



Serene and clear: an introduction to Buddhist meditation

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Week four: Cultivating love

Serenity and insight

We have seen how the Buddha taught meditation in terms of two fundamental approaches: serenity (*samatha*) and insight (*vipassanā*). All meditation techniques or methods can be classified as either *samatha*, meditation for serenity or calm, or *vipassanā*, meditation for insight or clarity. However, all meditation techniques contain elements of both serenity and insight. Without some degree of serenity, the mind cannot become clear; when the mind clarifies, it naturally becomes serene. The Buddha explained that, depending on individual talents and sensitivities, meditators can develop insight first and then serenity, or serenity first and then insight, or serenity and insight together. In all cases he emphasised the need for serenity and insight to be balanced. He said that a meditator who has attained serenity but not insight should approach someone who has attained insight and ask how insight is developed and phenomena investigated. A meditator who has attained insight but not serenity should approach someone who has attained serenity and ask how serenity is developed and the mind unified. Today we will practice the cultivation of love (*mettā bhāvanā*) both as a pure serenity practice, and as a way of linking serenity and insight.

Mettā

Mettā is a Pāli word usually translated as “loving-kindness.” It corresponds to the Greek *agape*, non-sensual love, as distinct from *eros*, sensual love. *Agape* is the kind of love Christians refer to when they speak of the love of God for us and of our love for our neighbour. Hence the compound “loving-kindness,” which emphasises the non-sensual nature of *mettā*. But as long as we keep this non-sensual aspect in mind, “love” is a satisfactory translation. Sensual love is conditional love, based on self-interest: if you behave in a way that brings me pleasant feelings, then I will love you. Non-sensual love is unconditional love: I love you, regardless of your behaviour. A metaphor the Buddha used for *mettā* is “the love that a mother has for her child, her only child” (Karaṇīya-mettā Sutta), and this captures the unconditional nature of *mettā*. However, *mettā* in its fullest development is extended equally towards all beings.

The equality which is a characteristic of *mettā* implies emotional freedom. Normally we react to people and events on the basis of our obsessive self reference. Conditioned by our likes and dislikes, we go through a series of mood swings which condition our responses to ourselves and the people around us. These moods are based on and in turn feed our habitual self obsession, as we grab for what we want and back off from what we don’t want. But *mettā* is a positive feeling of love which is not based on self obsession, and which therefore extends to all beings - including ourselves - whether or not these beings are behaving in the way we want them to. So *mettā* has a quality of impartiality, not favouring one form of

behaviour over the other, or one being over the other. And because it is impartial, *mettā* is universal, since it is not limited by individual preferences.

Mettā is the first of the *brahma-vihāras*, the “divine abidings” or “sublime states.” These are love (*mettā*), compassion (*karuṇā*), joy (*muditā*) and equanimity (*upekkhā*). Impartial, and therefore universal, love is the foundation of compassion and joy. Compassion is love directed towards those who are suffering, and is characterised by a desire to relieve their suffering. Joy is love directed towards those who are happy, and is characterised by gladness and rejoicing in their happiness. Equanimity is balance and impartiality, seeing the happiness and sorrow of all beings as equally conditioned by their habitual actions, and equally the result of their actions.

Mettā bhāvanā (the cultivation of love) can be practised in a number of ways. It can be practised solely to develop serenity (*samatha*), and has the capacity to take the mind as far as third *jhāna*, the third level of absorption. *Mettā* as a serenity practice can also be used as a means of supplementing insight practice. If the mind becomes restless or the body painful while practising insight, one can shift to the cultivation of love as a means of gaining inspiration and happiness and calming the body, and then with this foundation returning to insight. Or, *mettā* can be cultivated simultaneously with insight. Using this third approach, the cultivation of love (*mettā bhāvanā*) is very closely associated with the contemplation of mind (*citta anupassanā*). “Mind” in Buddhism includes emotions, not just thinking, and the Pāli word *citta*, usually translated as “mind,” could equally be translated as “heart.” When we cultivate *mettā* our meditation object is the person or persons for whom we are developing love, and so our attention is directed outwards to the person; but during this process we also find ourselves becoming sensitive to our own emotional states. For example, in attempting to cultivate *mettā* for a person, we may become very sensitive to the anger or defensiveness in our own hearts. In this way, the cultivation of *mettā* can teach us a great deal about how we tighten and construct a defensive shield around us. Watching this response come and go without identifying with it is the cultivation of insight or clarity.

