

# CHAPTER TWO

## *THE PRACTICE OF METTA MEDITATION*

### **SUPPORTIVE MEDITATION**

There are four kinds of meditation we need to practise in order to support Vipassana meditation. They are metta meditation, meditation on the qualities of the Buddha, meditation on the impersonality of the body and meditation on death. These four, if practised earnestly and correctly, help in the development of Vipassana practice. Vice versa, Vipassana meditation assists us achieve deep understanding of these four meditation practices. They are mutually approving and supportive, and that is why these four are known as *Supportive Meditation*.

They are largely reflective types of meditation rather than trying to watch sensation and thoughts momentarily as in Vipassana. They help the mind to focus. Once fully developed, they also tend to influence the way we think. Three of them — *Metta*, meditation on the impersonality of body and meditation on death — help us directly to acquire the *right thought* factor of the Noble Eightfold Path because their nature is that of goodwill, non-violence and detachment.

## METTA MEDITATION

Before practising *metta*, I would like to discuss what *metta* is. Practising *metta* (loving-kindness) meditation is not something new to the Burmese, the Thai and the Sri Lankan Buddhists. Actually in many places, by *meditation* people would immediately understand it as *metta* meditation.

*Metta* meditation comes in a set, comprising four component: *metta*, *karuna* (compassion), *mudita* (sympathetic joy) and *upekkha* (balanced mind). In Burmese and Thai, *upekkha* means being indifferent to someone or something. This is often mistakenly taken to mean the *upekkha* which is a part of *Metta*. In reality, *Upekkha* that is a part of *Metta* is not an attitude of ignoring and being indifferent towards something but rather a balanced mind that is not swayed nor affected either by the suffering object of *karuna* or the pleasant object of *mudita*. It always retains the spirit of *metta*, which is the very foundation of its existence. When we say *metta*, the remaining three are also included. However, in practice, all the four cannot be done at the same time. We have to begin with *metta*. Whether or not we progress to the other three elements depends on how we are progressing with *metta* practice. We could not start off with *karuna* and *mudita* or *upekkha* because each of the last three is a specialized advancement of *metta*. *Metta* is an inclusive primary practice that develops itself into the qualities of heart such as *karuna*, and is essential to furthering these qualities.

## **WHAT IS METTA**

The desire to see peace and success in your life is *metta*. The desire to be free from harm is *metta*. This good intention is to be developed and extended to members of your family and friends. As it progresses, you have to *gradually* extend it to all in the world including your enemy. The desire to see them doing well and happy in their life is the spirit of *metta*

You want to see yourself progress socially, economically and spiritually. This is *metta*. When we wish ourselves good health and prosperity, we are purely developing the awareness of goodwill to ourselves — promoting love for ourselves and avoiding danger, harm and enmity.

## **DO NOT START FROM THE WHOLE WORLD**

*Metta* is a goodwill through which you wish to see welfare and well-being of yourself. In this world, all living creatures love themselves and should have an awareness of this feeling. They should then extend this feeling to those nearby such as parents, family members, sons, daughters, brothers, sisters and teachers. This is the way to start spreading or expanding *metta*. There are some, who start by saying, "*may all creatures in the east be well and happy*". Some practise *metta* with only the whole world as their meditation object, overlooking the people nearest and dearest to themselves. Without being able to develop *metta* fully for themselves and their friends, how can one expect to stretch out *metta* to the whole world? It is not logical. That could become a futile effort and sometimes almost a prayer intended for mere public display.

## UNIVERSAL DIMENSION OF METTA

As *metta* is universal by nature, as said earlier, we have to have a *wholesome feeling* not only for ourselves but also for other people as well. Otherwise, *metta* can lose its true nature and be overcome by its invisible attacker: attachment and selfishness. That is not *metta* any more.

*Metta* by its true character gravitates toward a gradual diminishing of the border between you and your family, friends and strangers, and between yourself and the enemy. Prejudice, favour and fear are the manifestations of the opponents of *metta*; they create a mental boundary between those you *like* and those you *do not* like. *Metta* works to diminish and eliminate such bias and discrimination. *Metta* gives a universal dimension to the way we think and act. With *metta*, come virtues such as friendliness and honesty. One who has sufficiently developed *metta* is exceptionally thoughtful, caring and gentle. He is patient and willing to listen to someone else's point of view.<sup>1</sup> *Metta* seeks to transform the inner character of a person while offering peace and a confident outlook on life.

