Teaching Meditation 3: Loving-kindness

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‘May I be filled with loving-kindness
   May I be well
   May I be peaceful
   May I be happy’  

Abstract

The Buddhist meditations on loving-kindness have been adapted for use in a secular context. How to teach and do loving-kindness meditations are described. Loving-kindness is used as both a type of meditation and a valuable quality that is cultivated; it can be an antidote to negative thoughts, and a foundation for a kinder relationship to yourself and others.

Five meditations are described: (1) concentration on loving-kindness, (2) a visualisation filling the self and space with loving-kindness, (3) directed it to a part of the body, (4) directing loving-kindness to other people, (5) directing loving-kindness equally to all categories of people, and (6) a modern version of one of the original meditations on loving-kindness.

Introduction

We are too harsh on ourselves when it would be more useful to be kind. We can become kinder by meditating on loving-kindness. Kindness can become a foundation for our thoughts, emotions, and actions. It can be used as an antidote to negative thinking, anger, and frustration. We can replace unhealthy thoughts and feelings with kind thoughts and feelings. Loving-kindness can be directed towards ourselves and others and even the entire world and all who live in it. It can also be used as the focus for concentration meditations.

Many of our attitudes and beliefs discourage loving-kindness. For example: “no pain no gain”; pushing when pausing would be more wise, fighting when peace would be more wise, opposition when cooperation would be more wise. When people’s lives go wrong they tend to respond by harshly criticising themselves, then not only are their lives going wrong they are being harshly criticised — creating a double burden for themselves. Of course, we do this with good intensions not realising that too much criticism can paralyse. Also, people can believe they do not deserve to feel okay until their lives are okay and yet, often the reverse is true; people need to feel okay for their lives to work properly. Loving-kindness is a useful way to do this.

Loving-kindness 1: Concentration

Loving-kindness can be cultivated in many ways. It can be cultivated by using a poem: “May I be filled with loving-kindness / May I be well / May I be peaceful / May I be happy”. The image of a parent caring for their child can be used. The poem can be blended with the image of the sun radiating the reddish glow the sun gets when it is setting on a hot summers day, as an image for loving-kindness. Some people just use the first line of the loving-kindness poem; some people change the words to suit them. The word loving-kindness then becomes the meditation object it becomes a Meditation Word. The main thing is to contact loving-kindness in whatever way you are able, then cultivate it and use it. I first teach the poem then the other methods.

We can use the loving-kindness poem as the meditation object in the Four Stage Meditation Cycle (O’Donoghue, 2009) so that: Stage One is focusing attention on the loving-kindness poem; Stage Two is wandering attention away from the poem; Stage Three is realising that attention has wandered; Stage Four is returning attention to the loving-kindness poem.

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1 Adapted from Kornfried, 1994, p.20.
For some people the poem works better as a meditation object than the breath because the poems wordy nature gives their mind more to hold onto making it easier to concentrate on and to block out discursive thoughts. For them, it is easier to replace the chattering mind with the poem rather than replacing it with the breath. For other people loving-kindness works better because they are more attracted to loving-kindness than the breath, therefore it is easier for them to concentrate on loving-kindness. It is best to use a meditation object that is easier to stick to.

The more you practice the better you get; the more you practice loving-kindness the easier it is to contact that quality and the deeper you sink into it. This occurs over time, even a lifetime. Just repeating the poem changes you. It is a psychological process where any resistance to kindness comes up and is slowly dissolved. When doing this meditation I can feel tensions in my body, which I believe, are a subtle resistance to the poem’s intent and as I keep repeating the poem those tensions slowly dissolve as I open up to loving-kindness.

When teaching this meditation I say a phrase aloud, and ask people to repeat it in their thoughts. If I see that anyone is struggling or upset I say “If you are feeling uncomfortable just open your eyes and quietly move your body around and that will bring you out of the meditation.” If this has the desired effect I keep on with the meditation if not I stop the meditation.

The Language of Loving-kindness

Loving-kindness is a translation for the Pali word metta; Pali is the language that the talks of the Buddha were recorded in. Other translations are: kindness, friendliness, and good will. Loving-kindness was useful for myself but when I started to teach it I was not sure how people would react to meditating on loving-kindness. Few people have reacted negatively to loving-kindness. Resistance to kindness can arise because kindness contradicts some people’s beliefs about how best to motivate themselves, for example, by pushing, working hard, or “pulling up your socks”. When people believe these are the best responses to difficulties, then loving-kindness may be seen as promoting self-indulgence, laziness, or giving up. However, I believe that kindness is often a more effective and supportive foundation for change.

