

Introduction to Loving-Kindness Meditation

Joshua Tree Retreat II

A Dhamma talk by Bhante Vimalaramsi

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Hello. My name is Bhante Vimalaramsi. I've been practicing and teaching meditation for the last thirty five years. For twenty years I practiced vipassanā meditation, Burmese style of vipassanā. I was the attendant for U Silananda for two years. I've also been practicing Loving-Kindness meditation, for the last fifteen or twenty years.

I got real interested in how the Buddha was teaching, so I went to the suttas, and I saw that the instructions in the "Mindfulness of Breathing" meditation were very interesting. It says in the "Mindfulness of Breathing" sutta, that you understand when you're breathing in long, and breathing out long. You understand when you breathe in short and you breathe out short. And the key word here is "understand". It doesn't say to focus on the breath. It doesn't say to put your attention on any body part. It just says that you understand when you're breathing, and how you're breathing.

Then the instructions for mindfulness of breathing really begin. It says: "On the in-breath, you experience the entire body. On the out-breath, you experience the entire body." This is not the breath body; it's the entire physical body. The next part of the meditation says: "On the in-breath, you tranquilize the bodily formation. On the out-breath, you tranquilize the bodily formation." And what does this mean? It means: on the in-breath, you relax any tension and tightness in your body, in your mind; on the out-breath, you tranquilize any tension or tightness in your body, in your mind.

The tranquilizing step is very important, and there are subtle tensions and tightnesses that arise in your mind, and, in your head. There's a membrane that goes around your brain, and when a thought or a distraction arises, it contracts a little bit, and it causes a tension and tightness that you don't normally see unless you're looking for it. It's a very important step, to include in your meditation, because, craving always arises as a tension or tightness in your mind and in your body. Learning how to recognize that craving and relax, leads to the cessation of the craving, which is the third noble truth.

So the "Mindfulness of Breathing" meditation is a very important aspect of the teaching. And for many people, they prefer mindfulness of breathing to other kinds of meditation. I personally, by reading the suttas and doing a fair amount of study in the suttas, started to realize that the Buddha taught another meditation even more than he taught the "Mindfulness of Breathing", and that was the Loving-Kindness meditation and the Brahma Vihāras.

The Brahma Vihāras are: Loving-Kindness, compassion, joy, and equanimity. When I began practicing Loving-Kindness meditation, in an intensive way, I started to look in the suttas at the advantages for practicing this kind of meditation, and there are a lot of them. One of the advantages that the Buddha said about Loving-Kindness meditation is, that when you practice Loving-Kindness your progress in your meditation is faster with the Loving-Kindness than it is with any other kind of meditation.

The Loving-Kindness meditation, it is a feeling meditation, and it tends to show the meditator how their mind becomes hard, and how their mind becomes judgmental or critical, and how this is a form of suffering. So when you practice the Loving-Kindness meditation, it really does make a difference what kind of meditation that you're doing.

Now from the "Mindfulness of Breathing" sutta, the step in relaxing on the in-breath and relaxing on the out-breath, the relaxing part is also done with the Loving-Kindness meditation. Every time your mind, starts to move, your mind's attention moves from one thing to another, there's tension and tightness that arises in both your mind and your body. So all of these different movements, all of these different disturbances that arise, cause tension and tightness to arise in your

mind and in your body, and that needs to be relaxed. For instance: you're staying with the Loving-Kindness, and you're practicing the Loving-Kindness meditation.

The way that I teach this is: first, you start by sending loving and kind thoughts to yourself. You remember a time when you were happy, and when that happy feeling arises, it's a nice glowing warm feeling, in the center of your chest. As soon as that feeling arises, then you make a wish for your own happiness. "May I be happy. May my mind be peaceful and calm. May my mind be filled with joy. May my mind be clear, and alert."

Now the trick with this meditation is, that you need to feel that wish. You know what it feels like to be happy. You know what it feels like to be peaceful and calm. When that feeling arises, then you take that feeling and you put that in your heart, and surround yourself with the feeling. If it's peaceful and calm, you know what it feels like to be peaceful and calm. Relax, and allow that feeling to be there, and radiate that feeling to yourself.