There are three modalities of action: body, speech and mind. *Mettā* expressed bodily is action for the happiness and welfare of the person. *Mettā* expressed verbally is speech for the happiness and welfare of the person. And *mettā* expressed mentally is “minding” for the happiness and welfare of the person, wanting or intending the happiness and welfare of the person. Since we are practising *mettā bhāvanā* (the cultivation of love) as a meditation exercise, we are concerned here with *mettā* as an intention, or choice. Last week we spoke of the cultivation of intention by means of precise aim on to the meditation object, aided by naming it. Intention or choice is foundational to Buddhist psychology. We have seen that Buddhism takes for granted that we form or construct the experiencing subject, the self. The chief formative or constructive factor is intention. Intention is so important that the Buddha says “Intention, I declare, *is* action.” “Action” here is *kamma* (Skt. *karma*), which is the central conditioning factor in our lives, and for the Buddha, intention *is kamma*. This is why the cultivation of love can be such a transforming influence in our lives. By developing an intention for the happiness and welfare of ourselves and others, we become loving towards ourselves and others. We are formed by our habitual intentions.

Empathy

The foundation of the sublime states is empathy. For the Buddha, universal love is based on self love. He says:

Covering every direction with the mind,
One finds no-one one loves more than oneself.

In the same way, others love their own self -
Therefore one who loves himself does not harm another. (Udāna 5.1)

We are all possessed by self love, in the sense that all our thoughts, feelings and actions are based on self reference. We are constantly thinking about ourselves, and even when we think about others we think about them in reference to ourselves. A mother loves her children, but she thinks of them as “my” children, and does not have the same concern for other children who she thinks of as not “her” children. This self love is natural. It is not good or bad, any more than the weather is good or bad. It’s just the way the mind works, when it takes for granted the existence of an independently existing self and experiences the world from the perspective of that self. This conviction that the self exists independently of everything else is the view of the reality of the person (*sakkāya ditthi*), and insight practice aims at uprooting that view.

This self love is the foundation of our suffering, because it is the basis of our obsessions. It is also the basis of ethics and of the *brahma-vihāras*, because it is the basis of empathy. Notice how the Buddha, having established the reality of self love, then says: “In the same way, others love their own self.” This relentless self referentiality is universal, and seeing the universality of this condition is fundamental to ethics, *mettā*, and insight. Since I want to avoid pain, I do not inflict pain on other beings, because I know how they feel. This is the foundation of ethics. Further, since I want to enjoy happiness, I do what I can to increase the happiness of others, because I know how they feel. This is the foundation of love. And understanding that just as we want to be happy and to avoid pain, so do others; just as others want to be happy and to avoid pain, so do we; we understand that in the things that matter, we are the same as everyone else. What separates us is surface waves, the content of the narratives going through the mind; what unites us is that we all have the same kind of mind which works in the same way. Seeing this, seeing that happiness is just happiness and not *my* happiness or *your* happiness; seeing that pain is just pain, and not fundamentally *my* pain or *your* pain, is insight; and so even though the practice of the *brahma-vihāras* is classified as a *samatha* method, there is a close link between the *brahma-vihāras* and insight.

This is why the practice of *mettā* always begins with oneself. When generating love, first direct it towards oneself. Some people have a difficulty with that, because of feelings of unworthiness or low self-esteem. This is a type of *māna* (pride; conceit). We think we are special, but we are not. Our differences are surface only. To think otherwise is to identify with the personal - to be locked into the view of the reality of the person. Directing love towards oneself has nothing to do with worth or absence of worth. It is an expression of the simple and natural aspiration I have that “I want to be happy, and avoid pain.” From ourselves we move out to others, based on the understanding: “Just as I want to be happy and avoid pain, so do others; just as others want to be happy and avoid pain, so do I.”

All the sublime states are based on empathy, and the impartiality which is implicit in empathy. Love (*mettā*) is founded on the understanding that just as I want to be happy, so do others; just as others want to be happy, so do I. Compassion (*karuṇā*) is founded on the understanding that just as I suffer, so do others; just as others suffer, so do I. Joy (*muditā*) is founded on the understanding that just as I rejoice in my happiness, so do others; just as others rejoice in their happiness, so do I. And equanimity (*upekkhā*) is the maturing of impartiality, the understanding that all beings pass through happiness and sorrow in the same way and for the same reasons. Empathy begins with oneself, and so the practice of the sublime states begins with oneself.