There are people, who do not have the feeling of goodwill even for themselves. They do not strive to improve themselves; they may even harm themselves or place themselves in danger. Therefore, those people who seek to improve their life righteously and avoid harming themselves

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<sup>1</sup> Suvaco is the quality mentioned in the Metta-sutta.

are at least practising the awareness of *metta* for themselves. They need only proper guidance to extend it to others.

## **INVISIBLE AND VISIBLE ENEMIES OF METTA**

Metta practice can easily be derailed especially in the absence of mindfulness. The goodwill nature of *metta* could change into that of attachment and lust, both of which have magnetic potential. They are an *invisible hindrance* to *metta*. It is extremely difficult to combat them.

Ill-will and anger are the opposite of goodwill and loving-kindness. They have destructive forces within and without. They are the well-known and visible enemies of *metta*. All the hindrances to *metta*, both visible and invisible, are direct emotional responses from within, which require awareness and concentration to detect and put under control.

Actually, *metta* meditation cannot proceed in the absence of mindfulness. The Buddha has made it clear that one must establish mindfulness to sustain *metta*. We have to have a sustained awareness (*sati*), indeed, all the seven factors of enlightenment (*bojjhanga*) to develop *metta*.

The Buddha has also advised anyone to help his relative or friend, if really concerned for them, to practise mindfulness meditation (*Satipatthana*). *Metta* and mindfulness practices are often taught together.

## **NOT JUST RECITATION OF WORDS**

*Metta* meditation is not merely recitation of the *Metta-sutta*, the discourse on loving-kindness. It is about bringing and developing an awareness of the fact that we love ourselves; we do not wish any harm to befall ourselves. Moreover, it is about extending such good thoughts to others. It is also about evolving qualities of heart we mentioned earlier. To do that, right effort must be in place. Nevertheless, without mindfulness, we may not know where and when to make an effort. It is down to mindfulness again.

*Metta* meditation is not just chanting a formula either. There are many formulas translated directly from the Pali texts or based on one like "*may I be happy*", which is a well known formula.<sup>2</sup> It is not enough just to memorize the formula or stanza and recite it like a mantra. It does not work that way. It requires mindfulness and reflection on the issues such as happiness and suffering, and the person who is the meditation object.

## **IMMEDIATE RESULT OF METTA**

Developing *metta* is, in fact, instrumental in overcoming frustration within oneself. This gradual reduction of frustration is the first benefit that one reaps from *metta* meditation.

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<sup>2</sup> For the monastic community a formula in Pali like "*Aham avero homi, avyapajjo homi, anigho homi, sukhi attanam pariharami*" etc is most used. One has to know the meaning and use reflective energy while chanting it.

As one becomes cheerful and hopeful, he is well liked and loved by many. Aversion, irritation, agitation and anger will be greatly reduced as the practice goes forward. An arrogant attitude that tends to belittle others will also vanish. In the absence of metta's aura, contempt and an "*I don't care*" type of attitude can sour all the good will. Our daily life is often disturbing, disappointing and complicated. If your *metta* practice is sufficiently advanced, you will seek a contented, simple and unconfused life.

We need to be introspective to find out whether or not we have any of these qualities within us. To be able to do this, we need to practise Vipassana meditation. If through this meditation practice, we discover that we lack a certain quality, we should then apply right effort. We should reflect on the individual words of the Metta-sutta, the Discourse on Loving-kindness, and assess ourselves on whether we possess those qualities. This is another way of practising *metta*.

## **KARUNA AND MUDITA**

We have to start embracing compassion (*karuna*) and joy (*mudita*) right from the beginning. In metta meditation practice, there should be a meditation object. The first object is none other than yourself. The second object is people who are close to you.

No matter who is chosen to be an object of *metta* meditation, all the objects can be mainly put into two categories: one that is suffering and the other that is happy or successful. For example, my mother is chosen as the object of my *metta*. If she is suffering from a headache, I wish for her to be free from suffering, which is a headache. To have this

goodwill requires *metta* (loving-kindness) as its foundation. As I appreciate her suffering, compassion is born. This is because she is a suffering object.

When she is happy, I wish her happiness sustained with *metta*. As I treasure her happiness, joy comes into existence. The same object, my mother, is giving rise to both *compassion* and *joy*. This is due to the fact that I set out with *metta* practice having a dimension that is wide enough to embrace and give rise to both compassion and joy. The issue of the headache is relevant to develop attentiveness. It is an issue, which is in my mind at the present.

When she is anxious, I would say "*may you be free from anxiety and may you be happy.*" My good wish for her to be free from anxiety is a *compassionate* feeling, which originates from *metta* while the latter, a wish for her happiness, is necessarily a *joyous* one, also firmly established on *metta*. *Metta* sets out, therefore, to develop *karuna* and *mudita*.

