

How to cultivate lovingkindness (1 of 2)

[An excerpt from [SD 60ab Meditation in Society](#), © Piya Tan 2022]

9.1.1.1 In the traditional practice, the people to whom we should cultivate **lovingkindness** are as follows:

- (1) ourselves (*attā*);
- (2) a dear person: someone whom we like and respect (*piya puggala*);
- (3) a neutral [indifferent] person: someone for whom we have no feelings (*majjhata puggala*);
- (4) someone we dislike (a hated person) (*appiya puggala*).

Note that the first subject of our lovingkindness is ourselves. To cultivate **lovingkindness** (*mettā*), we must ensure that we do *ourselves* have lovingkindness, that we are capable of generating this unconditional acceptance of others, including ourselves. In other words, we should begin with ourselves, ensuring that we are not burdened or overshadowed by any sense of self-hate, guilt, fear or any other negative emotions, especially from religious conditioning or emotional trauma.

9.1.1.2 Just as charity begins at home, lovingkindness begins with “**unconditional self-love.**” Notice that if we say “self-love,” it sounds rather self-centred or selfish. But it is unconditional, in the sense that there are no conditions attached: “I love and accept myself just as I am,” “I forgive myself for all that I have done which I should *not* have done,” “I forgive myself for not doing what I should *have* done,” and so on.

This cultivation (like any of the others in this divine abode) may be done with mental words (subverbalization) or visualization of happy memories, or both. The subverbalization [8.7.1.3] should be done slowly, mindfully, repeating just 1-2 short sentences (as above) a couple of times; then, feel the sentiments of those words; smile within. [8.7.1.3]

If, for any reason, we are unable to begin with showing lovingkindness to ourselves, we should begin with the 2nd stage, that is, to the dear person. Then, near the end of the session, or in place of the “disliked person,” we should direct lovingkindness to ourselves. In time, we should work to uncover and heal our inability to show unconditional self-love. Indeed, our meditation may even help us discover the conditions that bring this about, and deal with them.

9.1.1.3 The 2nd subject or stage of our lovingkindness cultivation is **a dear person**. It is vital to understand that we should not try to direct lovingkindness to someone we may be sensually or sexually drawn to (whether of the opposite sex or the same sex), or to someone we are emotionally attached to or involved with. We would be arousing lust and blissfully wallowing in it without realizing that it is *not* lovingkindness.

Nor should we direct our lovingkindness to a dead person, since that person is no more around. Directing lovingkindness to a dead person may also arouse *fear* or *doubt*, especially when we feel guilty towards that person for any reason, or are superstitious. Hence, we cannot attain dhyana with a dead person as the meditation object.

For a dead person, it is proper to dedicate merits to them at the end of our meditation. For those who have attained nirvana, like the Buddha and the arhats, it is proper that we practise the recollection of the Buddha or of the sangha.

We may, however, cultivate lovingkindness toward persons of the opposite sex (or the same sex) after we have attained dhyana (when we have no lustful feelings, at least temporarily). We may also show them lovingkindness as a group: “May all women be happy,” “May all men be happy.”

9.1.1.4 At the start, we should cultivate lovingkindness towards only the first two: ourselves and the person we like or respect. This means that at the start, we should *not* direct lovingkindness towards a person we do not like or hate, one very dear to us, or to one we are indifferent. By staying

focused with just the first 2 persons, it will be easier for us to concentrate on cultivating lovingkindness.

Beginners will find it difficult to cultivate lovingkindness to a **neutral person**, especially when we have no connection with that person. The 4th person—**someone we dislike**—who may have hurt or harm us or those near and dear to us. Hence, thinking of this kind of person, anger may arise instead.

9.1.1.5 Interestingly, we cannot attain dhyana using ourselves as the object, no matter how long we do this. Why then do we start the cultivation of lovingkindness with ourselves? The idea is to be familiar with the wholesome emotion of lovingkindness, “May I be happy,” which is, normally, very easy seeing ourselves positively. Then, we are able to identify with others: just as we want to be well and happy, so do they, too. Just as we want to live long and not die, so do they. This is called **the golden rule** (that of wholesome reciprocity), which is also the universal basis for the morality of keeping the precepts.¹

When we cultivate lovingkindness to ourselves, we also arouse **joy** in us which makes it easier for us to keep the moral precepts and to meditate. Hence, we should begin our lovingkindness meditation with these 4 thoughts:²

