



# LOVING-KINDNESS MEDITATION

## instructions

Cultivation practices like Loving-Kindness and compassion meditations strengthen positive emotions and orientations towards self and other. Loving-Kindness is included in Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction, but not emphasized. In our Mindful Self-Compassion classes, it is a central practice.

### **BACKGROUND ON LOVING-KINDNESS MEDITATION**

Recent research suggests that the mind is “primed” to be more loving, kind, and compassionate but that our educational systems and culture don’t give us many opportunities to develop this. Our culture tends to view positive emotions like love as only “authentic” when they arise spontaneously, but mind training systems and science suggest that positive emotion is something we can develop.

Loving-kindness refers to the altruistic wish that yourself and others be happy and well. Just that: no strings attached, no arguments about whether it’s realistic. Setting aside concerns about who does or doesn’t deserve to be happier, loving-kindness hinges on the idea that all human beings want and deserve happiness. And that all human beings want to avoid suffering.

Research has shown that people who meet difficulty with compassion tend not to be burned out or burdened by it. Many report that it feels like an honor to be with the suffering of others when compassion arises. And compassion can be developed. Loving-Kindness Meditation is one of the tools for this growth.

### **THE PRACTICE**

Sitting in an alert and comfortable way, begin with mindfulness practice. Be aware of breath, body, and the feeling of sitting still. Give yourself some time to settle.

Now bring to mind the image of a loved one. Someone who naturally makes you smile. If a human being doesn’t come to mind, consider pets or other animals. You may also choose someone who is no longer living. Imagination can be powerful. Give this space and time. And, as always, remember that these practices are processes. Do your best and don’t worry if you don’t feel much. And deeply contemplate that, just like you, this person has known joy and delight. Great things have happened: accomplishments, successes, loving relationships, and much more. Give some space to feeling the delight of this truth.

Contemplate also, as you hold this person in mind, that just like you, and just like all people, your loved one has also suffered and known loss and pain. Be with that difficult reality for a few breaths.

Then with the breath as an anchor, offer good wishes of loving-kindness towards this being. Do your best to keep a feeling of their presence in your heart. Offer words like:

- May you be happy.
- May you feel safe.
- May you live with ease.

Sit and breathe with these good wishes for a while. Feel the feeling of offering these wishes. Imagine how it feels to your loved one to receive them.

Then bring your awareness to yourself. You might imagine yourself as you are now, sitting here. Or you might imagine yourself in the company of your loved one.

Deeply recognize that you, too, have known sorrows, pain, and great difficulty. That you, too, have faced burdens that seemed impossible to face or bear. And that you, too, have also known great joy, delight, and happiness. That like all beings you, too, want happiness and freedom from suffering.

And then offer yourself these same wishes:

- May I be happy.
- May I feel safe.
- May I live with ease.

Sit and breathe with these wishes for a while. Offering and receiving them from yourself, to yourself. Feeling, and accepting, whatever it is that you feel.

Finally let go of all of the imagery and language and simply sit and rest in awareness. Notice what you are feeling now at the end of this practice and accept what is.

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Over time this practice can lead to a significant increase in our ability to be loving, kind, and accepting of suffering so that we can be more compassionate. But like all practices, this takes time.

Meditation teacher Sharon Salzberg, author of the book *Lovingkindness: The Revolutionary Art of Happiness*, tells the story of being frustrated at thinking her Loving-Kindness practice wasn't helping. Then one day she dropped a vase; it shattered. After her customary self-critical exclamation of "Sharon, you're such a klutz," another phrase popped out of her mouth: "...but I love you anyway!" Sometimes progress in these practices isn't obvious to us.

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