

Guided Meditation: Awakening Lovingkindness

Through the lovingkindness meditation we open our hearts to ourselves, to others and to all beings everywhere.

—

Sit in a way that allows you to be comfortable and relaxed. Scan through your body and let go of whatever tension you can. Loosen through the shoulders, soften the hands and relax the belly. Take a few moments to sense the image and feeling of a smile (see "Embracing Life with a Smile," page 91). Allow this to connect you with a spirit of gentleness and ease.

Now allow yourself to remember and open up to your basic goodness. You might bring to mind times you have been kind or generous. You might recall your natural desire to be happy and not to suffer. You might honor your essential wakefulness, honesty and love. If acknowledging your own goodness is difficult, then look at yourself through the eyes of someone who loves you. What does that person love about you? You might also bring to mind whoever you embodies the Beloved—the Buddha, Kwan Yin, Divine Mother, Jesus, Shiva—and see yourself with this being's wise and loving eyes. When you have connected with a sense of your essential goodness, rest in a tender appreciation for a few moments.

Now with a silent whisper begin offering yourself lovingkindness through prayers of care. As you repeat each phrase, sense the meaning of the words and let them arise from the sincerity of your heart. Choose four or five phrases that are meaningful to you. They might include:

May I be filled with lovingkindness; may I be held in lovingkindness.

May I accept myself just as I am.

May I be happy.

May I touch great and natural peace.

May I know the natural joy of being alive.

May my heart and mind awaken; may I be free.

You might find that you begin to feel agitated as you offer yourself prayers of lovingkindness. The words might seem discordant and artificial if you are feeling down on yourself. Sometimes the exercise of offering yourself care only highlights how undeserving and bad you feel about yourself. Without judgment, include this reactivity in the meditation: "May this too be held in lovingkindness." Then resume offering the chosen phrases of care to yourself, remaining mindful and accepting of whatever thoughts or feelings may arise.

If you find that you are reciting the words mechanically during this or any part of the meditation, don't worry. As with the forgiveness practice, your heart has natural seasons of feeling open and closed. What most matters is your intention to awaken lovingkindness.

—

Now you can begin to open the circle of lovingkindness. Bring to mind someone who is dear to you. Reflect on this person's basic goodness, sensing what it is in particular that you love about him or her. Perhaps you love this person's capacity to love, their honesty or humor. You might remember that she wants to be happy and doesn't want to suffer. Be aware of his essence as good and wakeful and loving. In your heart feel your appreciation for this dear one and begin offering your prayer. You might draw from four or five phrases below or, if you prefer, create your own. As you silently whisper each phrase of lovingkindness, imagine

how it might be for this person to experience the fruit of your blessing—the self-acceptance, peace, joy and freedom.

May you too be filled with lovingkindness; may you be held in lovingkindness.

May you feel my love now.

May you accept yourself just as you are.

May you be happy.

May you know great and natural peace.

May you know the natural joy of being alive.

May your heart and mind awaken; may you be free.

After offering your prayers for a loved one for several minutes, widen your circle of caring and awareness by bringing to mind a “neutral” person. This is someone you might see regularly but don’t know well and don’t have strong negative or positive feelings about. Reflect on this person’s goodness by sensing how he or she also wants to be happy and doesn’t want to suffer.

Sense this being’s aliveness and essential caring about life. Using the phrases suggested above, or whatever other phrases you choose, offer lovingkindness to this person.

Now bring to mind someone with whom you have a difficult relationship—perhaps someone who evokes anger, fear or hurt. First take some moments to bring a kind attention to whatever arises in you as you reflect on this person. Hold your own feelings with lovingkindness. Then turning your attention to this person, try to see some aspect of his or her basic goodness. If it is difficult to perceive kindness or honesty, simply reflect on how this person wants to be happy and doesn’t want to suffer. Sense this being’s fundamental wakefulness, and remember that life matters to this person just as it does for you. Holding him or her in a gentle at-

tention, begin offering the phrases of lovingkindness that come most easily for you.

Next imagine that you are bringing together all those you have just prayed for—yourself, a dear one, a neutral person and a difficult person—and offer the prayers of lovingkindness for all at once. Sense your shared humanity, your vulnerability and your basic goodness. As you send prayers of care, hold yourself and these others in your heart, recognizing that you are all in this together.

Now allow your awareness to open out in all directions—in front of you, to either side, behind you, below you and above you. In this vast space, sense that your loving presence is holding all beings: the wild creatures that fly and swim and run across fields; the dogs and cats that live in our homes; the life-forms that are threatened with extinction; the trees and grasses and flowers; children everywhere; humans living in great poverty and those with great riches; those at war and those at peace; those who are dying and those who are newly born. Imagine that you can hold the earth, our mother, in your lap and include all life everywhere in your boundless heart. Aware of the joys and sorrows that all beings experience, again offer your prayers:

May all beings be filled with lovingkindness.

May all beings know great and natural peace.

May there be peace on earth, peace everywhere.

May all beings awaken; may all be free.

Repeat these phrases several times. Then allow yourself to rest in openness and silence, letting whatever arises in your heart and awareness be touched by lovingkindness.

You can weave the lovingkindness practice into your daily life. When you are with a loved one or with someone who elicits irritation or insecurity, you might pause, be aware of your heart and mentally whisper, "May you be happy." You might set the intention that you will reflect, each morning for a week, on the goodness of the people you live with. Then through the day whenever you remember, silently offer them prayers of lovingkindness. You might choose a person you see regularly toward whom you have neutral feelings, and for a week whenever you see him or her, silently offer your wishes for his or her well-being. Or you might choose a person whom you find difficult and daily offer him or her lovingkindness. As you do these practices, notice how your feelings change in relating to the people you are focusing on. Does their behavior change toward you?

Because the phrases and sequence of the formal practice can easily become mechanical, there are ways to keep your experience fresh and alive. In this spirit, you might experiment with the following:

- Select phrases that resonate in the moment.
- Whisper your prayer aloud.
- Say the name of the one to whom you are offering your prayer.
- Imagine you are holding in your heart those to whom you are sending lovingkindness, or placing your hand on their cheek with care.
- Imagine them feeling healed, loved and uplifted by your prayer.

Even a few moments of offering lovingkindness can reconnect you with the purity of your loving heart.

ELEVEN



AWAKENING TOGETHER: PRACTICING RADICAL ACCEPTANCE IN RELATIONSHIP

*Stay together, friends.
Don't scatter and sleep.
Our friendship is made
Of being awake.*

Rumi

*I sought my god,
my god I could not see
I sought my soul,
my soul eluded me
I sought my brother
and found all three
Anonymous*

In one of the legends of the Holy Grail, Parsifal, a young knight on a quest, wanders into a parched and devastated land where nothing grows. When he arrives at the capital of this wasteland, he finds the townspeople behaving as if everything were normal. They are not