



The Practice of LovingKindness

Extending Kindness and Care to Ourselves and Others

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LovingKindness practice, or *Metta*, is a process of opening our hearts.

This form of meditation is a concentration practice - one pointed attention to cultivating an unconditional and non-judgmental care and concern for ourselves, others, and all of nature. It is an expression of a deep intention for ourselves and for every living being to have the conditions in their life that will allow them to be free from suffering, to be happy, and to act skillfully with wisdom and compassion in their lives.

It may be helpful to understand LovingKindness as a form of basic kindness and friendliness, rather than "love" which normally contains elements of conditionality and attachment, such as possessiveness and sentimentality.

The Role And Importance of LovingKindness

LovingKindness holds a place of particular importance in meditative practice and psychology for a number of reasons.

Once it is established in our lives, LovingKindness acts as an environment for holding and relating to experience. It allows for a sense of initial openness and receptiveness to our experience, ourselves, and others. It tends to soften the sense of resistance and rigidity that accompanies so many of our automatic and unconscious reactions to experience. This creates the possibility of perceiving and responding to our experience in a way that has more clarity, understanding, and skillfulness.

LovingKindness also plays the role of facilitating the emergence of a set of other states of mind that become critical to the maturing of our meditation practice and to living a life of lasting peace and happiness. Specifically, it acts as the condition from which compassion, sympathetic joy for others and equanimity arise. It also contributes to the appearance of patience and tolerance. It acts as a continuing support and motivation for generosity.

The combination of these powerful and expansive mind states - generosity, lovingkindness, compassion, sympathetic joy for others, equanimity, patience and tolerance - allows the mind to be flexible, agile, and adaptable. It assists us in being in the presence of aversion, adversity, and suffering without moving into confusion and disorientation, and without going out of balance into habitual patterns of reactivity. They also create the conditions that allow the mind to experience, investigate, and work with whatever is present with greater clarity and from a more spacious and skillful perspective. This eventually leads to Insight.

It is important to understand that LovingKindness is grounded in the clear understanding that there cannot be peace in our hearts, or peace in the world, unless each of us feels safe and protected, peace and happy, healthy and strong, and is able to care for ourselves and experience our life with ease and is free from suffering. As a result, LovingKindness is not sentimental or emotional, but a firm Insight into the conditions that lead to peace and happiness, and those which lead to dissatisfaction and suffering.

An Inner Experience, Not An External Result

LovingKindness practice involves an inner experience.

In this practice, attention is focused on a series of phrases that are repeated while we attempt to touch inside ourselves the deep intention behind each phrase. Our effort is directed at becoming familiar with how this intention feels in our mind and heart. Once we begin to experience this intention and feeling, we then consciously strengthen and cultivate them.

Here are the phrases:

May I [you] be safe and protected from all types of harm and danger.

May I [you] be peaceful and happy.

May I [you] be healthy and strong.

May I [you] be able to care for myself [yourself] and live with ease in this world.

May I [you] be free [liberated].

Each of the LovingKindness phrases addresses a fundamental element of our physical, emotional, and psychological well-being and health. The presence or absence of each of these elements in our lives has a significant impact on our experience and perception of events, our understanding of ourselves, our relationships and the world around us, and the degree to which we act skillfully or unskillfully.

It can be helpful to do a simple reflection regarding the importance of each of the conditions described in the phrases to give us a better understanding of their importance and implications in our lives. For example,

When we do not feel safe and protected, if, instead, we feel vulnerable and threatened, this situation tends to generate related and reactive mind states. We tend to feel isolated, fearful, hesitant, and resistant. These related mind states act as filters which distort our perception and tend to point the mind into confusion, struggle, and dissatisfaction. This, in turn, influences the quality and skillfulness of our thoughts, decision-making, speech, and action in a negative way.

When we do feel safe and protected, on the other hand, we tend to be more open, balanced, and responsive. These mind states act as the foundation for a sense of well being and tend to point the mind towards clarity, balance, and peace. This, in turn, influences the quality and skillfulness of our thoughts, decision-making, speech, and action in a positive way.

