

Gentleness

Metta (maitri in Sanskrit) can be translated from Pali as gentle, friend, or lovingkindness. Cultivating lovingkindness is a crucial counterpart to other spiritual practices such as concentration, awareness, equanimity, and investigation. Traditionally prescribed to relieve fear for those who walked through jungles and slept in caves, metta practice is an antidote for negativity, whether self-hatred, anger, insecurity or resistance to change. Diligent metta practice brings easy sleep, pleasant dreams, protection from danger, a radiant face, a serene mind, and an unconfused death.

The formal practice

Formal metta practice taps into the power of intention, the ability of the mind to set itself moving in a particular direction. The metta practices mentioned below use the silent repetition of words expressing love to self and others. It is not important to feel anything special, but rather to connect again and again to the meaning of the words. Once the following methods are familiar to you, you may experiment with a focus other than words, such as visualization or the simple sense of love.

Start by making yourself comfortable. If you normally sit on the floor, try sitting in a chair or leaning against the wall. With the first few breaths, receive a sense of your body, heart, and mind as they are right now. Some people find it helpful to bring attention to the chest and breathe "through" the heart area.

Forgiveness

Sometimes it is helpful to clear space for metta with a short forgiveness offering. Silently reflect on and then repeat these or other similar words: If I have caused any living being harm, intentionally or unintentionally, I ask forgiveness.



If any living being has caused me harm, intentionally or unintentionally, I offer forgiveness. (Some people feel more comfortable saying, "I offer peace.") If I have caused myself harm, intentionally or unintentionally, I forgive myself.

Loving oneself

The traditional ways to cultivate metta start with oneself. The Buddha said, "You can search throughout the entire universe for someone who is more deserving of your love and affection than you are yourself, and that person is not to be found anywhere. You yourself, as much as anybody in the entire universe, deserve your love and affection."

To begin the metta practice, dig deeply to find your deepest wishes. Take your time to find your own words in your own language to express two or three or four of these deep wishes. Some of the traditional phrases are: "May I be safe. May I be free from suffering. May I be happy." You can also use single words such as "peace," "love," or "liberation."

Connecting to the meaning, repeat the words slowly, perhaps in rhythm with your breath, for at least 5-10 minutes. Feel as if you have all the time in the world. Once you find the right words, remain with the same words throughout the meditation.

Note that at times it might be helpful to focus lovingkindness on oneself throughout the entire meditation period. However, for some people, it is easier to offer self-acceptance rather than love: "May I accept myself completely. May I accept that I am okay as I am." Or visualize someone who has helped you, but with whom you don't feel tension, and imagine that person sending lovingkindness to you.

Three ways to expand the focus

After focusing metta on yourself, you can continue with one of three formats.



1. Expanding circles

Feel the life in the space just around and including you. Direct the wishes you had for yourself towards these living beings. Mosquitoes, pigeons, trees, human beings, ants, and you. Visualize and/or get a sense of the whole space or of individuals in the space one at a time. For several minutes or more, offer lovingkindness to all the beings in the hall, room, garden, or landscape. For example: "Just as I wish to be liberated, may all beings in this hall be liberated." "May all beings in this hall be happy." Or: "May we all be liberated...." After several minutes, again expand your sense of the moment to include a broader area, offering lovingkindness to the surrounding ashram or neighborhood or ecosystem. Then expand your awareness periodically to embrace the town, the state or province, the country, the planet and the universe. If you prefer, instead of referring to political boundaries such as states and countries, visualize natural "boundaries"--the forest, the river system, the mountain range, the plains, and then the continent or island you happen to be sitting on.

2. In each direction

A second way to practice metta is mentioned frequently in the ancient texts. Once you have spent some time directing lovingkindness towards yourself, you can send it out to all beings in each of the directions one by one: north, south, east, west, above, and below. Visualize and/or get a sense of all beings to the north receiving your friendship as you repeat, "May all beings to the north, be liberated." Lastly, allow the loving intention to spread out in all directions.

3. Individuals

A third way to practice metta is to focus on specific individuals, as usual starting with yourself. The second person to send metta to is called the benefactor, someone who has helped you, and whom you love and respect--preferably someone who is presently alive, and with whom you are not sexually involved. It may be a facilitator,



friend, or even someone like the Dalai Lama whom you may not know well. The third individual to receive your well-wishing is a person about whom you feel neutral. It can be difficult to think of such a person, since we usually jump to conclusions about others as soon as we meet them. Think of a bus driver, someone you have seen walking down the street, or a bank teller. The fourth person is someone with whom you feel some tension. If it is too difficult to send well wishing to this fourth person, then return to one of the previous steps for a while. With each person, visualize and/or get a sense of her or him, as you connect to the meaning of your chosen words.

Creativity

Once you have become familiar with the suggested forms of metta cultivation, you can be creative and find your own forms. You may find it more effective to start with what is easier and move towards what is more difficult. For example, if sending love to yourself is excruciating, you can break from the usual pattern and begin with a benefactor or friend. If while sending love to a large group you become distracted, then return to a smaller group for a while. However, metta has a healing power that may be beyond your expectations. Each time you practice, go to the edge of what is comfortable for you and see what happens.

