

Metta as the most useful method of meditation for people in the West today

by Jason Espada

Most people these days don't have a lot of time for meditation. They often have the stresses of work and caring for their family, as well as their relationships. These are common to all of us. From what I can tell, all methods of meditation can help with these. There are a few ways, however, that metta, or Buddhist loving kindness meditation *especially* matches our needs here and now.

The first is that it helps us to be on better terms with ourselves.

A lot of people have the problem of not liking or respecting themselves, and metta includes methods of developing kindness towards ourselves. Since we're always with ourselves, any amount of a greater acceptance, or goodwill we can generate will improve the quality of our life *right there*.

Not content with only proposing an ideal, such as 'just be kind to yourself', metta is creative in its approach to developing a sense of kindness for oneself. Although it's traditionally the first category used for cultivating metta, teachers in the West have been adapting this to meet our needs. We're encouraged to start with whoever is *easiest*, and *least complicated* for us to have feelings of kindness and well wishing for. Once we've developed some experience of directing thoughts of goodwill to them, we can return to ourself. Slowly, we can begin to offer ourselves the same quality of kindness that we direct to our most loved ones. One dear friend said that being kind to herself is like medicine. We all need and deserve this.

It's said that one of the traditional benefits of metta is that it helps us to settle comfortably, with a clear mind in meditation, with a fundamental goodwill towards ourselves. This is an important point, and one that is often overlooked in how meditation is taught and practiced in the West these days. Have you noticed?

If we are not on good terms with ourselves, we won't be able to go very deep in meditation. We may escape into fantasies to avoid what is difficult to be with, or we may develop a 'spiritual ego' that is not very stable. There's no way around this. We need kindness towards ourselves to do the

sometimes difficult work of deepening our self understanding, healing and transformation.

Another reason metta practice is especially needed by us today is that it helps us to know our connection to others. It's in our makeup that we need the support and love that comes from being connected to friends, family, teachers, and all others. In our modern society, people have become more and more isolated, and metta counters that.

We can re-awaken our connection to friends and family, and learn to have more warmth, attentiveness, goodwill and concern for all others we meet. This is pretty radical stuff because it goes directly to the quality of all our relationships.

We are so diverse here in America. It's a point of pride for us, in fact, something we identify as a real strength. The shadow side of it, however, is that we may have trouble finding common ground.

Which brings me to the third reason why I'm thinking that metta is the most useful method to know about, and practice, and share with other these days. Metta is universal. It can be taken up and understood by people everywhere.

You don't need to be Buddhist to practice metta meditation. Of course, people are free to explore the tradition this method comes from, but that's a personal matter. We should do whatever works for us, and follow the path that will lead to the fulfillment of our deepest aspirations.

I have one more reason why I'm looking at metta as having the greatest value for us today, and that is that it's the teaching and practice of what has true human value. This is the complete opposite of the materialism and self centered indulgence, narcissism, pettiness, avarice and aggression that are so common these days.

Metta is just the method we need when we meet fear and mistrust, self-denigration, and the denial of the worth and rights of others.

Metta can actually heal us, and our world, and for this reason, in times of despair, it offers hope.

I know a lot of people will appreciate how quickly we can see results from loving kindness practice. After just a week or two of regular practice, each day, in any circumstances (to and from work on the train, for example), if we are attentive, we can see an improvement in our temperament, and relationships. We may notice, for example, that we are a little more patient when standing in line at the bank, or at the post office, which is surely a gift of kindness to ourselves.

Metta is inherently enjoyable, and, together with this cycle of positive reinforcement, the practice naturally develops.

For people with an affinity with metta, it's natural that they'll want to make it a part of their whole life. As with other methods of meditation, the more we practice, the more we'll see the results.

As the Buddha taught in the Kalama Sutta, also known as the Buddhist Charter of Free Inquiry,

*Don't believe something because it sounds good,
or because it's part of a tradition;
or because a famous person said it,
or because it agrees with your opinions,
but try it out and see –
if it works to bring you greater satisfaction in your life,
greater peace, well being, and happiness,
then accept it,
cultivate that practice,
and share the benefit of it with others*

My friends, this is what I've found to be most useful for us as lay practitioners, in these times in the West. I've seen the good that can come from it, and so I'm glad to be able to share this.

May all people everywhere find methods of practice, and ways to live in this world that bring them peace, health and well being, and happiness for all their days.