

Main section of 1st edition of:
A practical, Bare-Bones guide
to Loving-Kindness Meditation
by Ven. Bhante Vimalarams

Read by Sister Khema, May 2003

Loving Kindness

When practicing Loving-Kindness Meditation, you first start by sending loving and kind thoughts to yourself. Begin by remembering a time when you were happy. When the feeling of happiness arises, it is a warm glowing feeling in the center of your chest. Now, when this feeling arises, make a very sincere wish for your own happiness. "May I be happy"... "May I be filled with joy"... "May I be peaceful and calm"... "May I be cheerful and kind", etc. Make any wholesome sincere wish that has meaning for you, feeling the wish in your heart. The key word here is "sincere", if your wish isn't a sincere wish then it will turn into a mantra that is, it may become a statement repeated by rote, with no real meaning. Then you would be on the surface repeating the statement while thinking about other things. So it is very important that the wish you make for yourself (and later for your spiritual friend) has real meaning for you and uses your whole undivided attention. Don't continually repeat the wish for happiness: "May I be happy... may I be happy... may I be happy... may I be happy". Make the wish for your own happiness when the feeling of Loving-Kindness begins to fade a little.

Relax Tension

The following is a very important part of the meditation:
After every wish for your own happiness, please notice that there is some slight tension or tightness in your head, in your mind. Let it go. You do this by relaxing mind completely. Feel mind open up and become calm, but do this only one time.
If the tightness doesn't go away never mind, you will be able to let it go while on the meditation object (your home base).

Don't continually try to keep relaxing mind, without coming back to the home base; always softly redirect your tranquil attention back to the feeling of happiness.

How to sit

When you sit in meditation please do not move your body, at all. Sit with your back nicely straight, but not rigid. Try to have every vertebrae stacked comfortably one on top of the other. This position has the tendency to bring your chest up a little so it can be easier to radiate the feeling of love.

Sit with your legs in a comfortable position. If you cross them too tightly the circulation in your legs may stop, causing your legs to go to sleep and this becomes very painful. If you need to sit on a cushion or even in a chair, that is okay. If: you sit in a chair, however, please don't lean back into it. Leaning back stops the energy flow up your back and can make you feel sleepy. Just sit in a comfortable way.

Please don't move your body at all while sitting. Don't wiggle your toes; don't wiggle your fingers; don't scratch; don't rub; don't rock your body; don't change your posture at all. In fact, if you can sit as still as the Buddha image in front of you, this would be the best! If you move around, it becomes a big distraction to your practice and you won't progress very quickly at all.

While you are sitting, radiating the warm-glowing feeling of Loving-Kindness in the center of your chest and making a sincere wish, feeling that wish in your heart, your mind will wander away and begin to think about other things. This is normal.

Upcoming Thoughts

Thoughts are never your enemy. So, please don't fight with them or try to push them away. When a series of thoughts come and take you away, notice that you are not experiencing the feeling of Loving-Kindness and making a wish for your own happiness. Then, simply let go of the thought. Even if you are in mid sentence, just let go of the

thought, let it be there by itself. This is done by not continuing to think the thought, no matter how important it seems, at that time.

At this point there is another very important step:

- Notice Tension: Notice the tightness or tension in your head/mind, now relax. Feel the tightness open. Mind feels like it expands and relaxes. It then becomes very tranquil and calm. At this time there are no thoughts, and mind is exceptionally clear and alert. Immediately, bring that mind back to your object of meditation, that is, the feeling of Loving-Kindness and making a wish for your own happiness.

It doesn't matter how many times your mind goes away and thinks about other things. What really matters is that, you see that your mind has become distracted by a thought. The same method holds true even for any sensation or emotional feeling that pulls your attention to it, notice mind's movement or distraction away from Loving-Kindness, and let it go. Then relax the tightness or tension in your head/mind and softly redirect your calm attention back to the object of meditation.

