

SESSION 27: Lovingkindness

WELCOME

Welcome again to our course on realizing a life of love! It's good to be with you!

If you're new to this course, I strongly recommend that you review the first ten sessions because they make up the core foundation. You'll need this to benefit from the remaining sessions.

SO LET'S GET STARTED

Again, as a reminder, the 3 As of awakening are *Attending*, *Appreciating*, and *Acting* with love. Attending leads to appreciation, which then leads to skillful loving action. Appreciation has two meanings, however: both understanding the nature of things and understanding the value or sacredness of Reality. Both of these aspects of appreciation arise from careful attending. Together, the twin practices of Attending and Appreciating, called "Appreciative Attending," generate wisdom and reverence, which enable us to fulfill our purpose—to nurture and savor Life. Inspired by reverence for Life, we can then take *Action* to benefit all of Life—others and ourselves—with a loving heart, while enjoying each brief and precious moment of existence.

In our last session we discussed the practice of assertiveness. I hope you've had a chance to review this lesson and begin to incorporate some of the practices for skillfully asserting yourself.

Today we will be practicing a powerful meditation for developing lovingkindness and compassion for ourselves and others. It is called the lovingkindness meditation.

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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 the other person well with loving phrases that you repeat over and over.**

Try to visualize the person or people you are wishing well. This boosts the power of the practice. You will **start with a benefactor** (someone else you want to send lovingkindness to) because it's easier than bestowing it on yourself. Then, you will **go on to wish yourself well, followed by others you feel neutral toward, and finally, those you dislike.** 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 develop more universal compassion.

Know that this practice can bring up painful feelings, however, such as self-hatred or anger toward others. If this happens, pause, breathe, and allow the feelings to come. 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 it's good for you.

Don't expect to necessarily feel loving feelings with this practice. It may feel mechanical. That's OK as long as you have a **sincere intention.** Just start with the recipient (yourself or someone else), the phrase, and the intention. The feelings of love that often come with reverence will arise with time and practice. Keep in mind that the benefits of this practice come from your wholehearted presence. **Your attitude should be of giving a gift.**

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Also, don't be afraid that this practice means you have to let someone hurtful into your life. Not at all. You're simply cultivating an inclusive, generosity of spirit apart from and in addition to feelings of dislike.

There are three parts to the practice: (1) the phrases you will repeat; (2) a sense of the recipient; and (3) a sincere intention for the well-being of the recipient.

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, and alert position. Your eyes can be closed or have a downward gaze. You can do this and other reverence practices while laying down if you aren't sleepy.
2. Begin with the sincerity of intention to wish yourself and others well.
3. Use the presence practice to get still and present. Take some slow, deep, relaxing breaths, and use your breath to anchor your attention.
4. 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**. What's most important is returning your attention to the phrases.

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5. When you're ready, bring to mind someone who is very easy to love—a benefactor (see examples in the benefactor practice). This will be someone you already feel 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: 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 your appreciation for them in a visceral way.
6. Think to yourself, "this person wants happiness and to be free of suffering just like I do."
7. **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.
 - 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 lovingkindness.
 - j. May you live with ease.
 - k. May you be healthy.
 - l. May you be safe.

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

9. Now, bring into awareness your own life. **Sense the goodness in yourself that you want to appreciate.** Sense yourself, if you can, through the eyes of another who loves you. Sense the desire to know truth and to awaken. Offer the lovingkindness prayer to your own being. Put your hand on your heart, and 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 lovingkindness.
- j. May I live with ease.
- 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 lovingkindness to yourself at each of those ages. It may be easier at first to feel it for yourself when you were an innocent child.

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10. Bring to mind someone who is hurting or who's 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 becoming overwhelmed by it. 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 to **develop the capacity to not turn away from another person's pain—to not “change the channel.” This practice is an act of will for developing compassion and equanimity.**
11. Think to yourself, "this person wants happiness and to be free of suffering just like I do."
12. Then, silently repeat one or more of the following phrases:
 - a. May I 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.
 - f. May you awaken and be free.
 - g. May you experience the natural joy of being alive.
 - h. May you be filled with lovingkindness.
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13. 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.

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

15. 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.
 - f. May you awaken and be free.
 - g. May you experience the natural joy of being alive.
 - h. May you be filled with lovingkindness.
 - i. May you live with ease.
 - j. May you be healthy.
 - k. May you be safe.

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16. 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 a belief that they have taken something from you. Note if you're comparing yourself to them and coming up short. Also, notice 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 of happiness for their success as you do this practice.
17. Think to yourself, "this person wants happiness and to be free of suffering just like I do."
18. Then, silently repeat to yourself one or more of the lovingkindness phrases. As you do so, hold this person in your mind and focus on your intent to offer them lovingkindness.
 - 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.
 - f. May you awaken and be free.
 - g. May you experience the natural joy of being alive.
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19. If you want and are ready, bring to mind someone who is difficult or someone you dislike or even hate. Maybe it's someone you find annoying. **Do not attempt this practice 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.** I suggest developing an abiding sense of lovingkindness for yourself before you extend your lovingkindness to difficult or harmful people. As you do this practice, however, you will develop strength and clarity. You will increase your capacity to give lovingkindness without hatred. To begin, start with a mildly difficult person. If you feel distress, go back to offering lovingkindness to yourself. Remember that you're doing this practice not only for others, but also for your own happiness and wellbeing. Don't try to force any special feelings. You don't have to like the person. You may notice judgments about them. That's OK. The practice is to include them in your field of lovingkindness because they, too, are a sacred living being 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.
20. Think to yourself, "this person wants happiness and to be free of suffering just as I do."
21. Silently repeat to yourself one or more of the phrases. As you do so, hold them in your mind and focus on your intent to offer them lovingkindness.

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- 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.
 - f. May you awaken and be free.
 - g. May you experience the natural joy of being alive.
 - h. May you be filled with lovingkindness.
 - i. May you live with ease.
 - j. May you be healthy.
 - k. May you be safe.
22. If you want, give lovingkindness to a group. It may be your family, friends, 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. You will gradually experience a greater sense of interconnectedness 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 when giving lovingkindness to all living creatures.
23. Think to yourself, "these people (beings) want happiness and to be free of suffering just like I do."
24. Silently repeat to yourself one or more of the phrases. As you do so, hold your group or all of Life in your mind, and focus on your intent to offer lovingkindness.

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

25. 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 beginning to counter self-hatred with self-compassion and self-kindness. 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 pathways in your brain to develop that counter the years and years of hurt and negative judgments you have absorbed and endured. Consistent, repetitive practice promotes positive mental reprogramming.

OUR NEXT SESSION

In our next session, we'll be discussing the love practice of affirming both ourselves and others.

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In the meantime, between now and then, I encourage you to do the following:

1. Continue your daily presence practice—both a period of silence, solitude, and stillness in the morning and your practice of stillness in motion through the day.
2. Start your day with a morning intention to love. You might want to recite a daily intention in the form of a prayer as in the dedication to love prayer in the meditations in the resource section of my website.
3. Practice appreciative attending. Inquire deeply into your experience with a kind, curious eye, especially if you're in pain. Ask, "what is this?" and affirm, "this is sacred." Continue to let go of negative judgments as they arise.
4. Practice the Lovingkindness meditation over the next week for 5-15 minutes or more. Add it to your presence practice. Remember to start with a benefactor and with yourself before moving on to others.

Please take some time after our session today to share your reflections with your fellow members of the WellMind community and to read what others have to say as well. Let us share and support each other in our exploration of love!