

## Tough love

Lovingkindness meditation,<sup>1</sup> to some, even beginners, can be very overwhelming, in the sense that it can tap some really joyful forgotten or undiscovered parts of us, or touch a painful old forgotten wound or cause a negative reaction. However, any trained and experienced Buddhist meditator would know that there are effective ways of resolving such issues in any normal person. (“Normal” here meaning anyone who has issues but does not need medication.)<sup>2</sup>

Most traditional Buddhist meditation teachers would use “lovingkindness” as a blanket term that includes compassion, the second of the “divine abodes.”<sup>3</sup> It actually makes good sense to always begin with lovingkindness, and then proceed to compassion. Simply put, a beginner may face difficulties, even problems, if he were to simply begin meditating on compassion without any grounding in lovingkindness.<sup>4</sup>

The next vital point to remember is that thoughts (mental chatter) are the worst enemies of meditation.<sup>5</sup> They simply hinder meditation in the form of sensual desire, ill will, sloth and torpor, restlessness and remorse, and doubt.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, lovingkindness is a feeling, a positive emotion, not a thought. However, we normally begin lovingkindness meditation with some positive words or thoughts, such as “May I be well. May I be happy. I accept myself just as I am.” This is to prime the mind by displacing immediate distractions so that our attention moves closer to lovingkindness.

To boost our lovingkindness meditation, we visualize some very happy memories. The first time we climbed a tree. How we gazed at the night sky full of twinkling stars. A happy family gathering. When we were giving birth to our child. When we were grooming our sick dog. We were tending to our plants and flowers.

Once we feel lovingkindness, a joyful embrace of what is in our hearts, we simply remain silent. Just smile gently in our hearts the moment we feel a hint of a thought returning. Just be that lovingkindness, and let it be. There’s nothing to say, nothing to do, nothing to think. To love is to be. This is the moment. Let it be. Let it be.

The sad fact, however, might be that we are unable to love, not even to accept ourselves. Then we should begin where we are most comfortable, say a happy time with someone very kind to us, or one of those happy moments mentioned above.

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<sup>1</sup> For a poem, see “Lovingkindness” (R160 = SJ2 38): [http://dharmafarer.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2009/10/Simple-Joys-2\\_2011\\_PiyaTan-ebook.pdf](http://dharmafarer.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2009/10/Simple-Joys-2_2011_PiyaTan-ebook.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> For a simple introduction, see “Lovingkindness is simply healing” (R58 = SJ1 4.2): [http://dharmafarer.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2009/10/Simple-Joys-ebook-2011\\_Piya\\_Tan\\_low-res.pdf](http://dharmafarer.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2009/10/Simple-Joys-ebook-2011_Piya_Tan_low-res.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> The 4 divine abodes are lovingkindness, compassion, gladness and equanimity. They internalize “divinity” or “godliness” without any need of belief or worship of any external agent or divine entity. In short, “God’s temple is within us” (R173 = SJ2 48). They are also called the positive social emotions, qualities of a true professional, virtues of leadership, etc. On the divine abodes, see “The greatest love” (R148 = SJ2 33): [http://dharmafarer.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2009/10/Simple-Joys-2\\_2011\\_PiyaTan-ebook.pdf](http://dharmafarer.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2009/10/Simple-Joys-2_2011_PiyaTan-ebook.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> On the primacy of lovingkindness amongst positive emotions, see **Brahma, vihāra**, SD 38.5 (2.1.2): <http://dharmafarer.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2010/02/38.5-Brahmavihara-piya.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> Thinking does have a vital role in creativity and efforts in wholesome communication. Often, our thinking and creativity are enhanced and enriched after a good meditation.

<sup>6</sup> These are in fact the 5 mental hindrances: see **Nivarāṇa**, SD 32.1: <http://dharmafarer.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2010/02/32.1-Nivarana-piya.pdf>

A more tricky version of self-hate is when we fear that love or compassion would undermine our drive. We use drive, control or achievement to keep away fears of shame or failure. This fear keeps molesting us with only brief breaks when we think we are succeeding in something or in control of a situation.

It is likely that we could have had an abusive or unloving past. So we feel violated, valueless, and even think of violence towards ourselves.<sup>7</sup> An important Buddhist teaching reminds us to “disown the pain,” not to think in terms of “I, me, mine.” Instead, we should define our negative feeling objectively as something like: “This is a hurt feeling. Just a feeling. Millions of others have gone through this, are going through this, will go through this. It is a common lot of humanity.” Then, when we feel ready, go on to do the self-accepting cycle of loving-kindness.