Some people do not like the word “love” in loving-kindness. Many depictions of “love” in romance novels and movies have cheapened the word. Other people are simply uncomfortable with love. I think it is more important to reclaim the legitimate use of the word love and I believe love is something we should all become comfortable with. Thus I continue to teach loving-kindness.

If you have done affirmations, or some forms of goal setting, then, you might object to the use of the word “may” that prefaces each of the four phrases in the loving-kindness poem. There are times, when as a therapist, I encourage definiteness of purpose. “I will try to go to bed on time so that I can get up on time” is a bit weak for a student who habitually stays up late, sleeps in, does not attend lectures, and is failing. I might encourage such a student to “go to bed on time and get up no matter what” and to think, “I will go to bed on time”. But in other psychological contexts, for example, “I will be happy” can bring a person into conflict with their experience. If they are unhappy a more gentle “may I be happy” is more likely to lead them one step at a time to more happiness rather than the strongly intended “I will be happy”. The attempt to overpower emotions is not always helpful or productive. Definiteness of purpose has its places but is not necessarily useful in the cultivation of kindness as it contrasts too greatly with the nature of kindness. On the other hand if you still prefer the definite “will” as in “I will be filled with loving kindness” then do so.

Another objection is that it sounds “too religious” as if we are asking God to fill us with loving-kindness, but this is not what is meant. I believe that psychologically to wish for kindness brings about a useful change in attitude and intention. When a person shifts from “I am useless” to “I will be filled with loving-kindness” that is a useful change.

I decided that loving-kindness was a good thing and that I am going to unashamedly talk about it and teach it. It is the lack of kindness in people’s lives and our culture that are the source of some of these negative reactions, so in spite of those reactions I will continue to promote loving-kindness.
Loving-kindness 2: Visualisation

This meditation combines the poem, a visualisation, and the feeling generated by the poem and visualisation. The poem can be accompanied by a visualisation. In our minds we see images, talk to ourselves, and feel things, however, we are usually better at one of these than the other. We should emphasise the aspect of this meditation that is natural to us: the image, the words, or the feeling and allow the other aspects to operate in the background. The meditation is on the CD, Meditation Works (O’Donoghue, 2008)

Imagine before you a sun, it is not hot it is pleasantly warm, it has the soft reddish glow the sun gets when it is setting on a summer evening. This is the light of loving-kindness. Imagine the sun shining on you so your whole body is covered with loving-kindness. It is not too hot but pleasantly warm. The sun then shrinks to the size of a tennis ball and rests in your heart. Loving-kindness then fills your whole body.

As it fills your body whatever you experience can begin to dissolve into loving-kindness. You do not have to make this happen it will happen naturally of its own accord. Any thoughts, images, memories, tensions, or sensations - let them slowly dissolve into loving-kindness. Loving-kindness fills your chest, shoulder blades, shoulders, down the arms to the hands - the whole arms. Loving-kindness radiates up the neck, fills the head, soaks into the eyes, jaw sockets, tongue, face - whole head. Move back to the heart. Loving-kindness dissolving any tension in the stomach muscles, the whole pelvic region, buttocks, lower back, middle back, upper back, the spinal column - whole back. Loving-kindness now fills the whole torso. Loving-kindness fills the thighs, knees, lower legs, ankles, feet - whole legs. Your whole body from the top of the head to the soles of the feet is now filled with loving-kindness. Allow loving-kindness to fill all the organs of the body. Soak your bones and joints with loving-kindness.

Allow loving-kindness to pass thought the skin, so that, you are resting in a sphere of loving-kindness. Your body is filled with loving-kindness, and it is surrounded with loving-kindness.

The loving-kindness poem can be interspersed within this visualisation wherever it seems appropriate. The meditation does not need to be done in the exact order I use; it can be done in whatever way feels natural.

Loving-kindness Filling Space

In this meditation we take loving-kindness out from ourselves one step at a time to fill the world. The meditation goes through these stages: self, room, city, state, country, earth. As a preliminary to this meditation it is helps to generate loving-kindness, this can be done with the poem, or the previous visualisation.