Standing

Begin with establishing the standing posture. Rest the attention in the chest, feeling the heart and the breath. Once the attention is grounded in the body, then begin to extend *mettā* toward yourself. Do this using an appropriate form of words. Traditionally, phrases such as: “May I be happy; may I be healthy; may I attain my heart’s release” are used, but the exact words are not important. What’s important is what the words mean to you, the feeling or intention *behind* the words. If the form of words you choose begins to get stale, change them. If the mind becomes tired, stop and reflect on an occasion when you felt happy, peaceful and at ease, and recall that feeling. Or you can visualise light in the heart. Or you can repeat the word “love,” directing the attention to the love that is already within us. It is important to keep the method fresh, so adopt a playful attitude, being ready to change tack whenever necessary.

If you begin to get a sense of happiness or quiet contentment, then focus on that feeling. If you experience resistance to the practice, a tightening and tension in the body and mind, then accept that feeling and focus on it. Do not get lost in ideas about what you should be feeling, but know what you actually are feeling. *Mettā* softens the mind, and connects it with the people around. Anger, in contrast, hurts. It hardens and isolates the mind, and in this practice we can develop a sensitivity to the presence of anger and a clear understanding of the suffering inherent in it.

Walking

This practice is to be done when walking in company, for example when moving through city streets. Begin walking, maintaining the balance and alignment of the body, and using this as a means of anchoring the attention in the body. Walk slowly about the room, not confining yourself to any particular track. As each person presents himself or herself in your view, extend *mettā* towards that person: “May she be happy;” “May she be healthy;” “May she attain her heart’s release.” Maintain an even sense of rhythm, in both your walking and your aspiration. Your eyes rest on one person: “May she be happy.” Your eyes rest on another: “May he be healthy.” And so on.

Sitting

Bringing your attention back into the body, go arrange your seat and take up the sitting posture. Make sure you are comfortable, because you want to be entirely focused on your stream of *mettā*, and not be distracted by physical pain. So if you are in any doubt about your capacity to sit for a period without being distracted by pain, sit in a chair. Bring your body into balance, then bring your attention to your breathing or to any strong physical sensation that attracts attention. As you settle into the posture, anchor your attention at the heart.

Once the mind is grounded, then switch your attention to how you are feeling, your emotional tone. Are you happy or unhappy? Peaceful or restless? Bored or interested? Just tune in to your feeling and acknowledge it. Don’t be concerned with what you think you should be feeling; just see what you actually are feeling. If you can’t identify a particular feeling, just acknowledge that and return your attention to the body.

Then begin to extend *mettā* to yourself, repeating words which express your feeling of *mettā*. With your attention parked in the body at the heart, maintain that stream of intention or aspiration towards yourself: “May I be happy;” “May I be healthy;” “May I attain my heart’s release.” Have a sense of direction - the words are flowing into your heart. Maintain the flow

of words, and discern the intention or aspiration behind the words, the energy that is generating the words. This is your aspiration for your own welfare and happiness, a universal aspiration that all of us possess. Maintain this flow of intention continuously. Your attention is more focused on this aspiration than on the words. The words are like the label with which you name an experience - "hardness;" "softness;" and so on. The aspiration is like the actual sensation.

When the mind is distracted, just drop the thought and return to the flow of aspiration which is being expressed in the words. If the aspiration is growing stale, change the words; or drop the words and imagine yourself happy and loved. If physical pain or discomfort intervenes, drop the painful sensation and return to the flow of aspiration.

Then bring to mind a person whom you love and respect and whose welfare you genuinely desire. Note the importance of this: we must *genuinely* desire the happiness and welfare of the person, so we need someone who inspires us with a real sense of good will, someone for whom we have sincere respect and affection, someone who has benefited us or of whom we are particularly fond. Reflect that "Just as I want to be happy and avoid pain, so does s/he;" "Just as s/he wants to be happy and avoid pain, so do I." Then imagine or visualise the person in front of you and send a stream of *mettā* towards him or her, using suitable words. Again, if a feeling of happiness or kindness arises, absorb into that feeling. Otherwise focus on the stream of intentions you are generating toward the person. The object of attention is the *intention* that the person be well and happy, and this intention is dynamic, moving from the practitioner to the loved person. So even if you are not feeling anything, still you can focus on that flow of intention that you are generating with words and visualisation, sending it towards the person.

Again, when the mind is distracted, drop the thought or the painful sensation and return to the stream of intentions for the welfare and happiness of the person. Forget everything else, and just absorb into that aspiration.

