly equivalent to 'experience'), and at the end of his career with no reference.

PRESENCE AND RECEPTIVITY

In moving from metta to spiritual receptivity the suggestion is to start with bringing a quality of presence and kindly awareness to experience, and then – if the experience is not demanding our attention: if it feels heard – letting go of

the focus on experience, and relaxing in to the quality of presence: being present to the openness and receptivity to new experience.

EXCERCISE

1. Relaxing in to an open sensitive presence. Being with whatever is particularly calling our attention.
2. If this continues to demand attention, staying with it: fully accepting, welcoming, begin with.
3. If not: if it feels heard, moving on to relax out of this centre of attention so that the presence is to an open space in which new experience might arise.
4. When this is in place, relaxing in to it. If there is any sense of the presence being held, or of the openness being held open, relaxing from this in to the presence/openness so that from being held open, awareness is simply open. From being held present, awareness is simply present. Rather than something one is doing it is just happening: a spontaneous presence.