You don't need to repeat the wish over, and over, and over again: "May I be happy. May I be happy. May I be happy. May I be happy. May I be happy.", like that. You want to just make the wish one time. Feel that wish. Put that feeling in your heart, and radiate that feeling out.

Whenever your mind has a distraction in it, in other words a wandering thought, or a feeling arises in your body, whatever, mind's attention will go to that feeling, or to that thought. Allow the thought or feeling to be there. Notice that there's a tension and tightness in your mind and in your body, and relax. Then gently direct your attention back to the feeling of being happy, and making a wish for your own happiness.

It doesn't matter how many times your mind wanders away. If you sit for half an hour or forty five minutes, and your mind wanders away fifty times, then you notice that your mind has wandered away, you let it be, you relax and you re-direct your attention back to your object of meditation, that is the feeling of being happy, and radiating that feeling, that is a good meditation.

If you get involved with the thoughts, and you recognize that you're thinking, and then you just continue on thinking, instead of letting go and relaxing, and coming back, then that is not good meditation at all. You're not actually meditating at that time; you're thinking.

It doesn't matter what the content, of the thought is. Allow the thought to be, without keeping your attention on it. You don't need to try to push the thought away, or force the thought from being in your mind. Just simply allow the thought to be, but don't pay attention to it anymore. It will fade away by itself.

The key is the relaxing after you have let the thought be. Relax the tension and tightness, and then gently re-direct your attention back to the feeling of being happy, making a wish for your own happiness.

When you're doing the sitting meditation, you want to sit with your back reasonably straight, not rigid, but nicely straight. Please, do not move your body while you're sitting. Don't wiggle your toes, don't wiggle your fingers, don't scratch, don't rub, don't change your posture. Don't rock it back and forth. You can sit and move as much as a Buddha image moves, which is not at all.

While you're sitting doing this, you will notice that there are some sensations that can arise in your body: a want to cough; a want to sneeze; an itch; heat; vibration; sometimes, even pain. As soon as you notice that your mind has gone to that sensation, you'll also notice that there are a lot of thoughts about that sensation. The more thoughts you have about that sensation, the bigger and more intense that feeling becomes. So the first thing you want to do, is let that sensation be there by itself without thinking about it. Let the thoughts be. Relax.

Now you will start to see that there is a fight mental fist wrapped around that sensation. That mental fist is: "I don't like it. I want it to be different than it is." For instance: you have this tickle in your throat and you feel like coughing. You allow that feeling to be there, and you'll notice that all around your throat, all of those muscles are contracting, because they're trying to stop the cough from happening. Relax the muscles in your neck, around that sensation. If your body needs to cough, let it cough. It doesn't really matter.

What matters is what you do with your mind. Let go of the tension and tightness caused by mind's attention moving to that sensation. Feel the tightness in your head. Relax. Now gently re-direct your attention back to the feeling of being happy and making a wish for your own happiness.

The nature of these kind of sensations is that they don't go away right away. So your mind is going to pop back to it. How did that happen? How did mind's attention, being very nice and stable on your object of meditation, move to that sensation? You'll notice first, there's still the thoughts, so you let go of the thoughts and relax. You allow the sensation to be there, and relax.

Now the truth is: when a sensation arises, it is there. Any time you try to fight with the truth, any time you try to control the truth, any time you try to make the truth be the way you want it to be, that is the cause of suffering.

We have to learn how to allow the truth to be, without getting involved with thinking about it. The truth is: when a sensation arises, it's there. And because that's the truth, we have to allow the truth to be there without trying to control it or make it different than it is.

As we allow the sensation to be there without any control at all, a lot of the emergency, and the want to move, starts to disappear. As you allow that feeling to be there without trying to control it, that feeling will start to fade, after a period of time. But you're going to be bouncing back and forth, between your object of meditation and that sensation, just like a ping pong ball going back and forth across the net. As you become more familiar with how your mind moves, you'll start to see little changes that happen before your mind gets caught in focusing in on the thoughts and the sensation itself. As you recognize that, you start to relax as soon as you see those little tiny movements, and that way, you will be able to see this more as an impersonal process, to be recognized, than, taking it personally and trying to control it.

