

## The Great Bridge to Universal Love

Of the categories in metta, or Buddhist loving kindness practice, of self, friends and those closest to us, neutral people, those we have difficulty with, and all beings, the one that gets talked about the least is clearly the neutral person. This is understandable, after all. The dear person category is easy, and enjoyable, and everyone who takes up metta practice wants to at least lessen their aversion to the enemy category. ‘All beings’, also, feels good even just to think about. But where does that leave the group of those people we don’t know personally? As we’ll see, all the categories in metta practice are important, and have an essential role to play.

When we think about it, this category of metta for neutral people forms the bridge between those we know and care about, and those we do not, and almost certainly will never know personally. This expands the field of our metta practice immeasurably.

Of the three obstacles to metta, those of attachment, aversion and ignorance, attachment is purified, or removed by having pure metta towards dear ones; aversion is removed by cultivating metta for those we have problems with, and ignorance, manifesting here in this category as indifference and neglect, is removed by developing metta for the so-called ‘neutral person’.

I’ve thought of this last group more as – those we don’t know personally, that we see, or who are known to us, and then, those who are unknown to us. This brings it closer to home. As with the other categories of metta, there is a step-wise progression we can follow to develop well wishing and care for this entire group.

We start with those we see, and reflect on how they are like ourselves, and our family and friends too, in that they want only happiness, and not even the slightest suffering for themselves, and their friends and family. If we can meet another in this way, then they are not a stranger to us. We can treat the clerk at the convenience store as a human being, as we would want ourselves, and our loved ones to be treated.

We can tell if this is working or not by how we then respond to those we don’t know on such places as public transport. If it is working, we should be able to notice some difference in how we spontaneously feel towards them.

When we find we are warming up to these people, then we can take the next step in the practice.

From there, it's much easier to begin to extend care also to *those we don't know personally, and who we we don't meet directly* (which is by far the larger part of this category). We reflect that those people too have wants and needs, and like ourselves, friends and family, and just like those we don't know that we *do* meet, they also deserve our respect and care.

There are many ways we can extend love towards this larger group. Thinking of others can start out as a concept, but it's important that it doesn't remain there. So that it doesn't become a vague abstraction, we can always aim to learn about and become more familiar with how others are living. Organizations like Kiva can be a big help here. They facilitate micro-loans, via the internet, to people in Third World countries. There are short biographies, and pictures to help us get a more grounded sense of who's out there;

Or we could take up the cause of animal rights, basing the extension of our care on what we feel for the lives of the animals we do know and see.

We may say that the lives of those without health care in our country are not our business, *but we can make it our business*; or that the way people live in the slums of Rio, or in Kenya, or in America is none of our business, *but we can make it our business*;

We may think it's beyond us to be concerned with the availability of basic medicines in the Third World, *but we can, in fact, choose to make it our business*; we might think that Monsanto introducing untested, genetically modified food into the market, without letting people know is not our business, *but we can make it our business*;

We may not pay attention to the economies and environment in China, India, and Latin America, and how the people's lives in those places are effected, *but we can make it our business* to know and find ways to respond to it...

I know some people are bound to object here and say it's all too much, and that there are too many needs in our world to give time and attention to them all, and they do have a point. What we can do though is to take care of ourselves well, and then to identify a few causes where we feel we can make

a difference, and do what we can right there. It's important though that we don't shut out the rest of it from the overall way we see our lives. We should learn as much as we can about this whole world of living beings that we share, and then try to be responsible human beings.

One of the precepts of Thich Nhat Hanh's Order of Interbeing says, 'do not close your eyes before suffering', and *of course, this isn't comfortable*, but our humanity calls us to it. If we can live with this awareness, although we won't be able to solve every problem right away, in time we might be able to find a way to make a difference. Now isn't that something?

These are all ways we can extend metta in the category of those we don't personally know. I'm sure we can all think of other ways, if we spend some time with it. In each case, we can ask, What would love have me do here? or, How would I respond if this were happening to those I know and care about? This is what actually makes the bridge, to all-inclusive love.

I think part of why we may not give much attention to this group is because of how it's been named. I mean, 'neutral person'? – not too spicy, eh? So, I would like to kick-start the campaign to increase interest in this category, and propose 'The Great Bridge to Universal Love', or something like that. Really, I'm only half kidding here, because it *is* this, after all.

We can make others' concerns our own, and their joys and sorrows something we register, and respond to, and when we do this we find that our metta has grown by that much.

To aim to go in the direction of really having love for all is truly a most noble aspiration, and the great advantage of the method of metta practice is that it shows how we can actually accomplish this. Now, how amazing is that? Once we know the metta teachings, the way is open for those of us who want to take it.

May all beings,  
known and unknown,  
seen and unseen,  
be entirely well and at their ease,  
and may they have every happiness.