May I be filled with loving-kindness. May I be…

May this room ...; May this city ...; May this state ...; May this country... May the earth ...;

If you wish then you can reverse the order or leave it at that point.

This meditation can be extended out to include the solar system, universe, and infinity. I do not do this in a class because if a person has a very vivid imagination it can be disturbing to imagine these domains, therefore, I tell people about this possibility and encourage them to experiment with it themselves if they wish.

Loving-kindness 3: for a Part of the Body

We can use loving-kindness for tension, pain, injuries, or when we are ill. We start by directing loving-kindness to one part of the body. To lay a foundation for this meditation it is helpful to first generate loving-kindness, which can be done by using any of the earlier meditations. The instructions for this meditation are:

We are going to direct loving-kindness to a part of the body. Could you select one part? It could be a part that is tense, or is painful, or where you have an injury, or a part of the body you do not feel good about and it would be better if you felt good about it.

Select a part.

Now have a sense that loving-kindness is being directed more intensely to that part. “May that part be filled with loving-kindness, may it be...”. (Do this at least three times in a class but in private it can be done many times.)
If you get tense, upset, or frustrated while doing this meditation then shift to doing loving-kindness for yourself until you feel okay.

Now to finish we spread loving-kindness more evenly throughout the body and do loving-kindness for ourselves again. This diffuses any tension that may have been caused by directing loving-kindness to one part of the body only. “May I be filled with loving-kindness, may I be ...”.

When we are ill or injured and we have to live with discomfort or pain we tend to be frustrated and impatient with ourselves, or the parts of our bodies that are injured. Frustration and impatience are subtle forms of aggression and aggravate sickness and injuries. This aggression is a part of unhealthy attitudes towards being ill. You may have been told to “soldier on”, that is, ignore it, don’t give in to it, do not care for yourself, act as if you are in a war zone and will be killed if you stop fighting. While these may be useful reactions if you are in a war zone, they are not useful when you are not in a war zone. Loving-kindness provides a healthy antidote to these habitual and damaging responses.

When I feel unwell I want to ignore it. I want it to not happen! I want to do the things I had planned to do based on good health. However, eventually I start to do loving-kindness for myself. Then, I start to be a little more careful of myself and to care for myself. Out of kindness for myself I might have a hot bath, eat some healthy food, do quiet things, cancel previous plans, go to bed early, not go to work if I am still sick in the morning, or visit a Medical Practitioner. I take kindness as an antidote.

We do not like being injured. We do not like the discomfort or pain and we dislike not being able to do what we could do before the injury. We get frustrated and angry. Which only adds to the burden of the injury. It can even cause us to aggravate the injury slowing the recovery, or even re-injure ourselves by not taking proper care.

I have a knee injury from running and I use loving-kindness to manage it. The injury was not bad enough to need surgery but I need to manage it by keeping the muscles strong, the tendons flexible, and not doing things that will injure my knees in other words treating them with care.

Sometimes my knees are painful. Initially I do not pay much attention to the pain. There might be a low level of irritation with my knees or the pain in them. This level of irritation takes the form of ignoring the pain. This ignoring can grow into a frustration with having to be bothered by my knees yet again — a wish that I did not have to spend time and effort looking after my knees.

At some point, if the pain does not go away, I realise that I need to do something about my knees. This is often before I can imagine doing something or before I can bring myself to do what needs to be done, I do loving kindness for my knees: May my knees be filled with loving-kindness / May … I just keep saying the poem. I do not try to change my behaviour. I just give kindness to my knees. I then start to notice that my stepping is a bit hard — the frustration is taking the form of striking the ground more firmly than I need to. After generating kindness I will be a bit gentler in how I contact the ground with the heel of my feet. I walk with a bit more care and gentleness. I might even walk slower.

When I get home I will treat my knees with more care. I might gently rub them, rather than rubbing them with annoyance. Then I might do the exercises that strengthen my knees. Although the proper physical care is important I believe this is more likely to follow when the proper psychological attitude of kindness is initially generated and then sustained.

People with work injuries do not like being injured and wish to return to work as soon as possible. They want to do what they could before the injury. Sometimes they dislike being injured so much that they ignore their injury and unintentionally re-injure themselves. What they need is kindness and I talk about having a kind attitude towards their injury, encouraging acceptance that their body cannot do what it could do before they were injured. I explain why their impatience can lead to a slower recovery and how kindness can help in the recovery they seek. Where appropriate I teach the loving-kindness meditation.

