



The Practice of LOVING-KINDNESS

By Ellen Laura

MEDITATION, THROUGH AFFIRMATIONS, VISUALIZATION OR SIMPLY LISTENING TO THE BEATS OF YOUR BREATH CAN BE MADE MORE POWERFUL WHEN LOVING-KINDNESS INTENTIONS BANISH ALL MEMORIES OF ANGER

AS THE NEW YEAR LAUNCHES, what better way to begin than with a renewed commitment to loving-kindness. During these troubled times, more people are open to learning meditation practices because they are not idealistic, but practical. A growing interest in the practice of meditation is often motivated by research on the positive health benefits. For those who approach meditation as an effective way to lower blood pressure and reduce the risk of heart disease, the attainment of emotional equanimity is a rewarding experience accompanying physiological benefits. Inner peace leads us toward forgiveness and understanding and away from hostility and war.

A primary obstacle to deeply effective meditation practice is anger and resentment, directed toward either others or oneself. We may think this is not so, since we don't have a sense of all our hatred

toward others or ourselves. But anger and resentment have their subtle sides that can be manifested in harsh judgment of our own actions and emotions and thoughts. Or those mental spears that keep arising, pointing their blades at those irritating "others" out there.

In directing loving-kindness toward ourselves and other groups of people, we are sending the same wish for well-being to all. A wish for my well-being is no different from the wish for a stranger's well-being. A wish for a stranger's well-being is no different than a wish for my own. What becomes dominant is what we all share as people, rather than how we differ.

Where to Begin

The practice always begins with developing a loving acceptance of yourself. If resistance is experienced, it is an indication that feelings of unworthiness

are present. No matter. This means there is work to be done, as the practice itself is designed to overcome any feelings of self-doubt or negativity. Then you are ready to systematically develop loving-kindness towards others.

"May we be well, happy and peaceful. May no harm come to us. May no difficulties come to us. May no problems come to us. May we always meet with success. May we also have patience, courage, understanding and determination to meet and overcome the inevitable difficulties, problems and failures in life."

These phrases are used in a loving-kindness meditation, also known as Metta practice in Buddhism. Yet the words are universal and so this spiritual practice easily can be embraced by anyone, regardless of religious affiliation.

Before we can extend authentic compassion toward others, we first must feel love. If we find our own heart is wounded or walled up, the Loving-Kindness meditation can help reconnect us to the source of love within. Once this love opens our heart and heals our pain, then we will be able to offer our genuine love and fearless compassion to others.

Here are four types of persons to develop loving-kindness towards: 1) A respected, beloved person, such as a spiritual teacher, minister or priest; 2) a dearly beloved, which could be a close family member or friend; 3) a neutral person, somebody you know but have no special feelings towards, such as a person who serves you in a shop; 4) a hostile person, someone you are currently having difficulty with.

Ways of arousing feelings of loving-kindness:

1. Visualization: Bring up a mental picture. See yourself or the person the feeling is directed at smiling back at you or just being joyous.
2. Reflection: Reflect on the positive qualities of a person and the acts of kindness he or she has done. And to yourself, make an affirmation, a positive statement about yourself, using your own words.
3. Auditory (repetition): This is the simplest way but probably the most effective. Repeat an internalized mantra or phrase such as "Loving-Kindness."

The visualizations, reflections and the repetition of Loving-Kindness are devices to help you arouse positive feelings of Loving-Kindness. You can use all of them or one that works best for you. When the positive feelings arise, shift your attention from the devices to the feeling as it is the feeling that is the primary focus. Keep the mind fixed gently on the feeling. If it strays, bring it back to the device, or if the feelings weaken or are lost, then return to the device, i.e., use the visualization to bring back or strengthen the feeling.

A beginning practice of Loving-Kindness Sit quietly and allow all the scattered aspects of your mind and energies to settle down. Acknowledge and embrace gently any suffering or struggle you become aware of. Now, remember a person from your life

who once loved you very much. (Using the image of a spiritual teacher you deeply respect can elevate this practice.) Imagine this person sitting in front of you at this very moment, extending his or her love to you once again. It's all right if you can recall only one happy memory with the person — make that memory of love your entire experience and bathe in its healing warmth.

Feel the other person's love coming toward you like warm rays of sunlight, permeating your entire being, and especially filling and warming your heart. If there is an old barrier around your heart, see it not as a massive or impenetrable wall, but as a thin, fragile layer of ice. Let the love flowing toward you melt the ice of your old hurt or fear, warming and nourishing your heart.

As this healing love comes into you, feel your heart overflowing with love and gratitude. Feel peaceful, whole, and replenished with love. Naturally, your love and gratitude go out now to the person who evoked it, wholly and unconditionally.

Expand Your Love

Once this giving and receiving of love is flowing strongly, expand the direction of your love another degree. Imagine that on either side of this person in front of you are other people in your life whom you love and cherish, and extend the same love to them — fully and joyfully. Then consider that on either side of this central person are also people you don't know very well: co-workers, shopkeepers, neighbors, even strangers you pass on the street.

Extend the same love to them, fully and wholeheartedly. Expanding your love further, consider that on either side of the central person loving you are those who irritate you, who you've been angry with, or who seem to be your enemies. Extend the same love to them, fully and unconditionally, loving and accepting them exactly as they are.

Finally, expand your love to embrace all beings. Consider now that the whole space in front of you is filled with beings throughout the universe, all forms of conscious life, including the tiniest insects, and even those who have died. Now your love is boundless and unbiased, and it shines powerfully onto each and every one, extending happiness to all existence.

Maintaining the Inspiration

As you conclude the practice, don't shake off the inspiration, awareness or limitless love it has aroused. Instead, as much as you can, continue practicing the essence of this meditation throughout your day, extending unconditional love toward yourself and everyone you meet.

This meditation can be brought in to help keep the mind open and sweet. It is a fact of life that many people are troubled by difficult emotional states in the pressured societies we live in, but do little in terms of developing skills to deal with them. Yet, even when the mind goes sour, it is within most people's capacity to arouse positive feelings to sweeten it. Buddhist psychology is based on the notion that human beings are fundamentally good. Their most basic qualities are positive ones: openness, intelligence and warmth. Buddhism views happiness as a natural outgrowth of loving-kindness and compassionate action. According to the Buddhist view, humans have problems, but they are temporary and superficial obscurations that cover over one's basic goodness.

Loving-Kindness is a meditation practice that brings about positive attitudinal changes as it systematically develops the quality of "loving-acceptance." It acts, as it were, as a form of self-psychotherapy, a way of healing the troubled mind to free it from its pain and confusion. Of all Buddhist meditations, Loving-Kindness has the immediate benefit of sweetening and changing old habituated negative patterns of mind.

Loving-Kindness is a heart meditation and should not be seen as just a formal sitting practice removed from everyday life. So take your good vibes outside into the streets, at home, at work and into your relationships. Applying the practice to daily life is a matter of directing a friendly attitude and having openness toward everybody you relate to — without discrimination.

May your heart be happy and kind. 



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