
GOING DEEPER IN MEDITATION

Metta



“Cherish the Doctrine

Live United

Radiate Love”

DARDO RIMPOCHEⁱ

Going Deeper: Metta

Introduction

In this session I want to present the positive emotion equivalent of the three qualities of mindfulness I presented last month

Positive emotion finds its place within the five spiritual faculties with the faculty of faith, and this presentation of metta also sits at the centre of the mandala of five spiritual faculties with mindfulness as it offers parallels of sati appamada sampajanna.

Mindfulness and metta are both aspects of samatha or calm abiding. Both the mindfulness of breathing and the metta bhavana are cultivations of this state of samatha.

If the mindfulness you are cultivating is emotionally neutral: cool and calculating – or even cold and indifferent – it's not the quality the Buddha was encouraging his followers to cultivate.

Compassionate Presence

The aspect of sati (recollectedness) that I drew out was presence: being here, being in the present 'now' of direct experience, and also being with it rather than in it.

This parallels and overlaps with the aspect of metta which is compassionate presence or empathic presence, or sympathetic presence.

This quality of presence involves turning towards our experience and being with it in a companionable way.

To the extent that we are identified with a part of our experience we're not able to be with that part in this empathetic, companionable way. And often it's the part that we're identified with that needs the metta: the part that's trying hard, feeling responsible, struggling to get by, to hold it all together.

So try relating to everything that you become aware of as *something* in your experience rather than as "me", "myself", "I" – and see if it's ok to just be with that part, just as you would be with a good friend.

- Not needing to fix anything, to come up with strategies.
- Just being with whatever is difficult as you would be with a friend in their difficulty.
- Just being with whatever is open, alive, free – appreciatively, enjoying its freedom.

This is bringing to our experience that pliant (kammannata) quality of metta that responds, adapts:

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- Being patient with what is difficult, metta responds with kshanti (forbearance, patience), understanding (jnana) and compassion (karuna).
- Enjoying what is pleasurable, alive, free, metta responds with joy (mudita) and appreciation (katanyata)
- Seeing joy and sorrow woven fine metta responds with understanding (jnana) and equanimity (upekkha)

These are not responses we need to fabricate – or even to find. They are just colours that the companionable presence of kindly awareness takes on in different circumstances.

Sensitivity

The ethical sensitivity of appamada is closely connected to metta.

Metta is essentially a skilful intention in the mind, as distinct from sukha which is essentially a pleasant feeling tone in the mind. This is why metta is able to be with what is difficult and painful. You do not need to be having a pleasant experience to experience metta.

Buddhist ethics is an ethics of intention.

- So, from a basis of metta we will naturally respond skilfully, creatively.
- We do not need to over think it. We can just get in touch with the store of metta we have accumulated/developed/discovered in our practice. When we are in touch with that, responding to circumstances from that, we can have confidence in our actions.

The practice is one of developing a sensitivity to the ethical tone of our experience. In this way we become familiar with the kusala: the skilful, creative, responsive quality of kindly awareness that is metta.

As a practice of metta

- in the first stage – it is a practice of bringing an intimate sensitivity to our experience which again involves turning towards, being with, being prepared to feel it all.
- In the following stages, it is a practice of bringing sensitivity to the quality of our relationship with others. Turning towards our connectedness and inter-relatedness.

Sympathetic Understanding

Just as understanding is an aspect of clear comprehension (sampajanna), so a sympathetic or empathetic understanding is a quality of metta.

One understanding of the nature of metta that I find helpful is to see metta as “a generosity of interpretation”.

This is the opposite of a condemning attitude that sees a person or an experience in black-and-white terms as unequivocally bad.

It is relevant to bringing metta to what we find difficult in ourselves or in our own experience in stage 1 of the metta bhavana.

It is also relevant in bringing metta to what we find difficult in another in stage 4.

Of course, not all actions are skilfully motivated, and an insistence of finding a skilful motivation for what seems evidently bad behaviour could just be delusional.

But they are all understandable. As human beings, we have the key to understanding all human behaviour, because it's all rooted in the inclinations we find within human awareness. As our self-understanding deepens, so does our capacity for an empathic understanding of others because we have the same roots of greed hatred and delusion in our own minds – and the same capacity for other regarding generosity, compassion, and wisdom. The potential for a living hell and the potential for enlightenment are both present. As Milton put it:

“The mind is its own place, and in itself can make a heaven of hell, a hell of heaven. ... Here at least we shall be free”ⁱⁱ

Going Deeper: Metta Exploration

- Bring awareness to the body as lived from the inside: the field of sensation.

Companionable Presence

- Welcoming whatever arises. Being present with it as we would be with a friend.
- Recognizing the quality of presence surrounding all feelings and sensations: being alongside experience.
- Recognizing the companionable, welcoming quality of this.
- Looking for an equal awareness of felt sensations and of the quality of companionable presence, of kindly awareness with which we are keeping company with them.

Sensitivity

- Bringing an intimate sensitivity to the felt sensation of experience: its texture.
- Being sensitive to how we feel about that experience: our likes and dislikes, whether we are comfortable or uncomfortable with it.
- Sensitive to a sense of direction:
 - An inclination to turn towards or to shy away.
 - An opening to experience or a defensive closing down.
- Noticing the quality of intimacy and sensitivity: all felt sensations arising within the sensitivity of awareness. Feeling it all directly, intimately.

Sympathetic Understanding

- All felt sensations are known, are apprehended directly, and understood to be there just as they are.
 - Knowing that this experience is just this.
 - Recognizing this as simple, human experience. The difficult understandable even if not desirable. The open/free understood to be your own nature. Not fundamentally different from the nature of awakening.
- Recognizing this quality of sympathetic understanding, of being human and knowing, understanding that this is being human.
 - How all feelings unfold within this quality of knowing.

ⁱ Padmavajra unpacks this aphorism of Bhante's teacher Dardo Rimpche in a talk at <https://www.freebuddhistaudio.com/audio/details?num=LOC2104>

ⁱⁱ Paradise Lost, Book 1, Lines 233-4, 237-8. This is actually Lucifer speaking. As Blake said: Milton "was of the devil's party without knowing it" (Blake, The Marriage of Heaven and Hell, p6)