In *metta* meditation, both feelings of being compassionate and joyous come into play. When we look at the famine in Sudan and see the people and children starving from hunger, we are observing a suffering object. You immediately develop *karuna* if *metta* is already inherent in you. A person practising *metta* meditation on a suffering object develops compassion. In another words, *metta* is transformed into compassion. When you hear that a certain group of people is being oppressed, you develop compassion if *metta* has already been developed. Of course, without mindfulness, this *metta* could lead to anger over the

oppressor, and you may react accordingly. Here you can see the importance of mindfulness that will help calm the anger.

When we hear of someone's success in the recent GCSE examinations, we feel happy. In this instance, the feeling developed is *mudita*, a joyous feeling. You are happy to see someone doing well. In this world, it is usually quite easy to feel compassionate because suffering objects are by nature very moving. It is very powerful. Just observe how the whole country felt when the news of Princess Diana's tragic death was announced in August 1997. Many, including those who never loved her, broke down in tears.

When she was alive, not all of those people were happy with her; some used to criticise her or even find fault with her, or magnify her mistakes. Some even made a fortune out of her weakness. There was not much *mudita* at that time. What I mean to say is that it is more difficult to rejoice in somebody else's achievement.

## **HARD TO FEEL JOYOUS FOR OTHERS**

Communism developed as a response to the oppression of the working class. From the Buddhist philosophical viewpoint, this oppression and poverty led to feelings of *karuna*, which in turn led to the formation of a system to dispel that oppression and exploitation. Communism was clearly built on compassion. However, the people who followed Communism did not feel happy when they saw rich people. They, especially the Communist leaders, had no joyous feeling. If they had feelings of *mudita*, they might not have nationalised or confiscated businesses that had been justly

acquired, thus might have prevented the present economic and political collapse in Eastern Europe. Those leaders might even have survived until now.

Therefore, when developing *metta*, we should assess ourselves to see whether it contains the necessary fundamentals that also give rise to both *compassion* and *joy*.

### **THE ROLE OF SATI**

The role of mindfulness in *metta* practice has already been discussed earlier. Nevertheless, I should mention it again here. You are moved when you see a suffering object. You are happy to see someone doing well. You become joyous because of *mudita*. Emotionally, these two, compassion (*karuna*) and joy (*mudita*) are opposite. Consequently, when we encounter both emotions at different times, we can be put off balance emotionally. We may become more disposed towards *karuna* and become very sad. Alternatively, we may become inclined towards *mudita* and be pushed towards greed (*lobha*) or pride (*mana*). You really need something to balance these two diametrically opposite emotions, and it is *Sati* (mindfulness), which brings in some balance. This is why we need to practise *metta* along with Vipassana meditation.

Having reached this stage, mindfulness helps develop concentration (*samadhi*). Such a development is vital because without the presence of strong concentration, the mind can be off balance. In plain language, *upekkha*, the last component of *metta*, cannot be cultivated unless concentration is developed. However, concentration alone, without *metta*, *karuna* and *mudita*, there does not bring about *upekkha*. In the

Abhidhamma teaching as well as in the jhana factors, a very advanced concentration is associated with *upekkha* and is called one-pointedness or *ekaggata* in Pali. One-pointedness, an aspect of concentration, helps the mind to balance itself.

When mindfulness is present, our mind is kept in balance. When we meet a person who is suffering, we can help him without being overwhelmed by sorrow. We are able to keep ourselves under control. When we meet a happy person also, we can feel happy as well without becoming greedy or craving. People often feel jealous in such circumstances. If we can feel suffering without anger and the joy without jealousy, then this is what is known as *upekkha*, equanimity. It is quite different from the Burmese and Thai word *upekkha*, which means *to ignore*. An ignoring attitude cannot become an offshoot of caring *metta*. The Pali *upekkha* is, as discussed earlier, related to *samadhi* (concentration) and is developed with it. A person lacking in *samadhi* but who claims to be practising *upekkha* is probably just trying to ignore things.

Why do we need this balance? In brief, it is because of the opposition to one another of the two emotions: *karuna* and *mudita*. In the learning stage, mindfulness balances *karuna* and *mudita*, and thereby helps develop *upekkha*, while in the reflective stage, the awareness of cause and effect contributes to *upekkha* practice.