We're made up of five aggregates. We have body, feeling, perception, thoughts, and consciousness. When a feeling arises, our tendency is to try to think that feeling. Every time we try to think and control a feeling

with our thoughts, that is the cause of suffering. Because our feelings just continue on and get bigger and more intense.

I can tell you exactly how depression arises, and how to let go of depression. First, you notice that mind's attention has gone to an unpleasant feeling. Next, you'll notice that you have a lot of thoughts about that feeling, and how you don't want that feeling to be there, how you want it to go away, because it hurts, and you get into a habitual tendency of: every time this kind of feeling arises, I always try to handle it in this way. And that makes the feeling bigger and more intense, and then you start hiding in your room, because you don't want to be around other people.

So the first thing you have to do is notice that there is a feeling that's painful, and it's all right for that painful feeling to be there. It has to be all right, because that's the truth. That's the Dhamma. As you start to begin to see the thoughts that are wrapped around that feeling and start letting go of the thought and relaxing, then going to that feeling and allowing that painful feeling to be there, without trying to control it, that feeling will start to get smaller and smaller until finally it will fade away. That's how you let go of, depression, or anxiety, or stress, or anger, or dissatisfaction, or sorrow, or sadness, or grief, what ever the catch of the day is, you need to handle it all in the same way.

Now, as you allow the sensation to be there without thoughts trying to control it, that sensation will begin to change, and it will begin to fade away, after some time. When these kind of feelings and thoughts arise, they turn into some kind of a hindrance. A hindrance is: lust, or greed, or "I want it" mind; hatred, or aversion, or "I don't want it" mind; sleepiness and dullness; restlessness and anxiety; or doubt. Now these five hindrances are hindrances because when they arise in our mind, they completely take our mind away from your object of meditation, which is the feeling of Loving-Kindness and making a wish for your own happiness.

Hindrances are our best friend. Hindrances are where our attachments are stored, and where the identification of "I am this feeling. I am this thought." comes from. As you allow the hindrance to be, let the thoughts about the hindrance be, don't get involved in the thinking about it, or the content, and you start allowing the feeling to be without

trying to control, eventually, that feeling will start to disappear, and when it disappears you will have such a sense of relief, that joy will arise, and the kind of joy that arises, is a very happy feeling that is very light in your mind and light in your body. It's called uplifting joy. So, after the joy is there for a period of time, you will feel more comfortable, in your mind and in your body, more comfortable than you've ever felt before. Your mind will become very peaceful and tranquil.

Now, as you're practicing your Loving-Kindness meditation for yourself, after about ten minutes, then you start to send loving and kind thoughts to a spiritual friend. A spiritual friend is someone of the same sex, and they are alive. A spiritual friend is someone that you have great respect for, that you truly do like them, and you sincerely do wish them well. So you're sending loving and kind thoughts to yourself: "May I be happy. May my mind be peaceful and calm. As I feel this peace and calm, I wish this for you. May you be peaceful and calm." When you're doing your Loving-Kindness towards your spiritual friend, you want to also see them in your mind's eye, and then take your spiritual friend and put them right in the middle of your heart, and surround them with the feeling of your wish, and then radiate that feeling to them. While you're doing this, you want to see you spiritual friend smiling and happy.

Loving-Kindness meditation is a smiling meditation. You want to smile in your mind. You want a smile in your eyes, even though your eyes are closed. You want a smile on your lips, just a little smile, and a smile in your heart.

Now there was a study done at one of the universities, on the corners of your mouth, and they found out that when the corners of your mouth go down, your mental states go down, and when the corners of your mouth go up, your mental state goes up. So it's important to make this into a smiling meditation, and smile as much as you can.

When you start visualizing your friend, for some people, seeing them in their mind's eye like that was a picture that was there, is very easy. For other people, they have trouble visualizing in this way. You can visualize with your images and words in your mind, but always see your spiritual

friend smiling and happy. The more you can see them smiling and happy, the more it reminds you to be smiling and happy too.

Now, what I recommend is that you begin your practice sitting no less than thirty minutes. When your sitting is good, and you have the time, then please extend the time, to, however long you feel is good. If you feel like sitting for forty five minutes, or an hour, or even more, then continue on with your meditation, as long as the meditation is good.

