

***Mettā* meditation: connecting with the web of life**

by Prof. Peter Case

Aukana Trust Lecture, 11th May 2011

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We hear a great deal these days about connectivity and communication. There can be little doubt that, for those fortunate enough to have taken rebirth in the prosperous West and, indeed, for many in the developing world, ours is an information age. Computer and other digital technologies have played a crucial part in the development of mass communication and interconnection. Such technologies are ubiquitous in the contemporary world. Societies could not function without the intricate web of computer networks that facilitate everything from personal banking, word processing, personal organizers through to financial trading, insurance data bases, government systems of numerous forms, computer games, simulations, digitized music and video imaging.

A new generation of 'plugged-in' humans has emerged. On my commute to and from work by train, for instance, I'm often fascinated by just how many people are using mobile phones to connect with others at a distance, either verbally or through text messages and emails. Many people plug themselves into mp3 players to listen to music but even here there is a form of connection with others – the recording artist or author – *at a distance*. Someone told me recently that adolescent children at school are often in the habit of 'texting' their friends even when they're in the same room! Textual exchange or connection is preferred to the seemingly old fashioned act of talking to one another.

What these forms of IT-mediated communication serve to remind us is, if nothing else, that the world we inhabit is one of interconnection. In modern civilizations we have found *material* ways of establishing channels of communication based on the remarkable advances in the natural sciences and engineering. The resulting technologies enable us to contact people wherever in the world there is a satellite

signal. We keep up friends and relatives through social networking sites such as Facebook and even meet up with them virtually using Skype or audio-visual devices. But for all the extraordinary advances in digital technology there is nothing particularly new to the phenomenon of communicating at a distance. Australian aboriginals, for example, are reputed to have used telepathy on a fairly routine basis to communicate with each other over vast distances in the outback. Telepathy also forms part of the living traditions in various Shaman cosmologies throughout the world. Furthermore, *Buddha Dhamma*, the teaching of the Buddha, itself explicitly recognizes and contains detailed instruction on how to develop the psychic capacity to see, hear and communicate at a distance with other humans and non-humans. In this sense, the Internet and related communication technologies are, in effect, our own culture's version of this direct intuitive ability to communicate and connect using clairvoyance, clairaudience and telepathy.

A book which I read early on in my own spiritual journey is Fritjof Capra's *The Tao of Physics*, written in the 1970s. Capra is a western trained physicist who, through his wider studies, noticed that the truths being discovered by modern scientists seemed to coincide very closely to those expressed by mystics within ancient traditions, such as, Taoism, Hinduism, Sufism and Buddhism. When exploring the fundamental make up of the universe at the level of atomic particles, Capra observes, western scientists are being led to conclude that, ultimately, our common sense notion of what is *real* is a kind of illusion; that, in fact, the entire universe consists in interconnected space/time and energy. This conclusion follows not only from the study of quantum physics but also from the investigation of astrophysics and the scientific laws governing the birth, development and death of the innumerable galaxies in the universe. It seems that science leads us to the same insight that the ancient mystics spoke of: that we reside in an incredibly complex web of energy and life.

More recent forms of mathematics and scientific investigation based on string-theory, complexity and chaos theory, bear out the earlier findings of scientists concerning the non-dual nature of the universe. Indeed, Capra wrote another book called *The Web of Life* in which he provides an accessible account of how scientific developments are leading us to understand the interconnectedness of the universe

and, as a corollary, the interdependency and fragility of the ecosystems that make up the extraordinary planet on which we live.

Even though there are many interesting similarities between science and mysticism of the sort Capra points to, there remain *fundamental differences* between techno-scientific understandings of interconnection or non-duality and the wisdom of spiritual traditions. Most importantly, however sophisticated it may get, science is – in the last analysis – always locked into some form of *representation* or *simulation* of the universe. It is concerned with modelling and explaining reality at an *intellectual* level. Spiritual seekers, on the other hand, are never satisfied with mere models or representation; they want direct *experiential knowledge* of interconnection. Moreover, because of its history, science has to account for interconnectivity in terms of material causation, such as, gravitation force or strong and weak nuclear forces. Contemporary science is extremely unsympathetic to the possibility of direct mind-to-mind contact and would consider communication between beings of different forms in different realms the stuff of fantasy and delusion. For those who develop the requisite skill in concentration meditation, however, such mind-to-mind interaction and connectivity is known experientially to exist. As *Buddha Dhamma* teaches us through its mundane truths, there are many realms beyond this human one inhabited by other conscious entities and, moreover, there are teachers who know and can point to these realities. *Buddha Dhamma* contains detailed maps of this cosmos and instructions on the mundane skills and techniques needed to develop psychic capacities, to travel to other realms and communicate with beings there.