- Strengthen Awareness: Every time you let go of a distraction or make a wish for your happiness, relax the tightness caused by mind's movement, and redirect your tranquil attention back to the feeling of being happy, you are strengthening your mindfulness (awareness). So please don't criticize yourself because you think that you "should" do better, or that your thoughts, sensations and emotional feelings are the enemy to be squashed and destroyed.

These kinds of critical, hard-hearted thoughts and feelings contain aversion, and aversion is the opposite of the practice of "Loving-Acceptance". Loving-Kindness and Loving-Acceptance are different words that say basically the same thing. So please be kind to

yourself. Make this a fun kind of game to play with, not of an enemy to fight with.

The importance of relaxing the tightness or tension after every thought, sensation or emotional feeling can't be stated enough. When you let go of this tightness you are letting go of craving. It is very important to understand this, because craving is the cause of all suffering. This tightness or tension is where our wrong idea about ego-identification is.

Craving and Ego-identification

Craving and the false idea of self always manifests as tightness or tension in your head/mind. When you let go of tightness, what you are actually doing is, letting go of craving and the false idea of "self" or "ego identification" with all of the thoughts, sensations and emotional feelings that arise. This is how you purify your mind and become happier and more uplifted, all of the time.

While you are sitting still, there may be some sensations that arise in your body. You may feel an itch, heat, tension, a feeling of coughing or wanting to sneeze, or pain. Please don't move your body at all. When such a feeling arises, your mind will immediately go to that feeling, let's say an itch or cough. You don't have to direct mind, it goes by itself. The first thing mind does is think about the feeling: "I wish this would go away"... "I want this to stop bothering me"... "I hate this feeling"... "Why doesn't it just go away"... "I want this to stop."

Every time you entertain these kinds of thought, the sensation becomes bigger and more intense. It actually turns into an emergency in your mind. Then you won't be able to stand it anymore, and you have to move. But the instructions are: don't move your body for any reason at all. Watch the movements of mind instead.

So what can we do? We need to open up and allow the feeling to be there:

Open up: First, notice that your mind has gone to the itch or cough, etc., and the thoughts about that sensation. Now let go of those thoughts, simply let them be. Next notice the tightness in your head/mind and relax. Every time a sensation (or emotional feeling) arises, it is only natural for mind to make a tight fist around it, this tight mental fist is aversion. So, open up and allow the itch (or emotional feeling) to be there. Remember that it is okay if the tightness doesn't go away immediately.

The "Truth (Dhamma) of the present moment", is that when an itch or any other sensation arises, it is there. What you do with this Dhamma dictates whether you will suffer more unnecessarily or not. Resisting the itch and trying to think it away produces both more subtle and gross pain.

Five Aggregates

We have five different things that make up this mind/body process, they are called the Five Aggregates. They are:

Physical Body, Feeling, Perception, Thought, Consciousness

As you can see feelings¹, are one thing and thoughts are another. If we try to control our feelings with our thoughts, the resistance that you have to this feeling causes it to get bigger and intense. In fact, it becomes so big that it turns into a true emergency (real unsatisfactoriness - Dukkha), and you can't stand the sensation (or emotional feeling) anymore. Then you have to move. While you are sitting in meditation, if you move your body even a little bit, it breaks the continuity of practice and you have to start over again.

So letting go of the thoughts about the sensation (or emotional feeling) means that you are letting go of the want to control the feeling with your thoughts. It also means that you are letting go of craving, which directly leads to the cessation of suffering. Next, you notice the tight mental fist around the sensation, and let go of that aversion to it. Simply allow the itch or cough (sensation or emotional feeling) to be there by itself. See it as if it were a

bubble floating in the air, the bubble floats freely. Whichever way the wind blows, the bubble will float in that direction. If the wind changes and blows in another direction, the bubble goes in that direction without any resistance at all.

This practice is learning how to lovingly-accept whatever arises in the present moment. Now again notice that subtle tightness or tension in your head/mind, relax and softly redirect your gentle loving attention back to the feeling of radiating love from your heart and making a wish for your own happiness.