Now here is where the meditation that I teach is a little bit different than a lot of other methods. Keep your meditation going when you get up, and start moving around and doing your daily activities. Smile as much as you possibly can, during all of your daily activities, and wish others well. The more you can smile when you're walking from one place to another, the more uplifted your mind becomes. When your mind becomes uplifted, then, joy arises much more easily in your mind.

It is a very necessary thing to have joy arising, because when joy is in your mind, you feel your mind is very alert. You see things. When mind becomes heavy, it's easy to notice. When you have joy in your mind, your mind is uplifted. It's very alert, and, the state of your mindfulness is very fast. It's easy to notice when a heavy mental state arises. It's easy to let go of the heavy mental state.

When you notice that you're caught by a heavy mental state, and welcome to the real world, we're all going to get caught by it, it's ok. But when you notice that you're caught by a heavy mental state, the fastest way to let go of that mental state, is by laughing at how your mind is attached to that state. When you laugh, it changes your perspective, from: "I am that.", to: "It's only that." Say for instance: you have anger because somebody said or did something that made you upset, and you walk away, and you start having thoughts of: "I don't like that person, and I'm angry at them and I don't wish them a lot of happiness." If you can laugh at how your mind became attached to that, all of a sudden, the: "I am angry.", turns into: "Oh, it's only this anger. Look at that. There's no reason to get upset about this." And it's very easy to let it go.

The point of mindfulness is to remember to observe, how mind's attention moves from one thing to another, remembering how to

observe, mind's attention's movements. As you're able to do this, you're able to let go of the suffering, that you cause yourself. There's nothing out in the world that causes your suffering. You can't blame anyone, for your suffering. Your suffering is yours because the reality of the situation doesn't match what you want to have happen.

As you are able to laugh, and have fun with your meditation, your mind naturally will begin to become uplifted, and, this leads to happiness in your mind and in your body, all of the time. The point of practicing Loving-Kindness meditation, is to teach your mind how to stay uplifted and happy, all of the time. This is a very important part of the practice.

Loving-Kindness meditation will take you into what is called jhānas. A jhāna is a level of understanding. Many people have the definition of jhāna as being some kind of concentration, and it is not that. Jhāna is a Pāli word that means level or stage of understanding. As you begin to practice your Loving-Kindness meditation, and you let go of a hindrance, as soon as you let that hindrance go, you will begin to feel relief, and then joy, after the joy fades away, you will feel very comfortable, in your mind and body, and you will have a mind that is very tranquil and peaceful, and stays on the object of meditation, very easily.

I just described to you, what happens in the first jhāna. You can still have a distracting thought arise while you're in this jhāna, but you'll notice it very quickly, and let it go very easily, relax, and come back to your object of meditation very easily.

Now there are different stages of jhāna that you can go through while you're practicing this kind of, insight, and, tranquility. Loving-Kindness will take you to the fourth jhāna. The fourth jhāna is where there is very, very strong equanimity or balance in the mind. As you go deeper into your practice, and continue on with the Loving-Kindness, then you will begin to see, different stages of what is called the Brahma Vihāras.

The Brahma Vihāras are the Loving-Kindness. The next stage is compassion. As you go deeper into the fourth jhāna and have the Loving-Kindness, then you will experience the feeling of the Loving-Kindness changing, and, you will also experience, an expansion feeling, in your mind. It expands out, and there's no center point. There's just

the feeling of compassion, and, the expanding feeling, going out, and out, and out. This is called the realm, of, infinite space.

As your meditation goes deeper, you will get to a place where, the feeling of compassion changes again, to the feeling of joy. You will start to notice individual consciousnesses arising and passing away, arising and passing away. It happens very quickly, and very easily. So, what we start to experience now is called infinite consciousness. As we go deeper, we start to see that there are gaps in between the consciousnesses, and eventually, the feeling of joy changes into a feeling of equanimity. When that feeling of equanimity arises, you'll start to notice that mind is not looking outside of itself any more. Mind is starting to see the realm of nothing.

This is as high as the Brahma Vihāras will take you, and this leads directly to what the Buddha, talked about, and showed us, to be, nibbāna. So the practice of Loving-Kindness eventually does lead to total liberation, here and now, and can happen in this very lifetime.

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