

Mindfulness meets mettā

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In classical metta practice we bring people to mind and wish them well. Often this is placed in contrast to vipassana, or mindfulness practice. However, one of the exercises in the Satipatthana Sutta – the teaching on the “Four Foundations for Mindfulness” - can be seen as a form of metta practice which is very firmly embedded in mindfulness.

In this teaching, the Buddha describes a number of exercises which bring us along the path to liberation. He starts with mindfulness of breathing and other exercises relating to the body, follows with the various feelings we experience, then the different mind-states we can notice, and ends with his core teachings, showing us how we can study these mindfully, moment after moment.

After each exercise he gives a number of options for practice. The first option – to do the exercises “internally” or “externally” – can be used as a form of metta practice. The most common interpretation is that ‘internal’ means our subjective, felt experience, while ‘external’ means knowing objectively what is happening. We can feel angry (internal practice) and also know that we are angry (external practice). Knowing experience both subjectively and objectively is the essence of mindfulness – knowing what we’re experiencing while we’re experiencing.

Another interpretation for this exercise has ‘internal’ referring to our own experience and ‘external’ to that of another person. Becoming aware of others as they walk is to practice walking meditation ‘externally’. This gives a very practical way of sensitising ourselves to others.

Say we are walking in a park. We bring awareness to sensations - the feet lifting and falling, the knees bending and straightening, the arms swinging. After a while, we broaden the awareness to notice anyone else walking nearby. Their feet are also lifting and falling ... knees bending ... To keep ourselves focussed we note “he / she is walking ... walking”. This is to practice walking meditation ‘externally’.

Sometimes it brings a sense of joy and connection to practice externally. We suddenly feel quite friendly towards whoever is walking nearby, interested in them. The link with metta is obvious here. It helps to bring attention back regularly to our own body so as to keep the meditation grounded, remind ourselves what the other person might be experiencing. This often strengthens goodwill.

Sometimes the opposite happens, we don’t want to acknowledge that others are walking nearby. It might bring up irritation, we might suddenly feel hostile to a complete stranger. Or we might feel self-conscious or shy, perhaps even intrusive, as though we’re peering into their private experience. External practice can show up underlying issues we have in relating to others, and is thus an excellent way of helping us

work skilfully with these.

It's helpful to bring awareness back inside our own body when an emotion becomes strong. This has a steadying effect. Instead of noting “he / she is walking” we note ‘irritation’ or ‘self-conscious’ or whatever word fits. As we bear with the emotion mindfully, it starts to burn out. Within a few minutes we may even feel friendly towards whoever disturbed us. This gives confidence that we can move beyond negativity triggered by interactions with others, strengthen resilience in the face of interpersonal conflict.

Practicing mindfulness externally isn't always a challenge – it can be uplifting and a bit of fun! As we're sitting on a bus, we feel our sitting posture and then reflect that others are sitting nearby. The heightened awareness of others can stir joy. When we're feeling happy, we remember that there are others who are also feeling this way. This helps to ground the happiness, prevent it spinning off into excitement and daydreams. Likewise, when we're feeling tired and worn out, we can remember that this is being experienced by many others right now. Suddenly we don't feel so alone.

The exercises offer a very practical and embodied way to strengthen our deep connection with others. Why not give them a try?

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