Let me explain this a bit further. The learning stage is about developing and then using mindfulness/*sati* to grow *upekkha*. It has to be said that the first thing we have to do to balance between two opposing emotions (i.e. *karuna* and *mudita*) is to use mindfulness/*sati* to create and maintain a

balance. By becoming aware of the enemies of both *karuna* and *mudita* through "bare attention" and dealing with them non-judgmentally, some kind of stability is created. In a more developed stage, which I call here reflective stage, mindfulness will have already built up some form of understanding. The most relevant understanding here is that of *dukkha* and its causes; this may also be called wisdom. But here I present it as awareness of cause and effect. In simple words, one is emotionally stable at the learning stage by relying on the sustained presence of awareness, whereas in the reflective stage, one becomes emotionally secure because of the understanding of life as a whole in the context of cause and effect. It is a case of awareness is being strengthened by understanding. Because of the two inseparable qualities (non-judgemental awareness and wisdom) that an enlightened being like an arahant can feel the pain and joy of others appropriately while at the same time being fully conscious of suffering and the causes of suffering. Usually, when non-enlightened people feel *mudita*, they do not necessarily think of *dukkha*, unlike the Buddha. So, the reflective stage is certainly a more advanced progress. I have now briefly explained what *metta*, *karuna*, *mudita* and *uppekha* are.

## **SPECIFIED AND UNSPECIFIED OBJECTS**

When choosing an object for *metta* meditation, there are two types of object: a specified one and an unspecified. A specified object could be a chosen person, whom one specifies by name or appearance. Try to visualise the person in mind when directing *metta* to that person and wishing him good health and happiness.

Without particularising any person, if we just say "*may all beings in the east or in the whole world be well and happy,*" then this is an unspecified *metta* object. This way of propagating *metta* to an unspecified object is only possible and effective if done by a person who has already developed and attained a very powerful degree of *metta* with a specified object. Otherwise, it will be ineffective.

**INSTRUCTIONS ON METTA MEDITATION**  
**(BASIC TECHNIQUE)**  
**IDENTIFYING NEGATIVE AND POSITIVE CONDITIONS**

I want you to think of two negative conditions that you do not wish to have and two positive conditions or things that you wish to have. In other words, think of desirable and undesirable things in your life. We will start our practice based on these settings. To give you an example, I have a gastric ulcer, which wakes me up in the middle of the night because of the pain. I suffer from lack of sleep. Sometimes when I go for lunch invitation, the food offered is very spicy; I end up eating just rice and yoghurt. I have encountered these difficulties. So, I have become mindful of these difficulties and with a feeling of *metta* for myself, my first wish is that *I may get rid of the gastric ulcer*. Secondly, my wish is to be free from bad company, to be far away from them and not to have to meet them. I will simply meditate "*may I be free from bad company.*" These are the two most obvious wishes for me as far as negative situations are concerned.

The two positives are to be able to meditate and study success fully. These are my two most important things, even

burning issues, for me at the present. I will incorporate them into *metta* practice.

## **STEP ONE**

I first choose myself as the meditation object. I say to myself in my mind *"May I be free from gastric ulcers. May I be free from bad company. May I be able to meditate more and successfully, and may I be advancing as I wish with my research study."* This is repeated two to five times.

## **STEP TWO**

Next I direct my mind to another person, for example, to my mother, visualising her and wishing thus; *"May she be free from gastric ulcers. May she be free from bad company. May she be able to meditate successfully. May she be advancing in her dhamma study."*

Actually, it should be a relevant issue for her. I may say, *may she be well and happy, may she be free from anxiety and worry.* Good health and happiness are something positive I want her to enjoy. Anxiety and worry are things undesirable I do not want her to have them. We need to choose two negative and two positive issues, and cultivate *metta* first for ourselves and then for a specific person.

By this practice, we develop *sati* (mindfulness) of our feelings of well being, our desire to be free from harm and suffering, and this then leads to the development of *metta* for ourselves. From then on, we can extend the same *metta*, first

to our parents if they are still alive, second to our existing families and then close friends. We direct our *metta* to them individually, one by one.

### **STEP THREE**

We next have to choose a neutral person. He or she may be someone from work or someone you come across in society. This person has to be known to you but one towards whom you have not formed any like or dislike. He or she is entirely neutral. We then direct our *metta* to that person in the same way as we did before.

### **THESE PEOPLE ARE NOT YET MEDITATION OBJECTS**

We should forget the people we have been in conflict with or had arguments with for the time being. Only when we have made some progress in our *metta* meditation, should we include them. Some say that they have just gritted their teeth and cultivated *metta* to people they have had a fight with. I cannot imagine what type of *metta* is being directed to them. This is just not possible. The border between your acquaintances and the neutral person has to be eliminated first, before you can effectively cultivate *metta* towards your enemy. We do not start with the opposite sex either as this can arouse lust. Nor do we begin with those who have died, for this can stir up sorrow.