



bodhi tree
FOREST MONASTERY AND RETREAT CENTRE

Support of Loving-kindness Meditation – Ven. Pannyavaro

After the meditator is established in the basics of Vipassana meditation, Loving-kindness meditation can be used to support the more challenging Vipassana practice. While this is switching meditation modes to a concentration-based practice, its benefit is that it uplifts and sweetens the mind and helps meditators to cope with negative emotions that they may not yet be able to deal with in their Vipassana practice.

Loving-kindness as a meditation practice retrains the mind to overcome all forms of negativity. It brings about positive attitudinal changes by systematically developing the quality of 'loving-acceptance'. It is the qualities of acceptance and receptivity that creates the spaciousness and clarity of mind that allows for deepening attentiveness. That is why combining loving-kindness with Vipassana is supportive of the meditator's ongoing practice.

Loving-kindness can be developed both to clear the way for and to support Vipassana meditation; or it can be further developed in a more systematic way to achieve a level of meditative absorption or one-pointedness.

When Loving-kindness meditation is developed systematically to the level of meditative absorption or one-pointedness, the five absorption factors of concentration are developed. The first two are causal factors – application and sustained application - followed by three effects: rapture, ease-of-mind, and one-pointedness or unification of mind. It is not really necessary to develop loving-kindness to the absorption level, but it can be useful for the meditator to be familiar with the absorption factors, as some of them will arise during Vipassana meditation as well. By being familiar with the effects of intensive concentration, the Vipassana meditator is less likely to get attached to them when they arise.

The advantages of having gained the five absorption factors are that they counteract the 'Five Mental Hindrances' or the obstacles on the path of the meditator - although the pure Vipassana meditator should be aware that threshold concentration is sufficient to inhibit these hindrances as well.

Here is how the five absorption factors neutralize the five mental hindrances: mental application arouses energy and effort to overcome the hindrance of sloth and torpor or mental inertia; sustained application steadies the mind to overcome

skeptical doubt, which has the characteristic of wavering; rapture, with its uplifting effervescence, prevails over feelings of ill-will; ease-of-mind, by relieving accumulated stress, counteracts restlessness or agitation of mind; One-pointedness holds the mind's wanderings in the sense-fields inhibiting sensuality.

Because of its auto-suggestive nature, the positive attitude of loving-kindness combined with deep concentration will imprint the new positive conditioning to override old negative patterns. For example, the overly critical mind, which finds fault with anything and everything, is reprogrammed to be more accepting and allowing. So on the psychological level, the therapeutic benefits for the individual are considerable, as old negative habits are broken and are replaced with new positive ways of thinking.

Loving-kindness is practiced as the first of a series of meditations that produce four qualities of love. They are Friendliness, Compassion, Appreciative Joy, and Equanimity. The quality of 'friendliness' is expressed as warmth that reaches out and embraces others. When loving-kindness matures, it naturally overflows into compassion because it empathizes with people's difficulties. On the other hand, one needs to be wary of its near enemy, pity, merely mimicking the quality of concern without real empathy. The positive expression of empathy is an appreciation of other people's good qualities or good fortune rather than feelings of jealousy towards them, which is the enemy of appreciative joy.

This series of meditations comes to maturity with equanimity. This equanimity has to be cultivated within the context of this series of meditations or else it tends to manifest as its near enemy, indifference or aloofness. It remains caring and on looking with an equal spread of feeling and acceptance toward all people, relationships and situations, without discrimination.

The structure of the practice is fairly simple. The meditator must start with generating loving-feelings and acceptance towards him or herself. This is important, as one needs to have loving feelings towards oneself before it can be projected towards others. Then one induces positive emotional feelings of loving-kindness towards four types of people, after which, one directionally pervades the loving-feeling to all points of the compass. The final stage is non-specific pervasion, which more or less arises spontaneously as the concentration intensifies, and there is little or no self-referencing.

