# **LOVINGKINDNESS**

**He or she who wants to attain peace should practice being upright, humble and skilled at using loving speech. He or she will practice living simply and happily, with senses calmed, without being covetous and carried away with the emotions of the majority. Let him or her not do anything that will be disapproved of by the wise ones. [And this is what he or she contemplates]:**

**May we all be happy and safe, and may our hearts be filled with joy.**

**May all living beings live in security and peace, beings who are frail or strong, tall or short, big or small, visible or not visible, near or far away, already born or yet to be born. May we all dwell in perfect tranquility.**

**Let no one do harm to anyone. Let no one put the life of anyone in danger. Let no one, out of anger or ill will, wish anyone harm.**

**Just as a mother loves and protects her only child at the risk of her own life, may we cultivate boundless love to offer to all living beings in the entire cosmos. May this boundless love pervade the whole universe, above, below, and across. May this love know no obstacles, and may our hearts be absolutely free from hatred or enmity. Whether standing or walking, sitting or lying down, as long as we are awake, may we maintain this mindfulness of love in our own hearts. This is the noblest way of living.**

**Free from wrong views, greed, and sensual desires, living in beauty and realizing perfect understanding, those who practice boundless love will certainly transcend birth and death.**

**The Buddha**

**Cultivating Lovingkindness**

The focus of these notes is to review the characteristics of *metta* (meh-tah), typically translated as *lovingkindness*. Lovingkindness meditation provides a way to train the mind to manifest benevolent intentions regarding one’s subjective experience.

Traditionally, metta is the primary factor of what are called the Divine Abidings: Lovingkindness, Compassion, Sympathetic Joy and Equanimity. Lovingkindness is the manifestation of Right Intention, an element of the Noble Eightfold Path, from which emerges compassion, which is specifically oriented towards empathetic awareness of distress and willingness to bring relief, or sympathetic joy, which is oriented towards empathetic awareness of another’s happiness and resonates with that experience. Equanimity represents a benevolent balancing of the other three factors. Equanimity is the result of applying wise attention to these factors through mindfulness, investigation of mental phenomena and the application of Right Effort, which disregards unwholesomeness and fosters the fulfillment of wholesomeness in one’s subjective experience.

Equanimity was reviewed during the prior talk of January 19, 2022, and can be found in the website archives under the title “Balancing Lovingkindness, Compassion and Sympathetic Joy With Equanimity”. The manifestation of equanimity prevents the arising of the *far enemy* or *near enemy* of the four factors. The far enemy represents the opposing, unwholesome manifestation, while the near enemy represents an unwholesome manifestation that can be misperceived as wholesome.

The far enemy of metta is aversion/ill-will, one of the Five Hindrances, and functions to create what contemporary researchers to call “affect avoidance”, with affect meaning the urgency of an unpleasant emotion. Ill-will is aggression regarding the avoidant response. Mindfulness and investigation of mental phenomena realizes how ignorance builds division or isolation from experience, creating aversion/ill-will, and counters this with awareness of the universality of human distress and confusion. Benevolent intention manifests as lovingkindness and provides relief from the adverse subjective experience and action. The near enemy comes about when the mind creates an idealized or romanticized view regarding circumstances; when the idealization is unreasonable or unsustainable, the false rendering of lovingkindness switches to aversion/ill-will. The antidote for the far or near enemy is the above-mentioned manifestation of mindfulness, investigation, and Right Effort.

Functionally, lovingkindness fosters realization of the interdependence of the world we live in, a fundamental reality Buddhism describes as *anatta* (ah-nah-tah), *the absence of an enduring, autonomous self*. It is the antidote for fear, anger, resentment, and disregard for one’s self-worth. The untrained mind creates a subject-object duality, which then requires a need to gratify or defend the sense of separation that results from ignorance regarding anatta.

Even though the creation of a self is a foundational process in the manifestation of dukkha (do-kah), distress and confusion about the self while interacting with the experiential world, we are organically “hard-wired” for empathy and altruistic behaviors. Much contemporary research suggests that preverbal toddlers will spontaneously help others—one experiment involved a researcher “accidentally” dropping something on the floor and nearly every child in the study picked up the item and gave it to the researcher unprompted. Neuroscientific research imaging shows that areas of the brain associated with emotion, behavioral initiation, self/other recognition, empathy, altruism and decision-making are activated in what appears to be an intention to act with benevolence socially. As social animals, this sort of interaction benefits harmonious family and other social interactions.

