

Lovingkindness Meditation

I'm grateful to Sharon Salzberg, Tara Brach, Joseph Goldstein, and others over the years who have taught me this lovingkindness meditation.

This classic practice works by imagining yourself or someone else in your mind and then wishing yourself or them well with loving phrases that you repeat over and over, such as, "May you be happy."

Try to visualize the person or people you are wishing well. This boosts the power of the practice.

You will start with a benefactor because that is easiest. You will then go on to wish yourself well, and then to others—those you feel neutral towards all the way up to those you intensely dislike or even hate. You can end the practice with loving wishes for all of life. But you don't have to go that far. At first, you may just want to wish benefactors and yourself well. As you expand your well wishes to everyone, you will experience more of a sense of belonging to everyone. This practice helps to develop more universal compassion.

This practice can bring up painful feelings. They may highlight how much you hate yourself or someone else. If this happens, pause, breath, and allow these feelings to arise. Even though you may not FEEL loving, it is only important that you have an INTENTION to wish yourself or others well because you know this is good for you.

Don't expect to necessarily feel loving feelings with this practice. It may feel mechanical. That is OK, as long as you have a sincere intention to wish yourself and others well. Just start with the recipient (yourself or someone else), the phrase, and the intention; the feelings of love that often (but not always) come with reverence will arise with time and practice. Keep in mind

Lovingkindness Meditation

that the benefits of this practice come from your wholehearted presence and intention, not from having loving feelings. Your attitude should be of giving a gift; you are cultivating a generosity of spirit.

Don't be afraid you have to let someone hurtful into your life. This practice doesn't mean you have to do anything; You are just cultivating an inclusive, generous quality of heart apart from and in addition to feelings of dislike. You don't have to be afraid of being overwhelmed with this practice.

There are three parts to this practice. One is the phrases you will be repeating. The second is a sense of the recipient of the lovingkindness phrases, and the third is a sincere intention for the well-being of the recipient. If a feeling of lovingkindness arises, that is fine, but it is not necessary.

You may do this practice for just a few minutes or longer, as you wish and as you have time. Even a few minutes a day will benefit you.

The Lovingkindness Practice

1. Get into a comfortable, relaxed, alert position. Your eyes can be closed or have a downward gaze. You can do this and other reverence practices lying down if you are not sleepy.
2. Begin with sincerity of intention to wish yourself and others well.
3. Using your presence practice to get still, and present. Take some slow, deep, relaxing breaths. Use your breath to anchor your attention.
4. If you wish, you can close your eyes.

Lovingkindness Meditation

5. Remember, as with all these practices, your mind will wander. This is normal and completely OK. When this happens, kindly and gently return your attention back to the phrases and the sense of the person you are giving lovingkindness to. Keep in mind that it is the return of attention to the phrases that is the most important part of the practice.
6. Smile slightly, with your jaw relaxed. Sense the receptivity and openness of the smile. See if you can feel the smile in the region of your heart. Through your presence practice, invite a sense of warm openness and receptivity.
7. When you are ready, bring to mind someone who is very easy to love—a benefactor (see examples in benefactor practice). This will be someone you already feel a sense of lovingkindness for. Let it be someone who, when you think about them, lifts your spirits and makes you feel good. Remember, they don't have to be perfect (who is?)—they may have hurt you or let you down. The question is are they good enough? Have they benefitted you? You may have several benefactors. You can use one of them or different ones on different days. Sense this person's goodness. Sense what you appreciate in them. Feel in a visceral way your appreciation for them.
8. Now think to yourself, "this person wants happiness and to be free of suffering just like I do."
9. Now repeat silently one or more of the following phrases. You may want to pick two to four phrases that have the most meaning for you:
 - a. May you be filled with loving presence.
 - b. May you feel my love.
 - c. May you be free of suffering.
 - d. May you be free from ill will.

Lovingkindness Meditation

- e. May you be peaceful.
- f. May you be happy.
- g. May you awaken and be free.
- h. May you experience the natural joy of being alive.
- i. May you be filled with loving kindness.
- j. May you live with ease.
- k. May you be healthy.
- l. May you be safe.

Imagine them being filled with your good wishes. Imagine them being touched by your love

10. Now bring into awareness your own life. Sense the goodness in yourself that you want to appreciate. Sense yourself in you can through the eyes of another who loves you. Sense the desire to know truth, to awaken. Offer the loving kindness prayer to your own being. Put your hand on your heart. Then repeat one or more of the following phrases:

- a. May I be filled with loving presence.
- b. May I feel my love.
- c. May I be free of suffering.
- d. May I be free from ill will.
- e. May I be peaceful.
- f. May I be happy.
- g. May I awaken and be free.
- h. May I experience the natural joy of being alive.
- i. May I be filled with loving kindness.
- j. May I live with ease.

Lovingkindness Meditation

- k. May I be healthy.
- l. May I be safe.

Repeat the phrases with a smile and with sincerity of heart. If you notice self-hatred and an inability to feel caring for yourself, just notice this and focus on your INTENTION to give lovingkindness to yourself despite the experience of self-hatred. You may want to imagine yourself at different ages and give loving kindness to yourself at those ages; it may be easier at first to experience lovingkindness for yourself when you were an innocent child.