Four types of people are chosen to develop loving-kindness towards:

First: a respected, beloved person, such as a teacher or mentor;
second: a dearly beloved person, that is a close family member or dear friend;
third: a neutral person, somebody you know but have no emotional involvement with; the fourth is a difficult person, i.e., a person you are currently having difficulty with.

The practice must always start with developing loving acceptance of oneself. However, if any resistance is experienced, then it indicates that negative self-judgments such as feelings of unworthiness are present. Don't worry, as this indicates there is work to be done. Essentially you are working with a quality of mind, and as the practice is auto-suggestive, any quality of mind, positive or negative, can be changed. In good time, and with persistent practice, feelings of self-doubt and negativity can be overcome. Then you can move on to develop loving-kindness to others.

Starting with yourself, and then moving systematically from person to person in the given order, the objective is to break down the barriers between the four types of people and yourself. In this way, it can be said to break down the divisions within one's own mind, the source of much of the conflict we experience in our relationships.

The key to the practice is being able to go beyond the barriers we create in our own mind, for the Buddha describes the loving person as having a mind without barriers – without separation. When a person has seen, and seen through, the conceptually created barriers of gender, race, class, and 'mine' and 'not mine', they are then able to love others unconditionally.

An effect of practicing systematic Loving-kindness meditation is that one is transforming the particular love one naturally has for one's close family members and dear friends - which is actually an attached kind of love - to a universal love that embraces everybody without exception, an altruistic love.

Just a word of caution, if you practice loving-kindness intensively, it is best to choose a member of the same sex, or if you have a sexual bias to your own sex then a person of the opposite sex. This avoids the risk of arousing the near enemy of loving-kindness, that is, lust. Try different people to practice on, as some people do not easily fit into the above categories, but do keep to the prescribed order.

Three ways of arousing feelings of loving-kindness:

Visualisation - create a vivid positive mental picture of oneself and the four people one has chosen, in order to promote a sense of loving-feeling, well being and joyousness.

Reflection - think about the positive qualities of the person and/or the acts of kindness they have done for you, or make an affirmation, which is a positive statement about yourself, in your own words. The exception to using the 'reflection device' is when working with the 'difficult person', because the thinking might trigger the painful relationship and aggravate things. So just a visualization of the difficult person, reinforced by the auditory repetition, is sufficient.

Auditory - this is the simplest but probably the most effective way. Repeat a phrase such as 'loving-kindness', 'loving-kindness'.

The visualizations, reflections and the repetition of loving-kindness are devices to help you arouse positive emotional feelings of love. You can use all of them or one that works the best for you. When the positive emotional feeling arises, switch from the devices to the feeling, as it is the feeling that is the primary focus. Keep the mind fixed on the feeling; if it strays, bring it back to the device, or if the feeling weakens or is lost then return to the device, for example, use the visualization or the repetition of 'loving kindness' to bring back or strengthen the positive feeling.

The next stage is 'directional pervasion', where one systematically projects the aroused feeling of loving-kindness to all points of the compass: north, south, east and west, up and down, and all around. Bringing to mind Dharma friends and communities in the cities, towns and countries around the world can enhance the directional pervasion.

The last stage, 'non-specific pervasion', tends to spontaneously occur as the practice matures. It is not discriminating. It has no specific object and involves just naturally radiating feelings of universal love. When it arises, the practice has come to maturity in that it has changed preferential love, which is an attached love, to an all-embracing, unconditional love!

As loving-kindness is a concentration-based meditation, one must not allow the mind to wander, and when it does, one gently brings it back. The time you need to spend doing this practice would depend on the time it takes to arouse the loving feelings. At least a half-hour session would be needed for the practice to develop sufficiently.

When the mind has been uplifted and is sweetened with feelings of loving-kindness, you will find that the drier Vipassana practice is very much easier. The meditator is in a heightened state of receptivity and able to tune in more sensitively to what is happening in the present moment.

When positive emotional feelings of loving-kindness have developed and overcome any negative mind state, then the meditator can choose to switch back to the Vipassana mode by focusing on the particular characteristics of the mind state that was induced from loving-kindness. In this way one is reverting back to the insight meditation mode.

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