The true nature of these kinds of sensations (and emotional feelings) is that they don't go away right away. So your mind will bounce back and forth from your object of meditation (that is radiating the feeling of love and making a sincere wish for your happiness) and to that feeling. Every time this happens you treat it in the same way:

- Let go: Let go of any thoughts, sensations or emotional feelings.
- Relax: Relax the tightness, let go of the tight mental fist around the feeling, let it be.
- Come back: Come back to your object of meditation. That is radiating the feeling of love and making a sincere wish for your happiness and feeling that wish in your heart.

Radiating Love

Remember its O.K. for that thought, sensation or emotional feeling to be there, because that is the truth of -the present moment. An acronym that works very well to help as a reminder is, "DROPSS" "Don't Resist Or Push Soften and SMILE". Allow the thought, sensation, or emotional feeling to be, without trying to make it be anything other than it is. Now, relax the subtle (and sometimes not so subtle) tightness or tension in your head/mind, and gently redirect your tranquil attention back to your meditation.

After doing this for about 10 minutes, you begin sending loving and kind thoughts to your spiritual friend. A spiritual friend is someone who, when you think of them and their good qualities, it makes you happy. This is a friend who is of the same sex, they are alive, and not a member of your family. This is for right now, later you will be able to send Loving-Kindness to all of the members of your family, but for this training period please choose another friend.

Once you start sending Loving-Kindness to your spiritual friend, please don't change to another person. Stay with your same spiritual friend until you get to the third meditation stage (Jhāna). So you are sending a sincere wish for your own happiness, then mentally you say: "As I wish this feeling of peace and calm (happiness, joy, whatever) for myself, I wish this feeling for you, too". "May you be well, happy and peaceful". Then start radiating this feeling of love and peace to our friend. It is quite important for you to feel the sincere wish and that you place that feeling in your heart.

Visualization

You also visualize your friend in your mind's eye. For example, you can visualize your friend as if it was like a photograph or you can see them moving around as if in a movie. The exact visualization doesn't matter. But when you see your friend, see him or her smiling and happy. This can help to remind you to be smiling and happy, too!

The visualization can be somewhat difficult. It can be cloudy or fuzzy, or a long distance away or it can be there for just a moment and disappear. That is all right. Don't try too hard because it will give you a headache. Some people can't visualize at all, so it is all right to bring your friend into your heart by using their name. You want about 70% of your time spent on the feeling of Loving-Kindness, 20% (less or more, depending on what is happening) on making a sincere wish and feeling that wish in your heart, this helps the feeling for your friend's happiness to grow. Only about 10% of your time should be spent on visualizing your friend. So you can see that the "Feeling of Loving-Kindness" is by far the most important part of the meditation, and the visualization is the least important part. But still

put a little effort into the visualization. Eventually it will get better and easier.

Smiling

This is a smiling meditation. While you are sitting and radiating love to your spiritual friend (or to yourself), smile with your mind. Even though your eyes are closed during the meditation, smile with your eyes. This helps to let go of tension in your face. Put a little smile on your lips and put a smile in your heart. Smiling is nice and most helpful to practice all of the time, but especially when you are sitting in meditation. The more we can learn to smile the happier mind becomes.

It may sound a little silly, but scientists have discovered that the corners of our mouth are very important; the position of the lips corresponds to different mental states. When the corners of your lips turns down your thoughts tend to become heavy and unwholesome. When the corners of your lips go up, mind becomes more uplifted and clear, so joy can arise more often.

This is important to remember because a smile can help you to change your perspective about all kinds of feelings and thoughts. So try to remember to smile into everything that arises and everything that you direct your mind. In other words, smile as much as you can into everything.

Dullness of mind

The more sincere and enthusiastic you are in sending Loving-Kindness to yourself and your spiritual friend, the less you will experience sleepiness or dullness of mind. When sleepiness or dullness occurs your body may begin to slump. This is the only time that you can move your body and straighten up. But don't do this too often, either.