Here at the Aukana Trust, we teach two basic forms of meditation each of which aims to offer direct intuitive and experiential knowledge of interconnection. As you will be aware, we put greatest emphasis on *vipassana*, ‘insight’ meditation for the simple fact that it is the *one* meditation technique that leads directly to the highest knowledge of all, that is, supramundane realization of *nibanna* – Enlightenment itself. This is knowledge of the unconditioned, the unborn. It is to connect fully with the non-dual infinite and discover *that which is always already the case*. It is, in short, the ending of all suffering. Knowledge of *nibanna* removes all forms of ignorance, craving and attachment; it is knowledge that there are no separate ‘entities’, ‘beings’ or, indeed, any ‘things’ in the universe to crave or become attached to. One who

comes to this understanding knows, beyond all doubt, that there is nowhere to go, nothing more to achieve, nothing more to become. In the words of the Pali Canon, for the Enlightened person: 'Done was what was to be done; there is no more becoming such and such'.

Alongside *vipassana* meditation we also teach *mettā* – 'loving-kindness' – as an essential accompaniment to the insight training. Why? Why is it necessary to practice *mettā* when we're told that, in and of itself, it does not lead to Enlightenment knowledge. There are several interrelated reasons. If one focuses exclusively on *vipassana* it's all too easy to develop a rather selfish and instrumental attitude toward the training. Someone hell-bent on Enlightenment, as it were, will – far from reducing self-importance – find that they inadvertently reinforce their sense of ego based on a purely selfish desire to 'become Enlightened'. Now, if Enlightenment is the 'end of becoming', then we can already see that there's a major problem with this attitude. Selfish concern to get to the end of the path at any cost will actually take one in precisely the opposite direction and increase one's sense of isolation and suffering. Cultivating *mettā* on a regular and systematic basis develops a mundane appreciation of interconnectedness and opens one up to contact with others. This, in turn, helps break down the barriers between the ego and its environment. One can begin to gain direct experience of the fact that one is not separated off from other people, other animals or non-humans or, indeed, other inanimate things. It is worth bearing in mind that the Buddha Gotama, although supremely Enlightened, used to retire to his 'perfumed chamber' every day without fail to practice *mettā* and the other divine abidings. Such is the power and importance of this practice.

Mettā also encourages us to consider the welfare of others and, although it is formally an act of mental cultivation, in practice it translates in daily life into putting others' interests before one's own. In order to arrive at a point where Enlightenment becomes a very real possibility we have to develop many positive and virtuous qualities, such as, generosity, ethical discipline, truthfulness, patience, determination and even-mindedness – to mention six of the ten *parami* or 'perfections'. *Mettā* is also included as one of these perfections which someone en route to the highest knowledge must develop. So, it's important to understand that insight meditation

pursued in isolation will never be enough to complete the journey. It is also necessary to work at a practical level on reducing self-centredness.

Mettā is also one of the four *Brahma vihara* or so called 'divine abidings'; a set of meditation disciplines that are conducive to 'ease of living here and now'. In order the four are: *mettā* – loving kindness, *karuna* – compassion, *mudita* – sympathetic joy, and *upekkha* – equanimity. The Buddha provided detailed instructions on how to develop each of these practices so that practitioners could connect with, and dwell in, efficient states of mind. Of the four, *mettā* is the most important as its cultivation automatically results in the development of the other three divine abidings. So, how do we practice *mettā*? There are two basic methods. Both start with cultivating a feeling of friendliness and then either (a) directing it toward individuals or groups, or (b) moving the feeling outward spatially in graduated steps using what's called the boundless practice. Both methods can be pursued either through formal seated practice (that is, seated with eyes shut in a quiet place) or more informally while, say, sitting on a bus or train, in a waiting room, or at any other convenient opportunity. You don't have to be super concentrated to practice *mettā*.