Illness, injury, tension, and pain all feel unpleasant. Our habitual reaction is to pull away from unpleasant feelings. This reaction causes a secondary tension. Then, not only is there the primary pain, our reaction of dislike becomes a secondary pain. This sometimes takes the form of tightening around the primary injury. Loving-kindness can reduce this secondary pain.

Pain can be valuable, for example in giving us the message “I do not want to injure myself again so I will be more careful”. Ignoring this message can be a dangerous reaction to pain. If in fact you do need to go
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to a medical doctor, then just doing loving-kindness is not enough when going to the doctor will be the kind thing to do. We should all face illness, injury, tension, and pain with kindness.

**Loving-kindness 4: I, We, You, and All**

We have learnt to do loving-kindness for ourselves, the whole world, to direct it towards a part of our bodies, and now we will learn to do loving-kindness for other people. We can direct loving-kindness to a specific person by naming them, imagining them, or while they are present. We do this by directing the loving-kindness poem, visualisation, or feeling to other people: *May you be filled with loving-kindness...* or *May [a person’s name] be filled with loving-kindness...* This can be used to mend relationships, for people we are concerned about, to overcome our dislike or anger for a person. I have done loving-kindness for audiences before giving a talk, for clients, for colleagues I have had conflict with, a partner I was arguing with, and while sitting with a sick person in hospital. I do not believe this magically or mysteriously changes anything but it can change our attitude to others and that can change how we relate to them. We can also direct it to categories of people such as ‘you’, ‘all beings’, or people who are in a physical location.

I teach people how to generate loving-kindness for four categories of people: (1) yourself, (2) another person, (3) both yourself and another, and (4) all beings; then reverse the order (5) both yourself and another, (6) another person, and (7) yourself. The first time I teach this I get people to say each phrase three times. The words I use are: (1) *May I be filled with loving-kindness; May I be well; May I be peaceful; May I be happy.* / (2) *May you ... / (3) May we ... / (4) May all beings ... // (5) May we ... / (6) May you ... / (7) May I ...*

There are dangers in using loving-kindness towards other people. If kindness to others is not balanced by kindness to ourselves then our ability to be kind cannot be sustained. A person who is all giving might become so exhausted that they struggle to cope and are no longer able to give. Some people realise they cannot go on like this so they decide they must be “selfish”, hardening themselves against their natural tendency to be giving because they can no longer sustain it. They have swung from the extreme of being all giving to the other extreme of no giving — “selfish”. It is hard to keep being selfish, particularly if you are a caring person. At some point these people weaken and revert to being all giving, until that is again no longer sustainable.

When this happens I like to have a conversation about how neither is sustainable. I explain how it is good to be caring but that many caring people have a lesson to learn about how to be caring without being destroyed. I point out that they need to include themselves in the caring and how caring for themselves helps them to keep caring for others. It can assist if people do not think of self-care as a selfish act but as a strategy to enable them to go on being kind and helpful. I like to use the example of a tomato plant. Is it selfish because it needs water and nutrition for it to produce fruit? Or is this the kind of caring needed to produce fruit. Kindness is so valuable that we should not allow others to abuse it. For a more detailed discussion about swinging between unsustainable extremes and using a middle way to escape this, see O’Donoghue (2002).

Just as we can give too much, too much can be taken from us. When being used, abused, or bullied it is important to be careful how you use loving-kindness. In an abusive relationship someone can manipulate our natural tendency to be helpful in a way that is damaging to us.

If you are in an abusive relationship using loving-kindness for the abusing person can reinforce an unhealthy dynamic of giving while the other person takes. When this is happening I warn against using loving-kindness for the other person, instead, I suggest using loving-kindness for yourself. As you become kinder to yourself you are more likely to look for ways to escape an abusive relationship.

**Loving-kindness 5: Equally for All**

Another version of this meditation teaches us to generate loving-kindness for four classes of people: oneself, a friend, a neutral person, and an enemy or person you dislike (Buddhaghosa, 1975). Once you have done it for each of these classes of people, you generate loving-kindness equally for all four classes of people. I do not teach this in my secular meditation classes. When I first did loving-kindness for someone I disliked it seemed so “against the grain” that I felt exhausted and had to stop and lay down on my bed to recover. However, once this reaction eventually stopped it became a useful meditation. To
generate loving-kindness for someone you do not like is so counter intuitive for many people that even
the idea is disturbing. I do not believe it is useful to disturb people with this. I explain this meditation very
lightly, even with a joke, by saying that I have used it while watching television for politicians who I
“hate”. By presenting it this way people become aware of this use of loving-kindness and are free to use it
if they want.