11. Now bring to mind someone who is hurting, or who is having a difficult time. Take a moment to reflect on what you appreciate about them. What arouses your care? Sense their aliveness. Sense their heart. Sense their pain. Also sense their wholeness beneath their pain. Attempt to be present with this pain without being overwhelmed. Freely give your well wishes and care for them while letting go of any need to control them or any demand that they feel better. Let this be a practice for you develop the capacity to not turn away from another person's pain—from not “changing the channel.” This practice is an act of will for developing compassion and equanimity.

12. Now think to yourself, “this person wants happiness and to be free of suffering just like I do.”

13. Then, silently repeat one or more of the following phrases:

- a. May you be filled with loving presence.
- b. May you be free of suffering.
- c. May you be free from ill will.
- d. May you be peaceful.

Lovingkindness Meditation

- e. May you be happy.
- f. May you awaken and be free.
- g. May you experience the natural joy of being alive.
- h. May you be filled with loving kindness.
- i. May you live with ease.
- j. May you be healthy.
- k. May you be safe.

14. Now, if you want, bring to mind a neutral person. It may be a stranger. It may be someone you see at work but don't know well. It may be a person at a store. It may be a neighbor. Get a sense of being on the same team with them. Get a sense of your connection to them as part of the human family. See if you can feel a sense of "we" and togetherness. Look closely at them in your mind's eye. Make an intention to connect with them. As you do this, see that lovingkindness arises from paying attention to them. Reflect on the fact that we all want to be happy. We all want to be loved. We all want to belong. We all want to be free of pain. Sense our shared universal vulnerability.

15. Think to yourself, "This person wants happiness and to be free of suffering just like I do."

16. Then, as you imagine them as a sacred living being, offer them one or more of the following phrases:

- a. May you be filled with loving presence.
- b. May you be free of suffering.
- c. May you be free from ill will.
- d. May you be peaceful.
- e. May you be happy.

Lovingkindness Meditation

- f. May you awaken and be free.
- g. May you experience the natural joy of being alive.
- h. May you be filled with loving kindness.
- i. May you live with ease.
- j. May you be healthy.
- k. May you be safe.

17. Now, if you want, bring to mind someone successful. Note if there is any envy, jealousy, or resentment. Don't be ashamed or embarrassed about anything that arises in awareness. Reflect on any sadness or regret you may feel about not being as successful. Note this with compassion. See if there is an idea that they have taken away something from you. Note if there are any negative comparisons of yourself to them. Also note that everything is impermanent, and they will experience the pains of loss and adversity, as we all do. Sense both their sacredness and their vulnerability. See if you can sense within yourself any feelings on happiness for their success as you do this practice.

18. Think to yourself, "this person wants happiness and to be free of suffering just like I do."

19. Then silently repeat to yourself one or more of the above lovingkindness phases. As you do so, hold them in your mind and focus on your intent to offer them lovingkindness.

20. Now, if you want and are ready, bring to mind someone who is difficult, someone you feel mixed towards, or someone you dislike or even hate. Maybe it is someone who you find annoying. Do not attempt this practice

Lovingkindness Meditation

until you feel ready; you don't want to force this practice with someone who has deeply hurt you if you don't feel a willingness to forgive them, move on, and wish them well. You may want to have developed an abiding sense of lovingkindness for yourself before you extend your lovingkindness to difficult or harmful people. As you do this practice, you will develop strength and clarity. As this happens, you will develop your capacity to give lovingkindness without hatred to hurtful and destructive people. To begin, you will want to start with a mildly difficult person. If you feel distress in this practice, go back to offering lovingkindness to yourself. Remember that you are doing this practice not only for others, but also for your own happiness and wellbeing. Don't try and force any special feeling. You don't have to like them. You may notice there are judgments about them. That is OK. The practice is to include them in your field of lovingkindness because they too are sacred living beings who may be sick or impaired in harmful ways. As you do this practice, see what happens when you wish for them to come out of their own suffering. You might want to imagine them as an infant; that will help you tap into their original innocence and innate goodness before they were shaped by their conditioning. As you do this practice, notice with time if there is an emergence of a sense of connection. Think to yourself, "this person wants happiness and to be free of suffering just as I do." Silently repeat to yourself one or more of the above phases. As you do so, hold them in your mind and focus on your intent to offer them lovingkindness.

21. Now, if you want, you can give lovingkindness to a group. It may be your family, friends, your community, marginalized people, people living in poverty, or any other group you care about. With time you can expand your group to include all of humanity and ultimately to all of Life. As you do this practice, you will gradually experience a greater sense of interconnectedness

Lovingkindness Meditation

with all of Life. This practice is not about liking everyone, but of sensing that we are part of a whole. You can and should include yourself in giving lovingkindness to all living creatures. Think to yourself, “these people want happiness and to be free of suffering just like I do.” Silently repeat to yourself one or more of the above phases. As you do so, hold your group or all of life in your mind and focus on your intent to offer them lovingkindness.

22. Finally, at the end of this practice, attend to the quality of loving care itself. Extend your care to all of Life. Extend lovingkindness to all living beings. Send a wish for the healing of our world.

If you suffer from self-criticism or self-hate, this lovingkindness practice is a good practice for beginning to counter hatred with self-compassion and self-kindness. You may not notice any changes in your consciousness right away; it may take a few weeks or even months of consistent practice for you to notice your consciousness becoming kinder. If you think about it, it makes sense that it would take some repetition for new neural networks to develop that counter the years and years of hurt and negative judgments we have absorbed and endured. Consistent, repetitive practice promotes positive mental reprogramming.

© 2021 Michael McGee