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INTRODUCTION TO MEDITATION – WEEK 4

LOVING KINDESS

Loving kindness is a state of mind that encompasses feelings of friendliness, goodwill, benevolence, fellowship, amity, concord, inoffensiveness and non-violence.

It is easy to confuse metta with the romantic notion of love, however with metta we aim to extend this feeling of well-wishing without sensual thoughts of what we can obtain from the other person. We aim to extend this feeling to all beings, small or great, near and far and not just those who are pleasing to us.

We can practise loving kindness in formal meditation. We start by directing thoughts of loving kindness to ourselves. This is an essential foundation for being able to direct thoughts of well-wishing to other people. We reflect upon the fact that all living beings want to be happy and consider that this impulse unites us. We reflect in a way which is meaningful to us, e.g. “just as I wish to be happy and free from suffering, so may that being. May all beings be happy and free from suffering”. Sometimes it may be difficult to give loving kindness to ourselves and if this is the case, we recollect some of the good things we have done and acknowledge that we deserve to be happy.

After ourselves, we extend the thought of loving kindness to a person for whom we have a loving respect, e.g. a teacher or parent. Then it is extended to dearly beloved people, to indifferent people and finally to enemies or people we may find difficult. Since this meditation is concerned with the welfare of the living, one should not choose people who have died. One should also avoid choosing people towards whom one may have feelings of sexual attraction. Instead considering these different groups of people we can extend or expand our visualisation spatially, beginning with beings in this room, then all beings in this city, all beings in this country, this world and finally all living beings in this universe.

As we visualise these beings, we can repeat a phrase such as “may you be happy, may you be well, may you be free from suffering”. While this helps as a kind of mental prompt, it is not the ultimate aim of the meditation: we really want to try to evoke a feeling of well-wishing and project it mentally to the beings we are visualising. With practice it becomes easier to bring up that feeling and we find that it grows in strength. In fact, we may find that it grows in strength to the point that we can let go of the subjects of our loving kindness and transfer our attention to the feeling itself.

In addition to the formal practice of loving kindness meditation, we can also employ it in our everyday life to bring about a change in the way of looking at things. Doing this supports our formal practice in the same way that mindfulness practice daily life supports our formal breath meditation. After doing formal loving kindness practice a few times and developing a little mindfulness of our states of mind we may become aware of situations in our everyday life when we experience negative or selfish thoughts. When we recognise these, we can make a conscious effort to let go of the negative thoughts and consciously bring about thought of loving kindness. By doing this often, we find that our old habits of mind are gradually chipped away and that we experience states of greater happiness.

Metta Sutta

The Buddha's Words on Loving-Kindness

This is what should be done
By one who is skilled in goodness,
And who knows the path of peace:
Let them be able and upright,
Straightforward and gentle in speech.
Humble and not conceited,
Contented and easily satisfied.
Not busy with duties and frugal in their ways.
Peaceful and calm, and wise and skilful,
Not proud and demanding in nature.
Let them not do the slightest thing
That the wise would later reprove.

Wishing in gladness and in safety,
May all beings be at ease.
Whatever living beings there may be;
Whether they are weak or strong, omitting none,
The great or the might, medium, short or small,
The seen and the unseen,
Those living near and far away,
Those born and to-be-born,
May all beings be at ease!

Let none deceive another,
Or despise any being in any state.
Let none through anger or ill-will
Wish harm upon another.
Even as a mother protects with her life
Her child, her only child,
So with a boundless heart
Should one cherish all living beings:
Radiating kindness over the entire world
Spreading upwards to the skies,
And downwards to the depths;
Outwards and unbounded,
Freed from hatred and ill-will.
Whether standing or walking, seated or lying down
Free from drowsiness,
One should sustain this recollection.
This is said to be the sublime abiding.
By not holding to fixed views,
The pure-hearted one, having clarity of vision,
Being freed from all sense desires,
Is not born again into this world.

