

A Lovingkindness Meditation

The quality of loving-kindness is the fertile soil out of which an integrated spiritual life can grow. With a loving heart as the background, all that we attempt, all that we encounter, will open and flow more easily. While loving-kindness can arise naturally in us in many circumstances, it can also be cultivated. The following meditation is a 2,500-year-old practice that uses repeated phrases, images, and feelings to evoke loving-kindness and friendliness toward oneself and others. You can experiment with this practice to see if it is useful for you. It is best to begin by repeating it over and over for fifteen or twenty minutes once or twice daily in a quiet place for several months. At first this meditation may feel mechanical or awkward or even bring up its opposite, 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. In its own time, even in the face of inner difficulties, loving-kindness will develop.

Sit in a comfortable fashion. Let your body relax and be at rest. As best you can, let your mind be quiet, letting go of plans and preoccupations. Then begin to recite inwardly the following phrases directed to yourself. You begin with yourself because without loving yourself it is almost impossible to love others.

May I be filled with loving-kindness. May I be well. May I be peaceful and at ease. May I be happy.

As you say the phrases, you may also wish to use the image from the Buddha's instructions: picture yourself as a young and beloved child, or sense yourself as you are now, held in a heart of lovingkindness. Let the feelings arise with the words. Adjust the words and images so that you find the exact phrases that best open your heart of kindness. Repeat the phrases again and again, letting the feelings permeate your body and mind. Practice this meditation repeatedly for a number of weeks until the sense of loving-kindness for yourself grows. When you feel ready, in the same meditation period you can gradually expand the focus of your loving-kindness to include others.

After yourself, choose a benefactor, someone in your life who has truly cared for you. Picture them and carefully recite the same phrases, May he/she be filled with loving-kindness, and so forth. When loving-kindness for your benefactor has developed, begin to include other people you love in the meditation, picturing them and reciting the same phrases, evoking a sense of loving-kindness for them.

After this you can gradually begin to include others: friends, community members, neighbors, people everywhere, animals, the whole earth, and all beings. Then you can even experiment with including the most difficult people in your life, wishing that they, too, be filled with loving-kindness and peace. With some practice a steady sense of loving-kindness can develop and in the course of fifteen or twenty minutes you will be able to include many beings in your meditation, moving from yourself, to a benefactor and loved ones, to all beings everywhere. Then you can learn to practice it anywhere.

You can use this meditation in traffic jams, in buses and airplanes, in doctors' waiting rooms, and in a thousand other circumstances. As you silently practice this loving-kindness meditation among people, you will immediately feel a wonderful connection with them-the power of loving-kindness. It will calm your life and keep you connected to your heart.

From "A Path with Heart" by Jack Kornfield