Whichever approach is used – directed or boundless - it is important to start the formal seated practice by deciding how long you intend to do the meditation. You might devote thirty minutes or a whole hour exclusively to *mettā* or, alternatively, you might start an hour's practice by doing, say, twenty minutes of *mettā* followed forty minutes of *vipassana*. Having decided how long you intend to sit for, the next thing to be aware of is your present state of mind. Are you running ill-will, are you bored or agitated, is the mind a little flat or, on the other hand, are you in a positive mood with a buoyant and pliable mind ready to meditate? If there are hindrances present, it's good to note them and then attempt to take corrective action to establish a more efficient state of mind before starting the practice. One thing you can do is reflect on the disadvantages of anger and resentment. Think about how unhelpful it is to run ill-will; how it makes you appear ugly to others, prompts you to speak harshly and can even lead you to break things and cause harm to other beings. Having pondered the disadvantages of hatred one then reflects on the many positive benefits of loving kindness. There eleven traditional benefits of *mettā*. These include being able to sleep well, not experiencing bad dreams, being able to concentrate much better,

having a bright and pleasant complexion and being dear to both humans and non-humans. Actively thinking about the advantages of *mettā* can often be enough to brighten the mind and make it ready to do the meditation.

Once you're ready to begin the practice proper, it's important to cultivate love and friendliness toward yourself. And here we encounter another potential stumbling block as many people find it extremely difficult to feel love for themselves. One way around the problem is to begin by thinking of all the positive aspects of one's life – all the things that one has going for oneself, such as, a good job, a comfortable home, plenty to eat, loving friends and family, and so forth. Once the basic positive mental state is in place, one can then begin thinking of one's own positive qualities. This is time for blowing one's own mental trumpet mentally and refusing to dwell on negativities. As Alan once usefully put it in the words of a famous song, *mettā* is all about 'accentuating the positive, eliminating the negative and not messing with Mr in-between'! So it's important to think of the fact that, perhaps, you work hard to keep house and home together; that you are generous with your time and give to good causes; that you devote time to pursuing the meditative path, keep the precepts, practice meditation on a regular basis, and so on. All such thoughts will be conducive to cultivating love toward yourself. Once this feeling is present – and it can be vary along a spectrum of relatively weak to very strong indeed – it can be directed toward other beings.

Using the 'directed' method, the traditional way of proceeding with the meditation is to send loving-kindness first to a respected friend (typically your *kalyana-mitta* - your spiritual friend), then to a loved one (for example, a spouse, another member of the family, or close friend), then to someone about whom you feel neutral (this might be, for example, the person who serves you regularly at the local corner store or a work colleague with whom you are acquainted but who's not particularly 'close' to you), and then, finally, toward an 'enemy', that is, someone toward whom you have felt hatred in some degree or other. As you can see, the way in which *mettā* proceeds is in order of difficulty. It's fairly easy to direct friendly feeling toward a respected friend and loved one, less easy to direct it toward a neutral person and quite challenging to feel friendliness to an enemy or someone who you take to have caused you harm in some way.

Each of the *Brahma vihara* meditations have so called ‘near’ and ‘far’ enemies. These are qualities of mind that are destructive of the intention and purpose of the practice. The near enemy of *mettā* is ‘lust’ and the far enemy, hatred itself. So, for example, when directing loving-kindness toward your partner the feeling of friendliness might get corrupted by feelings of lustful or sexual desire. If you find this happening, it’s best to take the mind away from the immediate subject – your partner, say - and return it to the previous object, the respected friend. Once you’ve established friendliness correctly on this object you can try, once again, to direct it to your partner or loved one. Similarly, when practicing *mettā* toward one’s enemy – say a difficult boss – it’s relatively easy to fall into hatred. Thoughts of friendliness become subverted as the image of that person prompts one to turn over in mind the unpleasant conversation one had earlier that day and how badly done by you’ve been. Again, if this happens, simply drop the object and return it to the neutral person, or go back further down the chain. Re-establish the friendly feeling and then proceed to the next person.

There are also formal techniques of overcoming hatred in *mettā* and anyone interested in finding out more about these might like to read the chapter on *mettā* in Jacqui and Alan’s book, *A Meditation Retreat*, or read section IX of the *Visuddhi Magga* (page 323). The range of techniques – twelve in total - include, amongst others: giving a gift to the hated person (this can be done mentally in one’s imagination as well as physically), dwelling on the other person’s good qualities (there will be some if you think hard enough!), reflecting on the fact that hating someone will harm you as much if not more than the other person, or considering the hated person in terms of the ultimates of existence – from which perspective there is no other person to hate, only transient sensory phenomena which come and go with incredible rapidity. These are *skillful means* through which anger can be restrained and eventually supplanted by more efficient states of mind.

