

In the metta bhavana practice we develop spiritually by enriching the emotional quality of our awareness and attitudes.

The word “metta” means “friendliness”. We need to appreciate that metta is a powerful expression of friendliness. When metta is felt more fully, friendliness becomes a strong feeling of goodwill toward everyone and everything we encounter. Metta is an emotion that we build up gradually through the practice of meditation and through acting in a positive way.

The word “bhavana” means “development”. When fully developed, metta is an intense emotion. But we cannot generate metta simply by willing it. We need to build up the qualities of metta in ourselves gradually. This is bhavana.

The practice

1st Stage. We begin by dwelling on the positive feelings we have for ourselves, on the many ways we care about ourselves, and on our own positive qualities.

We can use our imagination to help feelings emerge. We may simply say some phrase to ourselves that expresses metta, such as “May I be well” or “May I be happy”. We say the phrase to ourselves and then let it have the space to work, and let the feeling of happiness and the emotion grow from it.

We may recall times when we felt content and fulfilled, in touch with what delights us, and felt caring toward ourselves. Or we may imagine situations that stimulate such feelings, such as sitting by a calm lake, or experiencing a sunny day.

2nd Stage. We choose a good friend, and we bring them into the practice. We will then naturally feel the flow of our inner friendliness begin to include our friend. We can use our imagination to stimulate our feelings, just as in the first stage. But this time we say “May he or she be well”. We see our friend when he or she was truly happy, and picture him or her in a pleasing setting.

At first we are advised to choose a friend who is alive, of about the same age as ourselves, and for whom we don’t have a strong sexual attraction. This avoids bringing in feelings that we might mistake for metta.

3rd Stage. We choose a neutral person. This is someone we’ve encountered, but don’t really know personally. It should be someone for whom we have no particular like or dislike. It may be someone we see at the bus stop, or at work, or a local shopkeeper.

4th Stage. We choose someone who is an enemy, or someone with whom we find it difficult to communicate or agree. We try to see beyond our present disharmony and see that our enemy also wishes to be happy and to experience a positive state of being.

5th Stage. Coming back to the metta we feel, we bring together ourselves, our friend, the neutral person, and our enemy. We feel the same wish for happiness in all of us, and the same goodwill towards all four. Then, we begin to bring the wider and wider perspective of life around us into the practice. We think of others immediately around us. We look beyond to people living in the vicinity, in the city, in the county, in the country, and extend to people everywhere. We wish them all well, identifying their happiness with ours. We then extend our thoughts to all the continents, bringing in everyone in the world with whom we share life, all life everywhere.

Preparation for Meditation

Friends of the Western Buddhist Order

Preparation for meditation involves setting up the right conditions and employing habits that help us meditate more successfully.

To begin

- Practice meditation at the same time every day -- for example, just after you've brushed your teeth -- so it becomes part of your life and you don't have to think about it. If you meditate in the mornings, it is good to be awake before you begin to meditate. For some people, this means having tea or coffee before they sit. Eating should be in moderation, since it can be difficult to meditate on a full stomach.
- Ideally, reserve a place in your living area just for meditation. So as soon as you sit in that spot, you know what you are going to do. Also, preparing the area before you sit can help. It's best to have a quiet environment (no radio, TV, etc.).
- Allow time to wind down and relax. Simplify the mind's workings with perhaps a small task that requires little mental effort. Take pleasure in preparing a pleasant meditation environment. It should be quiet, undisturbed and aesthetically pleasing. Flowers, candles, incense, pictures or other attractive objects are helpful.
- Sit quietly and comfortably and allow your mind to orient calmly towards meditation. Ensure your posture is good and try to relax any tensions in your body. Perhaps do a few stretching exercises.
- Resolve any worries or pressing thoughts before starting. Make contact with your feelings and make a definite decision to do the practice wholeheartedly, and to seek enjoyment in it.
- Run through "PIPER" (Posture, Introspection, Purpose, Energy/enthusiasm, Resolve).

To finish

- Allow plenty of time to finish and come back into the world around you. Sit quietly for a little while, if you wish.
- Move your hands and reconnect with your body.
- Don't just rush off! Plan what you will be doing for the next few minutes. The positive effect of meditating may not be obvious, so take things quietly just after meditation. This helps carry your meditation throughout the day.