We are not attempting to make something happen outside of ourselves in this practice. The intention of the practice is not to somehow cause someone to become, for example, healthy and strong, through our working with the LovingKindness phrases. It is, instead, to develop the internal conditions that will allow each of us to become grounded in this universal care for ourselves and others so it becomes the foundation for our engaging all experience, regardless of the external circumstances and conditions of our lives.

Forms of Practice

LovingKindness meditation is versatile in that it can be done almost any time.

In addition to formal sitting and walking practice, you can use LovingKindness practice during the day by connecting your attention, and directing the intention of the phrases, to people or animals around you. You might randomly select someone while standing in line at the grocery store; sitting in a reception area waiting for your appointment with the dentist or a physician; driving to or from work; or walking through your place of work or the park.

We can direct the phrases towards ourselves during periods of self-judgment, confusion, or strong emotions to balance and stabilize the mind and heart.

The Process

LovingKindness practice traditionally starts with one's self and then systematically works with other categories of persons based on our relationship with them. This is done in the following order:

- Oneself
- Benefactor/Mentor/Elder
- Close Friend
- "Neutral" Person
- Difficult Person or Adversary
- Categories of Beings

The formal sitting practice of LovingKindness proceeds as follows:

1. Begin by moving awareness into the body as a whole, allowing the body to let go and relax. It is important when doing LovingKindness to be in a relaxed posture and to allow the body and mind to relax as a preliminary to beginning the meditation. Once the body has begun to settle, move the attention into the sensations of the breath. Stay with the experience of each full in-breath and each full out-breath, relaxing on each out-breath.
2. Visualize the person that will be the object of the LovingKindness practice session - yourself or another person - in front of you. If you feel comfortable, move the image into the heart/chest area. If you have difficulty visualizing the person, allow a heartfelt sense of them to arise and be felt.
3. Connect, and feel connected, with this image or heart felt sense of the person. An important part of the process is to sustain this connection - to stay connected - during the meditation session. Hold this person with kindness, generosity, and genuine concern.
4. Recite the phrases, described above. With each phrase, feel the deep intention for the well-being of the person. Allow the intention behind each phrase to fill your mind and heart. Send this feeling and intention to the person.
5. At the end of the session, allow the image of the person you are working with to gradually fade. Move the attention back into the sensations of the breath. Stay with each full in-breath and each full out-breath, relaxing on each out-breath.
6. Repeat this process without interruption during the period of meditation. Check in periodically to insure that the elements of the LovingKindness process are present. It is common for our visualization or heartfelt sense of the person, or our connection with the person, to weaken during a session. When you notice this, just start over again. Allow an image or heartfelt sense to arise. Connect with the image or heartfelt sense. Feel and direct the intention behind each of the phrases to the person.

If you have difficulty starting with yourself, start with someone with whom you can create a solid *unconditional* connection. This can be someone who is alive, or someone who is no longer living. The important point is to find an object for the meditation with whom you can feel and experience the intention of the LovingKindness phrases.

Some practitioners find it helpful to imagine themselves, or others, as a baby or small child for purposes of starting the LovingKindness practice. Others find using an animal with whom they have had a relationship as an effective way to begin opening their hearts with LovingKindness practice.

It is not traditionally recommended that you begin with an immediate family member, such as a spouse, or anyone with whom you have a romantic or sexual relationship. These relationships will normally involve some element of conditionality. You can use this

group of people as an object of meditation later, once your LovingKindness practice has developed and become stable and reliable.

Practice Guidelines

Here are a number of other important guidelines for developing a LovingKindness practice:

Regular and systematic work with the practice is necessary for it to take hold. You might substitute LovingKindness in place of Insight practice one day per week or use the first or last ten minutes of your daily sitting for LovingKindness.

Don't be concerned if you initially have difficulty visualizing or having a heartfelt sense of yourself or another person; connecting with the image or heartfelt sense of yourself or another person; or with evoking a feeling of LovingKindness. This is quite common at the beginning of learning this process. This practice, like Insight practice, requires an investment of time and effort to gradually awaken this state of mind and heart.

Remember this is a concentration practice. The mind will wander and when it does, bring it gently, non-judgmentally, back to the beginning of the LovingKindness practice. Just start over again. Do this over and over again until it becomes a smooth, gentle rhythm. No need to be impatient, frustrated, or angry. Just stay focused on holding the experience with generosity, kindness, and compassion.