Once you’ve worked your way through the traditional four types of person, there’s no reason why you shouldn’t then go into ‘free form’, as it were, and direct *mettā* to other individual human beings; toward groups of humans, towards animals, pets and

so forth. If you have a Facebook account, why not use that as a mental reference list of people to whom you can direct loving kindness.

Mettā is, in the last analysis, a *thinking meditation*. Once you've developed the basic skill it can be useful to find ways of varying the practice and using your imagination to keep it fresh. For instance, you can invent unusual means of travel to meet the person toward whom you are practicing. Distance is no object, physical boundaries are no object to an active imagination. One meditator I knew used to picture himself on a magic carpet and whizz through the air in order to encounter various people.

In addition to the directed practice of *mettā* one can also cultivate the boundless practice. In undertaking the boundless practice, you start in exactly the same way by setting things up properly and directing friendly feelings toward yourself. Now, instead of directing that feeling toward specific individuals, you move outwardly from a point in the solar plexus in a graduated fashion. It can be useful to picture a warm, golden candle flame emanating from the one's centre and moving out to fill first the whole of one's body – filling it with feelings of friendliness to all beings in the body – then outward to fill the entire room in which one is sitting, then out again to the whole house or building, then the neighbourhood, the town or city, the country and so on into the outer reaches of the cosmos, if one so desires. If this method is employed, it's also important to bring the mind and friendly feeling back in the reverse order that one went out, as it were. So, from the galaxy to the solar system, to the planet and so on until you're back in the room and to your body and back to the solar plexus.

There is also a salutation that one can use – a formula, if you will – to assist with the boundless practice. It runs as follows: 'May all beings be well and happy, wherever they may be. Whether they are near or far away; whether large or small; seen or unseen, may all beings be well and happy. Whether they have two legs, four legs, six legs, eight legs, many legs or no legs, may all beings be well and happy. Whether they be born or yet to be born, whether they reside in a high or lowly position, may all beings be well and happy. Whether they walk or crawl, fly or swim, may all beings be well and happy, whatever they may be doing'. This salutation can be reflected upon at each stage of the spatial journey outward from the centre of the body so as to share the *mettā* with beings in a completely uninhibited and inclusive way.

As a final point regarding the boundless practice, it's also worth noting that it can be pursued using the points of the compass, that is, directing friendly feeling toward all beings to the north, south, east, west and points in between – toward all beings in heaven realms above and all beings in less fortunate realms below. Again, varying the technique from time-to-time will help keep the practice alive and vital.

Mettā really is a crucially important accompaniment to the *vipassana* path. It serves to break down barriers between beings and truly connect the meditator with the mundane universe. Speaking personally, I remember that, shortly after I first took up the training, it was the powerful effects of *mettā* that convinced me that meditation worked. As a young research student I'd been somewhat inwardly focussed. I could literally go days whilst working on a research project without speaking to a single soul. Following meditative instruction and, giving it my best shot, I tried – with no little difficulty, I might add – to cultivate *mettā* on a daily basis. Within a week or so I noticed that people would spontaneously strike up casual conversation with me, say, for example, when I went into a shop to buy a newspaper. This had simply not happened before and I was genuinely intrigued by how the meditation had brought about this tangible effect. It was one of the first lessons in the just how powerful the mind is and how *mettā* can truly break down the barriers to communication in really practical ways.

Of course, as I've already indicated, *mettā* does not lead directly to the Enlightenment; only *vipassana* – intuitive insight into the transient, unsatisfactory and non-self nature of reality – will destroy the fetters that bind us to the world of rebirth and suffering. But, when practiced effectively, *mettā* certainly has the 'flavour' of the Enlightened mind. Although it might not yet experience non-duality in its purest form, the mind filled with *mettā* nonetheless understands through direct experience that there is an intricate web of life in which all things – animate and inanimate – are totally interconnected. In that sense at least, *mettā* approaches the infinite and does wonders for breaking down the barriers between oneself and the wider universe. So in this information age of ours, my advice is not to rely solely on broadband, the Internet and Facebook. Get truly interconnected by cultivating and discovering for yourself the power of *mettā*.