Another consideration regarding the way the nervous system operates involves the vagal nerve process. As reviewed in the archived talk of January 19, 2021, the vagus nerve is the largest and most extensively connected nerve in the human body, extending from the base of the brain down through the torso all the way to the intestines and back up to the brain. The vagal nerve process affects the throat, lungs, heart and intestines, and affects the moods we experience generated through the actions of the brain. Research suggests that regular meditation practices, either involving mindfulness of breathing or the Divine Abidings, benefits the functioning of the vagal processes—this is called vagal tone—and there is a strong correlation between the levels of vagal tone and prosocial involvement, along with physical and mental health.

The ability to verbalize is one of the most distinctive characteristics that differentiates humans from other social animals. It is important to understand that our internal narratives, which largely create our sense of self, all involve the complex cognitive and emotional processes of the brain/body continuum. When we internally verbalize an experience, there is an associated emotional stimulation, and this stimulation doesn’t just occur in the brain—it radiates into the blood stream through hormonal activity as well as the actions of the vagal process, and the reactions in the body are relayed back to the brain, reinforcing the fabricated beliefs and behaviors. For example, if my reservoir of memories included a traumatizing interaction with a dog earlier in life, then the word “dog” would stimulate an aversive process, cognitively, emotionally and hormonally. It might be subtle and not very impactful but could become quite activated under the right circumstances—affect avoidance, that is, aversion and ill-will. Alternatively, if the reservoir of memories about dogs was pleasant and joyful, a different cognitive, emotional and hormonal process would be initiated. Psychological researchers use the term “affect approach” to describe this reaction. If the interaction with the dog involved the dog not responding as one’s memories dictated, the near enemy of lovingkindness would manifest.

A key element of metta contemplations involves silently and sincerely repeating emotionally impactful phrases—a primary one could be “May I be safe, happy, healthy and content”. The words *safe, happy, healthy* and *content* either already have emotionally benevolent associations or they can be initiated through the sincere repetition of the contemplation. Additionally, I encourage those contemplating the Divine Abidings to persistently focus attention on the middle of the chest, between the breastbone and spine, while repeating the phrases. This focus on the chest cultivates mindfulness of the body and presumably a beneficial impact on vagal tone.

When I went on my first one-week residential retreat focusing on cultivating the Divine Abidings, the teacher, Sharon Salzberg, who wrote “Lovingkindness—The Revolutionary Art of Happiness”, among other books about the Divine Abidings, provided us with a basic platform of phrases and suggested that we work with them and create just the right phrasing to nurture benevolent intentions. I did this over the course of the next several metta retreats, over a few decades, and came up with this phrasing:

May I be safe

May I be happy

May I be healthy

May I be content

May I love myself sincerely and with gently patient kindness

Just as I am now, no matter what happens.

This format is intended to cultivate benevolent intentions regarding my self-experience in an ongoing way, through silently and sincerely repeating the phrase and focusing attention in the area around the middle of the chest. There may or may not be any sort of physical sensation while investigating that area of the body, but the practice links what is happening cognitively with the actions of the vagal processes.

Here are the instructions I have provided while teaching introductory courses on lovingkindness:

Sit in a balanced, upright position that is not too comfortable or uncomfortable. Close your eyes, or, if you prefer, focus your eyes on a simple object a few feet away. Sweep your attention through the body, noting and relaxing any unnecessary tension. Bring your attention to the area around your heart, alert to notice and allow the growth of any feelings of love or kindness that are apparent. These feelings might be physical, such as a pulsing or tightness. They might be emotional—a yearning or opening of the heart to love and tenderness. It is not the craving associated with lust or sensuality. Don’t be concerned if the sensations are of tension, aching, or there seems to be no sensation at all. Simply rest your awareness right in the middle of your chest persistently. Diligent practice can, over time, produce feelings of joy, gratitude and satisfaction. I have experienced tears of joy and gratitude when the practice becomes vitalized through persistent sincere repetition of the mantra.

The goal of this practice is to recall feelings of love in the area around the heart and allow them to grow. The feeling may be fleeting or incomplete. Meditating is much like learning to ride a bike—climb on, wobble around a bit, fall off, then climb back on again. After a while, balance and steadiness are achieved and, like recalling how to ride a bike, the feeling of lovingkindness surges up easily and can be steadily kept in awareness.

The feeling is focused on the sort of love that is tender, gentle, and accepting of each moment as it is. It grows from the inside out and is not dependent on others. It is similar to carefully guarding and cultivating a tiny glow of fire on a cold, dark night. Keep the focus on the feeling, protecting it from being “blown out” by anger or regret, and adding more “twigs” of memory until a warm feeling in the heart is easily maintained.