I have also found it helpful to do loving-kindness for activities I find difficult:

- may the dishes be filled with loving-kindness;
- may cleaning be filled with loving-kindness;
- may writing be filled with loving-kindness;
- may sleep be filled with loving-kindness …;
- may exercise be filled with loving-kindness …;
- may work (case notes) be filled with loving-kindness ….

Loving-kindness 6: The Buddha’s Words on Loving-Kindness

I like to introduce some of the Buddha’s original words on loving-kindness so that people know where
this tradition of loving-kindness came from. I read this discourse aloud asking people to place themselves
in a mild meditative state while listening to the words. Rather than think about the precise meaning of the
words I suggest that people just let them pass through, while they get a general feel for the words, and to
get the precise meaning later when they can read the discourse.

May I be skilled in goodness / And know the path of peace. / May I be able and upright / Straightforward and
easy in speech / Gentle and not proud / Contented and easily satisfied / Having few duties and living simply /
Peaceful and calm and wise and skilful / Not proud or demanding. / May I not do the slightest thing / That
the wise might fault. / 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 long or large, 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. / May I not deceive another / May I not despise beings in any state. / May I not through anger or ill-will / Wish
harm upon another. / Just as a parent protects with their life / Their child, their only child / So with a boundless heart / May I
cherish all living beings / Radiating loving-kindness over the entire world / Spreading upwards to the skies / And downwards to the depths / Outwards and unbounded / Freed from hatred and ill-will. / Whether standing or moving, seated or lying down / Free from drowsiness / May I sustain loving-kindness. / This is the sublime abiding. / By not holding to wrong views / The pure-hearted one, having clarity of vision / Being freed from greed / Is awakened².

In one course a participant preferred reading this discourse to all other meditations taught. For them the
more wordy nature of the discourse was more engaging than other forms of meditation.

I made a recording of the discourse and put it on my MP3 player. For one month just listening to that was
my main meditation practice. I would listen to it on my way to work, at lunchtime, on my way home, and
at night if I could not sleep or if I woke up.

I became calmer, found it much easier to “let things go”, my relationship with people became gentler, I
was happier, and more content. This occurred from just listening to this discourse when I had spare time.

Loving-kindness: a Realistic Approach

When people start to use loving-kindness as an antidote to negative thinking they can get trapped into
feeling they are getting nowhere if they cannot fully replace the negative thinking with kind thinking.
They hope to fully remove negative thinking and anything less feels like they have failed their thinking
about this has polarised (O’Donoghue, 2002). When this happens we need to provide some ways to step

² This version of the loving-kindness discourse has been made by comparing a number of translations, by making it
consistent with contemporary language, and making it an aspiration rather than a description.
out of this polarity so that even small improvements are seen as improvements. I often talk about one step at a time. Is it contributing? Is it heading in the right direction? Every minute of loving-kindness is one less minute of negativity; every minute of gentleness is one less minute of harshness.

For example, Jill had an injury that caused physical pain. She found meditation useful and enjoyed it. One week she came to the class and said meditation was not working, that she was still in pain and it would not go away. She sounded disappointed and discouraged. The way she spoke implied that she was giving up on meditation because it was not working. I talked to her about polarised thinking and being trapped into thinking that either it fully works or it is not working at all. I explained that meditation can contribute to managing and reducing pain; that small relief from pain is better than no relief from pain; that contributions are useful; that we can be trapped into believing that meditation is a waste of time if it does not fully remove the problem rather than seeing a reduction as a useful contribution. Jill continued to meditate with a more realistic expectation of its usefulness and contribution to her pain management.

**Conclusion**

We can meditate on loving-kindness, we can drip-feed it into our lives, and we can help others to do the same. If our thoughts, feelings, and actions are filled with kindness then we will be better people, have better relationships, and the world will be a better place — it will be kinder. To privilege kindness in this way is an ethical decision — it is to value kindness as a primary quality.

**References**


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