

Loving Kindness Practice (Metta)

Introduction

All human beings have a desire to be happy and to be free from suffering. In this practice we recognise that we deserve to be happy and that our desire to be happy is right and just, just as all beings everywhere deserve to be happy and free from suffering.

Our aim is to embody loving kindness. Therefore, it is important to have physical awareness when doing the practice. Be aware of your body, notice and accept with kindness any areas of tension especially around the shoulders, face, jaw and the mouth. Use the breath to soften and release around such areas.

Being kind to our body and in tune with it is very important. Where parts of the exercise register physically can be areas for developing insight and growth.

Exercise itself

Remember your motivation of aspiring to benefit everyone.

The practice involves repeating three or four phrases or wishes firstly for ourselves and then for progressive groups of others. Some examples of traditional phrases include:

May I/you/they/we all be well or healthy;

May I/you/they/we all be happy;

May I/you/they/we all be free from suffering;

May I/you they/we all be free from danger (including dangerous mind states);

and

May I/you/they/we all live with ease (may life go easily).

Pick three or four of the above phrases which are meaningful to you and if these phrases are not meaningful to you, make up your own set of phrases.

We are not trying to force anything or to squeeze out any particular feeling from our hearts. If things feel dry or distant, that is fine. That is our experience. We can allow whatever is there just to be there as it is. In time, we may find that our experience changes and deepens. We can think of the practice as planting seeds of intention - that we are developing an intention to be loving and kind to ourselves and to others. Gradually, through this practice, our hearts open allowing sensations of warmth and connection to arise and grow.

At the beginning of each loving kindness practice we learn how to be loving and kind to ourselves, by repeating the phrases for ourselves. We may notice some resistance to this, which is to be expected and is OK. A lot of us have a habit of being quite hard on ourselves; of being unfriendly to ourselves. This is often a coping strategy, which we have adopted in our youth in order to cope with the life circumstances we find ourselves in or to meet the heavy demands modern society can place upon us. We don't need to blame ourselves for this because these coping strategies may have worked very well for us and were the best we could do in

difficult circumstances. However, we might want to recognise that these coping strategies have unforeseen and perhaps negative consequences for us now. Going forward we might decide that it would be a good idea to cultivate an open friendliness to ourselves. If we do notice difficulties with generating loving kindness to ourselves, we can gently explore these difficulties in the 7 steps practice, by applying the 7 steps to any difficulty that arises for us.

Later in the loving kindness practice we develop loving kindness progressively to different groups of people.

A typical progression of groups of others might be:

- a beloved friend;
- a neutral person, who is someone who we neither like or dislike;
- a difficult person, who is someone with whom we have experienced difficulty or conflict;
- all beings everywhere, without exception or distinction.

In the beginning it may be easier to develop loving kindness for a loved one than for a stranger or someone who we find difficult. It can be helpful to think of your loving kindness spreading out in a circle, with yourself at the middle and each time we practice developing loving kindness for a new person or group of people, we can think of our circle of loving kindness growing bigger to encompass the new person or people. Then you practice loving kindness for everyone within the circle, including yourself. You can move back and forth between yourself and the others, as this can help to emphasise that we are all the same, in that we all want to be happy and to be free from suffering.

If you find it difficult to say the phrases for a person or group of people, you might alter the phrases to wish that they be free of any negative qualities which cause suffering to themselves and to others. For example, if your difficult person is an angry person, you might wish for them to be free from anger and then you might use this phrase for the other groups of people, including yourself. When working with a difficult person, at the beginning, don't choose your worst enemy. It is unrealistic to expect to be able to say these phrases for someone who has hurt you deeply, without practicing for some time on less difficult others. Instead, you might choose someone who you find mildly irritating and work from there to gradually include more difficult people. Again, if you notice any difficulties with saying the phrases for one or more group of others then, gently explore these difficulties using the 7 steps practice.

Remember that this practice can be very challenging and that we are just beginning to create the intention of being loving and kind to ourselves and to others. Beware of any high expectations that we 'should' already be loving and kind to everyone and recognize that these expectations are unrealistic. Just do the practice, write in your journal how it has gone and see what happens. If difficulties arise, its OK and to be expected. Be kind to yourself, recognize any difficulties as opportunities to learn more about yourself, to grow and to mature. Remember that if you react to this practice in a particular way, it is highly likely that you are not on your own and to use the support of your tutorial groups and your tutor, as and when you need to.

For further guidance please see pages 79 to 82 of the Mindfulness Manual from last year's Mindfulness training course at Samye Ling.

Sources

Salzberg, S. & Goldstein, J. (2001) Insight Meditation Workbook. Sounds True, Boulder, Colorado.

Pema Chodron. Perfect Just As You Are (Audio Study Course).