If you see your mind starting to dull out, then take more interest in your friend; see him or her doing things that you truly appreciate. For example, you can visualize times that they were helpful and generous, or times when they made you happy and you laughed with them. This can help to increase your interest and energy, and then the dullness will subside.

Please, once you begin this meditation, start by sitting for half an hour. The first ten minutes you send Loving-Kindness to yourself. The rest of the time, send love to your spiritual friend (remember the same friend all of the time). When your meditation becomes better and you feel more comfortable, you can sit for a longer period of time (whatever is appropriate for you with your time constraints). But don't sit for less than thirty minutes a day in the beginning! More if you have the time.

Active Meditation

This is not simply a passive meditation to be practiced only when you are sitting in a chair or cushion. It's a meditation to be practiced all of the time, especially when you do your daily activities. So many times we walk around in a mental haze of random nonsense thoughts. Why not try practicing Loving-Kindness Meditation whenever we can possibly remember? When you are walking from your house to your car or your car to your job, what is your mind doing? Ho hum, probably more nonsense thoughts.

This is the time to notice what your mind is doing in the present moment and let go of these distracting thoughts. Relax the tightness in your head/mind and wish someone happiness! It doesn't matter who you send loving thoughts and feelings to in your daily activities. It can be to the person walking next to you, your spiritual friend, yourself, or all beings. The key words here are to "send love", smiling and feeling that sincere wish. Try to do this as much as possible during the day.

The more we focus on sending and radiating loving and kind thoughts, the more we affect the world around us in a positive way.

As a result your mind becomes uplifted and happy at the same time. Nice!

Benefits of Loving-Kindness

There are many benefits to practicing Loving-Kindness: you go to sleep easily and sleep soundly. When you wake up you wake easily and quickly. People like you. Your face becomes radiant and beautiful, when you practice Loving-Kindness, your mind becomes clean more quickly than with any other type of meditation. Actually, the Lord Buddha mentioned this type of meditation more times than he did "Mindfulness of Breathing" meditation. So you can see just how important he thought it was.

Loving Kindness and Nibbāna

The practice of Loving-Kindness Meditation can lead you directly to the experience of Nibbāna if you follow all of the Brahma Viharas: that is the practice of Loving- Kindness, Compassion, Sympathetic Joy and Equanimity. This is mentioned many times in the suttas (the original discourses of the Buddha). Many times other teachers will say that this practice alone doesn't directly lead the meditator to the experience of Nibbāna. And this is true. But, when Loving-Kindness Meditation is practiced as part of the Brahma Viharas then it will take the meditator to the fourth Jhāna or meditation level. This is where the Lord Buddha tried to have all of the students who practiced meditation get to. The fourth meditation level is where the meditator experiences deep states of equanimity.

According to the suttas, there are three different paths that can be taken once the meditator reaches this level. They can take one directly to the experience of Nibbāna. We will not go into more detail at this time, because it may cause some confusion. But if you are interested, in having more information please start reading suttas like sutta 62 The Maharchulovada Sutta in the Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha. Or you can read sutta 27 The Culahatthipadopama Sutta in the same book. I sincerely hope that these meditation

instructions are helpful to you and that by practicing in this way you will benefit greatly and lead a truly happy and healthy life.

Sharing Merit

Now, as the custom is after every sharing of dhamma, let us share some merit for listening and doing the good work of purifying our minds, so we may all, truly be happy!

May suffering ones, be suffering free

And the fear-struck, fearless be

May the grieving shed all grief

And may all beings find relief.

May all beings share this merit that we have thus acquired

For the acquisition of all kinds of happiness.

May beings inhabiting space and earth

Devas and nagas of mighty power

Share this merit of ours.

May they long protect the

Lord Buddha's dispensation.

Sadhu ... Sadhu... Sadhu...

Footnote:

¹ When we talk about feelings it includes both mental (emotions) and physical feelings, in Buddhism we treat them all in the same way.

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