If negative thoughts or resistance arise, particularly with respect to the person who is the subject of your LovingKindness, bring your attention back to the intention and feeling of the LovingKindness phrases. If these negative thoughts or resistance persist, however, consider switching to another person as the object of your practice.

Do not be surprised if strong emotions arise during this practice. As LovingKindness begins to soften and melt barriers inside of us, strong emotions frequently arise. When they do, bring your attention back to the LovingKindness practice. If the emotions become so strong that they interfere with your ability to continue the practice, switch to Insight practice and experience and investigate the emotion. Once the mind has become balanced and stable, return to the LovingKindness practice.

If you have difficulty starting with yourself, start with a being with whom you can create a solid *unconditional* connection. It is not traditionally recommended that you begin with an immediate family member, such as a spouse, or anyone with whom you have a romantic or sexual relationship. These relationships will normally involve some element of conditionality.

Many people report feeling a sense of sadness, grief, or being overwhelmed at some point in practicing LovingKindness as a result of the mind comparing the conditions in the outer

world to the aspirations contained in the phrase. If this happens, recognize that the mind has moved from the inner work of cultivating the feeling and intention of the phrases to using the phrases as standard for the way things should be, or the mind wishes them to be, as a basis for comparison and judgment of the conditions of the outer world. Note that when this happens, you are no longer doing LovingKindness practice, but have moved into emotional reactivity as a result of the mind comparing and judging. As best you can, note this and return to cultivating the feeling and intention of the phrases. If the emotions are so strong as to prevent you from returning to the LovingKindness practice, shift to Insight practice to rebalance the mind by deconstructing the reactivity that is taking place.

The Discourse On LovingKindness

LovingKindness practice has its origin in the teachings of the historical Buddha and one of his discourses entitled "*The Discourse on Lovingkindness*" or "*The Metta Sutta*." The term "LovingKindness" is the English translation of the Pali word "Metta." The term "Sutta" refers to a discourse or presentation of the Buddha.

This particular discourse, which follows immediately below, provides a glimpse into the spacious intention embodied in the practice of LovingKindness.

This is what should be done
by those who are skilled in goodness,
and who know the path to peace:

Let them be able and upright,
straightforward and gentle in speech.
humble and not conceited,
contented and easily satisfied.
Unburdened with duties and frugal in their ways.
Peaceful and calm, and wise and skillful,
not proud and demanding in nature.
Let them not do the slightest thing
That the wise would later reprove.

Wishing: in gladness and in safety,
may all beings be at ease.
Whatever living beings there may be,
whether they are weak or strong, omitting none,
the great or the mighty, medium, short or small,
the seen and the unseen,
those living near and far away,
those born and to be born,
may all beings be at ease.

Let none deceive another,
or despise any being in any state.
Let none through anger or ill will
wish harm upon another.

Even as a mother protects with her life
her child, her only child,
so, with a boundless heart
should one cherish all living beings.

Radiating kindness over the entire world,
spreading upward to the skies,
and downward to the depths,
outward and unbounded,
freed from hatred and ill will.

Whether standing or walking, seated or lying down,
free from drowsiness,
one should sustain this recollection.
This is said to be the sublime abiding.

By not holding to fixed views,
the pure hearted one, having clarity of vision,
being freed from all sense desires,
is not born again into this world.

Resources

Sharon Salzberg has written a clear, helpful, and insightful book on this practice entitled *Lovingkindness: The Revolutionary Art of Happiness*. Each chapter discusses various aspects of the practice followed by specific exercises and meditation process. This is an excellent introduction to this form of practice.

Kamala Masters has recorded an excellent set of LovingKindness instructional tapes. They can be obtained through the Insight Meditation Society's Dharma Seed Tape Library. They can be ordered online at www.dharmaseed.org. The album is entitled "*Metta Series*," Number KM14. The series covers the following topics:

1. Metta practice and its benefits. Developing loving-kindness for

oneself and a benefactor.

2. The enemies of Metta: Attachment and Aversion. Developing loving-kindness for a dear friend.
3. Metta and mindfulness support each other: Developing Metta for a neutral person.
4. The dangers of anger: Developing loving-kindness for a difficult person.

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