A bit more understanding of how we create our “self” or rather “selves” would be helpful and healing. We tend to create a sense of self of what we do *not* want to be, and also who we do not want *others* to know about. Often these selves get pushed into the shadows of our being, so that we are not even aware of them. But they are there, lurking, controlling us from the dark depths.

At an early stage in lovingkindness meditation, we visualize in our hearts, a beautiful white lotus, radiant like the sun itself, shining with lovingkindness. This lovingkind light brightens up our whole body and mind, dispelling all dark emotions so that all our being becomes radiant with lovingkindness. All this feels joyful and peaceful.

After a few minutes of comfortable sitting, once we feel a sense of peace, we gently and silently verbalize (or subverbalize): “I accept myself just as I am. I forgive myself completely.” Or we can make up our own suitable short sentences. Mentally say them a couple of times, and then silently feel the warmth or good feeling throughout our body and mind.

Once when we did this in a group sitting, a woman brimmed with joyful tears. Later, she told us that all her life she had been abused by her parents who rejected her as being of no use to the family. This was the first time she ever said or heard such a nice thing about herself. She realized she could simply say it and make it happen: “I’m OK!” We need to clear our minds of thoughts: they are not ours, anyway.

Another difficulty is when, in our meditation, we recall someone we dislike or who has hurt us. We can feel the anger or sadness or negativity arising. Again here we are simply being confronted by thoughts. The sad event is long dead and gone; even that negative person has aged or died. So why bear a dead weight or coffin of the past? Just put it down; leave it buried.

Firmly clear away such a negative thought by gently smiling at it. (Mental smiling is great event in the meditating mind.) If the thought keeps returning, then try “labeling” it simply as “thinking, thinking” a couple of times. Then gently smile again. If this fails, too, we go back to an earlier, more comfortable, stage of the meditation.

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<sup>7</sup> Such traits may spur us on to become intolerant evangelists whose blind-sided agenda is to convert others without ever being able to really wholesomely listen to others.

If all this fails, stop the meditation, take a deep conscious breath, hold it as long as we can, absorbing all the negativity. Then, gently breathe out the negativity like whistling, until we are like a flat balloon. Then breathe normally.

A third problem with lovingkindness is actually outside of meditation. This is when we have difficulty with receiving lovingkindness, or even friendship or love, from others. We feel threatened, wondering, “Why is he so kind to me? Is he trying to use me? Is he gate-crashing my elite circle? Is he after my money? Is he after sex?”<sup>8</sup>

Possibly, such a distancing, especially when it is an insidious habit, could be rooted in a repressed childhood trauma or being hurt by an attachment figure.<sup>9</sup> In one counselling case, a pretty young woman complained that all her relationships failed because she was afraid of intimacy.

From the counselling, she recalled being molested by a relative when she was very young. Once this shadow is brought to light, it is easy to dispel it, using lovingkindness to accept herself, and to show compassion to that molester: compassion is kindness shown to others even when they don’t deserve it. The molester was himself a helpless person. This is how we excise past ghosts from our minds,<sup>10</sup> and give up a victim role (Dh 3-4).<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Doctrinally, this is known as “conceit” or “measuring” (*māna*): see **Mine: The nature of conceit**, SD 19.2a.

<sup>9</sup> See Paul Gilbert, “Compassion-focused therapy,” in Singer & Bolz, 2013:69 f.

<sup>10</sup> See Kai Kupferschmidt, “Concentrating on kindness,” *Science* 341 20 Sep 2013: 1336-1339:

<http://www.sciencemag.org/content/341/6152/1336.full> or [download](#).

**Free 531-page interactive ebook download** (recommended): T Singer & M Bolz (eds), *Compassion. Bridging Practice and Science*, Munich: Max Planck Society, 2013: <http://www.compassion-training.org/>. My thanks to Dr CHONG Kwek Yan of Singapore for relaying this information.

<sup>11</sup> See also “Don’t own the pain,” (R122 = SJ2 19): [http://dharmafarer.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2009/10/Simple-Joys-2\\_2011\\_PiyaTan-ebook.pdf](http://dharmafarer.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2009/10/Simple-Joys-2_2011_PiyaTan-ebook.pdf)