STRAIGHT TO THE HEART

A Metta Meditation Practice

By Michelle Dalbec, E-RYT 500 - www.myoga.com

Introduction

METTA translates as “love” “friendliness” or “loving kindness”.

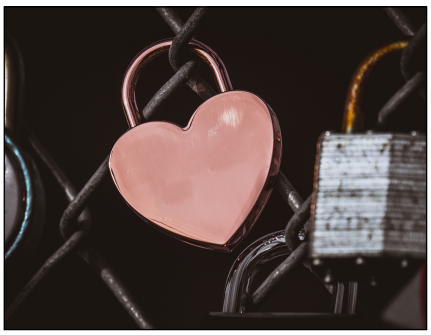
Metta Meditation is often referred to as “Loving Kindness” or “Well Wishing” meditation. This practice is an act of sending well wishes, you can also think of them as blessings or prayers, to a series of recipients and yourself. The idea is to offer these wishes freely, without attachment, without discrimination, and without the expectation of reciprocation.

The Buddhists refer Metta as one of the four “heart practices”. It is said to be the first and the foundation of the Brahma-Viharas. Brahma-Vihara translates as “divine emotions”, “sublime attitudes”, or “divine dwellings”.

Metta or “Loving Kindness” acts as a “tenderizer”, softening and making more palatable what at times can be challenging or tough emotions to manage. It can also help soften a tough exterior that may be surrounding the heart.

Jack Kornfield says: “Be aware that this meditation may at times feel mechanical or awkward. It can also bring up feelings contrary to lovingkindness, feelings of irritation and anger. If this happens, it is especially important to be patient and kind toward yourself, allowing whatever arises to be received in a spirit of friendliness and kind affection.

The other three Brahma-Viharas are: Karuna (compassion), Mudita (appreciative joy), Upekka (equanimity).



PRACTICE

You offer these wishes-blessings-prayers to a number of different recipients. Traditionally you start with the self then move onto: a loved one, a neutral person, a person of challenge, and finally all living things.

Any words or phrases that are meaningful to you can be used. Traditional phrases are: safe, happy, free, at peace. You may take some time to consider what each one of these wishes means to you and develop a personal connection to them. You can also personalize your wishes, finding ones that feel just right for you.

Begin by bringing yourself into a comfortable position: standing, sitting, or lying down. Make sure your body is in a position where you will be awake & alert and simultaneously at ease. Take a few minutes to become present with your body, allow your breath to be calm and steady, and connect with your heart. Then bring attention to yourself and silently repeat the phrases:

May I/you be safe.

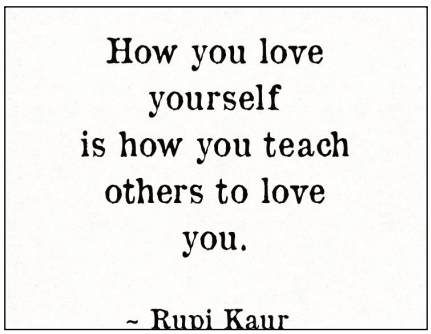
May I/you be happy.

May I/you be free.

May I/you be at peace.

Stay with yourself as long as you like and then move onto the next person and so on. After offering to all living beings let go of the wishes and for a few moments simply breathe, relax, and observe the effects of the meditation.

The practice can be expanded or compressed to any length of time. Depending on time and the needs of your heart it can also be narrowed down and directed towards one individual.



BENEFITS

This form of meditation may seem fanciful, or like wishful thinking, but it is actually rigorously studied, with numerous well-established benefits. Some of them are:

Increase positive emotions
Increase in personal resources such as mindfulness and purpose in life
Increase in social social support
Increase in sense of social connection
Reduction of reactions to stressful situations
Rise in expressions of compassion and altruistic behaviors
Reductions in implicit bais
Increase in baseline vagal tone - a physiological biomarker of well-being

Cultivating the heart qualities leads to a calm, joyous mind. Loving-kindness meditation can be practiced anytime, anywhere. So peace is always close at hand and within our own hearts.

QUOTES

The Mother of the Universe refuses to let me worship her outside myself anymore. She's withdrawn inside me and tells me if I want to know her, I have to come inside too (which is the last place I want to be). Although she's been telling me this for years, she's never gone to this extreme before of actually hiding inside me. If I want to love her, I can only do it by loving myself now.
- Cassia Burman

"The beginning of love is the will to let those we love be perfectly themselves, the resolution not to twist them to fit our own image. If in loving them we do not love what they are, but only their potential likeness to ourselves, then we do not love them: we only love the reflection of ourselves we find in them." - Thomas Merton

To feel the love of people whom we love is a fire that feeds our life. But to feel the affection that comes from those whom we do not know, from those unknown to us, who are watching over our sleep and solitude. Over our dangers and our weaknesses – that is something still greater and more beautiful because it widens out the boundaries of our being, and unites all living things.
– Pablo Neruda

"Love is a science. We must practice experiments in this science. He invited us to conduct these experiments even with the risk that we may fail. In risking, we source the will to live. In every risk, successful or not, we've beautified the world a bit more. Our attempt itself has changed things, for us and the planet."- Swami Kripalu

Then it was as if I suddenly saw the secret beauty of their hearts, the depths where neither sin nor desire can reach, the person that each one is in God's eyes.
If only they could see themselves as they really are. If only we could see each other that way, there would be no reason for war, for hatred, for cruelty … I suppose the big problem would be that we would fall down and worship each other." - Thomas Merton

"Your soul is the reflection of all souls. You are the Other. Without the other, you would not exist. You are defined by your relationships with others. You would need to describe the whole universe in order to define a single person. Therefore every single person is the whole universe. Your soul is both personal and universal at the same time. Everyone is a reflection of yourself. You are in a hall of mirrors where every reflection of yourself appears different. Others you admire reflect the qualities you most cherish in yourself. Others you detest reflect the qualities you most deny in yourself. Each person you see is a different version of you." - Enoch Tan

RESOURCES

BOOKS:

Loving Kindness: The Revolutionary Art of Happiness by Sharon Salzberg

The Experience of Insight by Jack Kornfield

Love 2.0 by Barbara Fredrickson, PhD

The Mindful Path to Self-Compassion by Christopher Germer, PhD

TEACHERS:

Sharon Salzberg - www.sharonsalzberg.com

Jack Kornfield - www.jackkornfield.com

Tara Brach - www.tarabrach.com

Jonathan "Sudhir" Foust - www.jonathanfoust.com

Christopher Germer, PhD - www.chrisgermer.com

Dr. Kristin Neff - www.self-compassion.org

WEBSTIES:

Insight Meditation Society - www.dharma.org - search for metta

Dharma Seeds - www.dharmaseeds.org/talks - search for metta