

Lovingkindness is Not for Sissies

by Lisa Hoffman

Lovingkindness never much inspired me beyond thinking that it was nice. It struck me as lacking an edge -- no New York energy in loving everyone. Over time I saw how wrong I was. Lovingkindness is about wishing well-being *no matter what*. And it was a member of the meditation group I lead who demonstrated how edgy such love is.

"Dale" is a woman in her late 50s who is marrying her partner now that gay marriage is legal in California. Her partner's sister is a conservative Christian and won't come to the wedding. Dale's partner is deeply hurt because she and her sister have always been very close. Dale is consumed with fury at the sister and protective of her wounded fiancé.

She told us about this recently, when our meditation group talked about lovingkindness as seeing the humanity in all beings, even people who have caused great harm. That is the traditional Buddhist practice, and we all agreed on the challenge of wishing well-being and ease under such circumstances. As we talked, there was a palpable feeling of opening in the room, of warming to this intention of love and acceptance. Toward the end of our group, Dale spoke up. "This has been a really good discussion for me," she said. "I see that I can accept my partner's sister, even wish her well. And there can also be room for the hurt and anger. I'm really going to think about this."

Lovingkindness is one of the Four Heavenly Abodes, along with compassion, joy and equanimity. The Buddha taught them as practices that cultivate a heart of love and openness to everything. Dale embodied my growing appreciation of lovingkindness as embracing people exactly as they are, and life exactly as it is. Nothing was changing about the situation except Dale could imagine wishing the sister well-being and seeing her as a person. Her practice of lovingkindness could include her own anger and disappointment. "I realize that my partner's sister isn't going to change, but I can," she said.

The traditional practice of lovingkindness involves daily chanting that begins with you. You wish yourself well-being. It is an especially good practice for those of us who are hard on ourselves:

May I be happy.

May I live in safety.

May I live with ease.

May I have well-being.

When you feel ready, extend your lovingkindness chanting to someone you care deeply about, which is often easier than focusing on you. Immerse yourself in wishing joy to a loved one. It can heighten your appreciation of your beloved -- you may notice qualities that you haven't in awhile, or attributes that are new to you. This practice can also expand your foundation during inevitable difficulties to include lovingkindness. You may find yourself experiencing conflict and communicating about it in a different way. I don't believe that lovingkindness means that you'll never get angry or feel hurt because you are drifting along in a cloud of love. Rather, there is room for your feelings and experience, your loved one, and communication that is perhaps a bit more gentle than it might have been before your practice.

Now shift your lovingkindness focus to someone you feel neutral about -- perhaps the person who picks up your garbage once a week. How does offering such a person well-being affect you? What do you notice the next time you see this individual? And how might your wish of ease affect those you are chanting for?

Next is the edge of lovingkindness -- wishing happiness and ease to someone who causes you difficulty or pain; someone you're angry with, uncomfortable around, or actively dislike, even hate. It is fascinating to practice lovingkindness with someone toward whom you have negative feelings. Often reasons not to wish this person happiness arise, and these thoughts and emotions become part of your lovingkindness. When I first tried this aspect of lovingkindness, I realized that it is a practice of strength and clarity. That's because I was choosing to open to someone who had hurt me deeply. I was choosing to sit with the thoughts and memories that came up when this individual was in my consciousness.

I began to deeply appreciate lovingkindness because it embraces life's inherent messiness. It includes everything. I didn't need to be different, have only loving feelings and thoughts, or get rid of anything. And I began to notice that it opened the possibility of healing and change, as Dale had said. I grew up with an abusive, alcoholic stepfather with whom I was angry for most of my adult life. He was a monster when I was a little kid, and remained a monster. I decided to turn my lovingkindness practice toward him. He had died years before, but my bitterness remained. At first, I could manage only one chant, and it was accompanied in my mind and heart by anger and hatred.

But I continued, entertaining the possibility that he had been someone with his own wounds, and not a monster. Gradually, my thoughts and emotions softened, as did my deep wounds. They are still there, a part of me, but they are quiet and are companions with understanding, even compassion.

Sharon Salzberg, in her book *Lovingkindness* describes this practice as "the ability to embrace all parts of ourselves, as well as all parts of the world... When we feel love, our mind is expansive and open enough to include the entirety of life in full awareness, both its pleasures and its pains. We feel neither betrayed by pain nor overcome by it, and thus we can contact that which is undamaged within us regardless of the situation"

An acquaintance embodies Ms. Salzberg's description beautifully. She is a staunchly progressive person and became disturbed by the level of hatred she felt for President George W. Bush. She felt it was poisoning her, and decided to direct her lovingkindness practice toward him. It was one of the hardest things she ever did, even adding his picture to her home altar. But she kept at it, and eventually the hatred began to soften. She will always have passionate political differences with him, but isn't overwhelmed by aversion. "I have to say that I still dislike him. But I can actually wish him well being and ease. I don't choke, and it really is sincere. I know that he is a human being. And I can also see that my hatred was most detrimental to me."

Lovingkindness is often taught as an antidote to anger and fear. A close friend provided a powerful lesson about consciously choosing this practice. She practices family law, and many of her cases involve tremendous conflict, deep rage and pain, and spouses who feel wronged and righteous. She was woken in the dead of night by her phone ringing and picked it up, thinking it was her night owl daughter who was going to college in New York. But she heard a man's voice

threatening to kill her. She hung up immediately, knowing that it was probably someone from one of her more difficult cases, and was shaking with anger, fear and anxiety.

Sleep was impossible, and it occurred to her that wishing this man lovingkindness was a skillful way to meet this horrible situation. She quietly wished him well being and ease over and over. Gradually, her overwhelming emotions began to settle and she felt some well-being and ease herself. She would see what she could do about the situation in more practical ways in the morning, but at that moment she was able to resume her nights slumber.

Lovingkindness is ultimately extended to all beings, everywhere. It is a wish that has the power to unlock the heart and create profound connection. I have learned that lovingkindness is not for sissies. It requires backbone, heart and clarity. It can be transforming, sometimes quietly and sometimes in a way that shakes the earth.

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