The relationship between serenity and insight

The mental factors of attention, energy and concentration are always present in any meditation exercise, but they function differently in serenity (*samatha*) and insight (*vipassanā*) practices. In both practices the meditator generates a continuous flow of attention. In serenity practice, this continuous flow of attention is directed to a single object, so the mind can become fully absorbed in just that single object. This type of absorption is called absorption concentration (*appanā samādhi*). In insight practice, this continuous flow of attention is directed to a discontinuous flow of separate and discrete objects, so the mind can become absorbed in first one object and then another and then another. The mind might be absorbed in each object for only a moment, but for that moment it is fully absorbed. This type of absorption is called momentary concentration (*khaṇika samādhi*), and is characteristic of insight practice. Momentary concentration is associated with insight (*vipassanā*) because it reveals the universal characteristic of impermanence (*aniccatā*).

As we saw last week, perceiving change or impermanence is central to *vipassanā*. The Buddha said that all conditioned and formed events have three characteristics - they are impermanent or changing (*anicca*), unsatisfactory (*dukkha*) and not-self (*anattā*). When we talk about "insight" in the classical Buddhist sense, we are talking about insight into these three universal characteristics. The entry into these characteristics is through the perception of impermanence, the discontinuity of experience. When we become intimate with the fact of change we see how nothing we hang on to can give us any satisfaction, because as soon as we grasp at it, it changes into something else. When we investigate the mind-body process

we see that every aspect of it is in constant change and is inherently unstable. This fundamental instability leads us to a profound sense of insecurity. Experience is constantly changing, and we are not in control of these changes. The more we intuit this absence of control, the more we tighten up to assert control; and the more we assert control, the deeper our failure to establish it. And the “I,” the self, is the controller, the “overlord” in traditional Buddhist terms. We find ourselves caught in the floodwaters of uncontrollable change, and the insecurity inherent in this situation reveals the universal characteristic of unsatisfactoriness (*dukkha*).

Seeing deeply into impermanence and unsatisfactoriness, we then intuit the third universal characteristic, not-self (*anattā*). When the Buddha talks about “self,” he does not mean a person or a specific experience, but a relationship to any experience which is defined by identification and possession. We think we are and we own our bodies and minds. But the first two universal characteristics reveal that we cannot realistically assert identity with any aspect of experience, because anything we think we are immediately turns into something else. And we cannot realistically assert ownership of any aspect of experience, because anything we think we own is clearly out of our control. So the experience of not-self is not a specific experience, but a relationship to any experience which is defined by non-identification and letting go.

The perception of impermanence, seeing the discontinuity of experience, provides the entry into insight. All insight or clarity meditation methods are designed to reveal this discontinuity, by shifting our attention from one aspect of experience to another to another. So practising the cultivation of love (*mettā bhāvanā*) as a serenity practice, we become absorbed into just one thing: just this continuous stream of intentions, ignoring everything else; just the happiness of *mettā*, ignoring everything else. In *mettā bhāvanā* as a preliminary for the practice of insight, we spend a period of time (an hour, a day, a month, a year) developing absorption into the stream of *mettā*, and then with that foundation of deep concentration we change to investigating the mind-body process, moving from one aspect of it to another to another.

Or, we could practise *mettā bhāvanā* as the linking of serenity-insight. The same principles apply, defining the same two relationships to the meditation object, but the time spent in each relationship is a lot briefer. As we cultivate the stream of *mettā* we also monitor our own emotional responses. When we find we are resisting *mettā* by tightening against the person who is our object or the practice itself, we make that very resistance the object. Practising *mettā*, we become very sensitive to the presence of aversion in the mind. We can see clearly its painful and narrow, self obsessed quality. Making that aversion the object of meditation, even for just a brief moment, is insight, the contemplation of mind (*citta anupassanā*). Or, if we are distracted by pain in the body we switch our attention to that sensation, practising the contemplation of body (*kāya anupassanā*). We can switch quickly from absorption into the stream of *mettā* to absorption into first this aspect of the mind-body process and then another, simultaneously cultivating both serenity and insight.

So we can see that the relationship between serenity and insight can be developed and experienced in a number of ways. But in every instance we need to be clear about what we are doing. When absorbing into a single object, just that. When moving from one object to another, just that. An old Zen saying expresses it in this way: “When sitting, just sit. When walking, just walk. *Don’t wobble!*” It’s important to understand what we are doing when we are doing it, so that we can co-operate with the meditation process. Otherwise we could end up with a kind of vague and sloppy part-serenity part-insight practice in which we never really become fully absorbed into a single object, nor have a clear and sharp perception of discontinuity.