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| (1) May I be free from danger. | <i>aham̐ avero homi</i> |
| (2) May I be free from suffering [mental pain]. ³ | <i>abyāpajjo⁴ homi</i> |
| (3) May I be free from misery [physical pain]. | <i>anīgho homi</i> |
| (4) May I be well and happy. | <i>sukhī attānam̐ pariharāmi</i> |

Once our mind or heart is radiantly joyful with love, kindness, and empathy, we are ready to cultivate lovingkindness to others, too.⁵

9.1.2 Cultivating lovingkindness by person

9.1.2.1 When we have attained the 4th dhyana, especially through the white kasina-dhyana [8.6.2], we should be able to emerge from it with mental radiance, and go on to cultivate lovingkindness up to dhyana with ease.⁶ With 4th-dhyana concentration, the mind is temporarily purified of greed, hatred, delusion, and other defilements.

Having just emerged from dhyana, the mind is pliant, workable, pure and radiant, and because of this, we will quickly arouse perfect lovingkindness to whomever we wish, even those we have not liked, what more those who are dear and respected by us. We should visualize this last person as standing or sitting a few yards before us, and we direct these 4 thoughts to that image:

- (1) May this good person be free from danger.
- (2) May this good person be free from suffering [mental pain].
- (3) May this good person be free from misery [physical pain].
- (4) May this good person be well and happy.

9.1.2.2 We may, of course, begin with attaining **the 1st dhyana**, or even some pre-dhyana level of concentration, with a calmly focused mind, radiate our lovingkindness with those 4 sentences

¹ See **Veḷu, dvāreyya S** (S 55.7,6-12), SD 1.5; Dh 129 f.

² From *imā sattā averā avyāpajjhā anīghā sukhī attānam̐ pariharantu*, **Sā;eyyaka S** (M 41,14/1:288,27), SD 5.7).

³ The words in [square brackets] here and the foll are Pa Auk’s tr. The words *avyāpajja* [Be *abyāpajja*] and *anīgha* are polysemous: see the 2 prec nn.

⁴ On *abyāpajja* or *abyāpajjha* (also *avyāpajja*, *avyāpajjha*), “non-ill will,” see **(Iti) Vitakka S** (It 38,3), SD 55.9.

⁵ See Pa-Auk 2019:81-83.

⁶ See also Pa-Auk 2019:72-77 Q&A 2.2.

[9.1.2.1], slowly repeating each 3-4 times each time. Then, choose the one that we like best, for example, “May this good person be free from danger.” Then, with a new image of that person, in this case *free from danger*, direct lovingkindness using that same sentence, repeating it again and again: “May this person be free from danger”

Keep up the focused repetition until the mind is steadily fixed on the object, and we are able to discern the dhyana-factors [8.2.5.4]. Once we have attained the 1st dhyana, stay with it long enough to be familiar with it. We should keep on attaining the dhyana for a few months to be sure we are good at it. Then, when we feel ready, go on to master the 2nd dhyana in the same manner. Then, the 3rd dhyana, and then the 4th dhyana in the same way. Each time, we cultivate lovingkindness in the very same manner, and working on the 5 masteries [8.2.5.3] each time.

9.1.2.3 When we have succeeded with a person we like and respect, we do it again with another person of our own sex whom we **like and respect**. Try doing this with about 10 people of the same type, until we can reach the 3rd dhyana using any of them. By this stage, we can safely go on to other people, still of our own sex, who are **very dear to us** (*atippiya sahāyaka*), such as our partners, spouses, parents or children.

Take about 10 people of that type, and cultivate lovingkindness towards them one by one, in the same way, until the 3rd dhyana. Then, we can also take about 10 people of our own sex whom we are **indifferent** to, and in the same way develop lovingkindness towards them until the 3rd dhyana.

We will by now have mastered the lovingkindness dhyana to such an extent that we can, in the same way, cultivate it towards about 10 people of our own sex whom we **hate**.

Cultivating lovingkindness in this way, that is, by gaining concentration up to the 3rd dhyana on each type of people, progressively from one to the next, from the easiest to the more difficult, we make our mind increasingly soft, pliant, workable, radiant, until we are finally able to attain dhyana on any of the 4 types: those we like and respect, those very dear to us, those we are indifferent to, and those we hate.

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