Consciously recall a time of pure and clear love and affection from the past. Perhaps it is only of one incident, the memory of a person or a pet. Often, it is initially difficult to notice feelings of love that aren’t blurred or distorted by lust, guilt, fear, pain, or resentment. Many people are not easily able to visualize such memories. In that case, simply use words and phrases to evoke feelings of lovingkindness. Traditionally, repeating a certain phrase is used for this purpose. A few examples include: **“May I be happy, peaceful and free from suffering.” “May I be safe, may I be happy, may I be healthy, may I be content.” “May I find loving release from greed, hatred and delusion.”** **“May I love myself completely and with great kindness, just as I am now, no matter what happens.”** Keep the focus on the center of your chest while repeating the phrase and contemplate what happiness (peace, health, contentment, etc.) feels like as an emotion, as well as how to express this in daily life. When some other thought, sensation, or emotion arises, simply note it with mindfulness and investigation and then let Right Effort guide your attention back to the feeling of lovingkindness around the heart.

Often, strong emotions other than love arise during this practice, because previous experience has linked love so strongly with pain, anger, confusion, jealousy, disappointment, lust, and so on. Simply notice the distractions as manifestations of the near or far enemy, and then return to recalling lovingkindness, cultivating it by repeating the phrase.

As the practice goes on, it is desirable to expand the lovingkindness beyond yourself. There are several strategies for this:

1. Imagine your heart as the center of the universe and that lovingkindness is radiating out in all directions, like radio waves from a broadcasting tower. Gradually include others—in the room, the neighborhood, the county, etc., in this growing, radiant sphere of lovingkindness.
2. Recall various people encountered during the day and project lovingkindness to them. In this case, it is recommended to practice first with respected acquaintances, then emotionally neutral people, friends, family members, and perhaps eventually including those with whom you have difficult relations. When feelings of lust, fear, guilt, or hatred arise, practice turning away from the feelings and back to the lovingkindness, while keeping that person in mind.
3. Visualize categories of beings; first humans, then animals,
4. plants, or even inanimate objects like buildings, cars, etc., while remaining open to feelings of lovingkindness emanating from the heart, and with determination to bring this love into every encounter in life.

Remember that the main goal of the practice is to develop and project to yourself and others feelings of love and kindness, regardless of whether others are aware of it or appreciate it. Eventually, you will be able to practice this practically everywhere—in traffic, while waiting in a line, dealing with customers, coworkers, family, media personalities, flowers, trees, and so on.

It is very useful to practice this when feeling strong emotions of fear, anger, or discouragement. As mentioned above, we all are conditioned to be preoccupied with and controlled by unpleasant emotions and practicing self-hatred does absolutely no good. This meditative strategy is a great way to cleanse yourself of those useless thoughts and feelings. It is important to realize that whatever angry or hurt emotions we feel in response to a situation is not about the other party—freedom from suffering comes from releasing your attachment to an expected outcome. Even if your expectations are reasonable and the other person is in the wrong, your salvation comes from addressing your own attachments first, then focusing on external changes.

The following pages contain a series of lovingkindness contemplations that can be reviewed and memorized to acquaint you heart and mind to the cultivation of metta. I invite you to consider dedicating one meditation period each day for the cultivation of lovingkindness. Use the mantras provided as a guide through which you can develop what really resonates for your needs and circumstances. Sincerity and persistent, diligent repetition is key—the sincerity and clarity you bring to the practice is what embeds metta into you personality structure and creates a reservoir of benevolently potent memories that will affect your self-worth and the quality of your social life.

Finally, I recommend as references any of Sharon Salzberg’s several books on the subject of metta, for example, the above-mentioned “Lovingkindness—The Revolutionary Art of Happiness”, “The Kindness Handbook—A Practical Companion”, and “Real Love—The Art of Mindful Connection”, among others.

MAY THE MERITS OF THESE CONTEMPLATIONS BENEFIT EVERYONE YOU MEET.

May I be safe

**May I be happy**

**May I be healthy**

**May I be content**

**May I love myself sincerely**

**And with gently patient kindness**

**Just as I am now**

**No matter what happens**

**May I be safe**

**May I be happy**

**May I be healthy**

**May I be content**

**May I love you sincerely**

**And with gently patient kindness**

**Just as you are now**

**No matter what happens**

**May you be safe**

**May you be happy**

**May you be healthy**

**May you be content**

**May you love yourself sincerely**

**And with gently patient kindness**

**Just as you are now**

**No matter what happens**

**May we be safe**

**May we be happy**

**May we be healthy**

**May we be content**

**May we love each other sincerely**

**And with gently patient kindness**

**Just as we are now**

**No matter what happens**

**May all beings be safe**

**May all beings be happy**

**May all beings be content**

**May all beings love life sincerely**

**And with gently patient kindness**

**Just as it is now**

**No matter what happens**