

Lovingkindness
Caring for Others and Self , The Heart of Higher Education

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Abstract

This paper begins by outlining lovingkindness practice as a means of cultivating compassion. The nature and stages of this practice are outlined. Then some of the research on the impact of this practice generally and in higher educational contexts is summarised.

Keywords

Lovingkindness, Higher Education, Compassion, Self-compassion, Empathy, Mindfulness

1. Introduction, Motivation and Contexts

Lovingkindness practice is a meditation practice where we intentionally wish wellbeing and happiness for ourselves and for others (Salzberg, 2002). The simple purpose of this practice paper is (in keeping with the conference theme) to do a short review of one contemplative practice used for self-care namely, lovingkindness. Lovingkindness is a practice I do regularly. When in my turn, I guide a practice at the mindfulness group for staff at University College Dublin, I usually guide lovingkindness. I am studying compassion and compassion practices as part of a M.Sc programme in Studies in Mindfulness with the University of Aberdeen. The intention is that this paper combined with experiencing the practice may serve as an introduction to the practice for people new to it and considering doing this practice. The aim of developing lovingkindness meditation is to cultivate self-compassion and compassion for others. Compassion is a multifaceted concept. It has three essential components. Firstly, it begins with an *openness and sensitivity* to the suffering and difficulties of others and ourselves. Secondly, it develops through an *intention and motivation* to alleviate this suffering and bring joy. Thirdly, it is expressed through *skillful action or response* carried out to alleviate this suffering so that people may experience happiness (Sogyal Rinpoche, 2002; Gilbert and Chodin, 2013; Jazaeieri et al, 2013). The cultivation of compassion should be at the heart of higher education (Barbazet and Bushe, 2014).

Self-compassion is an important basis for compassion for others and lovingkindness practice begins with intentionally wishing ourselves happiness and wellbeing before wishing the same for others. Neff (2003) recommends that self-compassion be introduced into education as an alternative to the previous emphasis on self-esteem. This is to encourage

the skills of mastery rather than performance goal orientation, and to encourage positive attitudes amongst people both and about themselves and others, rather than self-comparison and the resulting narcissism. Leary et al (2007) argue that a self-compassion approach is more helpful for dealing with the stresses of life than a self-esteem approach. This may be because self-compassion involves an honest perception and recognition of one's personal strengths and weaknesses whereas self-esteem can involve illusions and defensiveness, thus self-compassion effectively assists in emotional regulation and problem-solving (Leary et al, 2007). The importance of social connection, empathy and compassion to physical and psychological health as well as longevity is well documented (Seppala et al, 2013). The Dalai Lama highlights the twin motivations for compassion namely, to make others and ourselves happy.

From my own limited experience I have found that the greatest degree of inner tranquility comes from the development of love and compassion. The more we care for the happiness of others, the greater our own sense of well-being becomes.

Cultivating a close, warm-hearted feeling for others automatically puts the mind at ease (Dalai Lama 2013).

In higher education we are preparing most people for professional work and research has indicated that in this context there are three reasons why compassion is important:

1) it improves outcomes for clients/patients, 2) clients/patients expect it and 3) it brings satisfaction to the professional (Derekson et al, 2013 ; Lussier and Richard, 2007). There are many ways that compassion can be cultivated in higher education teaching including: learning about compassion from different academic disciplines and philosophical and religious traditions, reviewing research on compassion, learning from role models, embedding learning about compassion into teaching and learning strategies, learning specific skills related to compassion e.g. empathy and the expression of empathy, work placements and field trips, civic engagement and service learning projects, doing compassion practices in the classroom integrated into disciplinary learning, undertaking specific compassion cultivation programmes that include compassion practices e.g. lovingkindness and participating in mindfulness and compassion meditation groups.

(Armstrong, 2011; Barbazet and Bushe, 2014; Jazaieri, 2012; Weare. & Zarboni, 2008). A colleague and I have used problem-based learning to cultivate person-centredness, empathy and compassion in higher education (Barrett and Naughton, 2015). This paper focuses on lovingkindness meditation practice as a way of cultivating compassion.

2. What is Lovingkindness Practice?

Lovingkindness (metta) is a meditation practice where we intentionally wish lovingkindness for ourselves and for others (Salzberg, 2002). We start the practice by setting our intention to do the practice and stating our motivation to do the practice for our wellbeing and happiness and for the wellbeing and happiness of others. We imagine ourselves in a big field scattering the seeds of intention for care and kindness and warmth for ourselves and others. We settle by giving attention to our posture, back erect, dignified and relaxed, feet on the floor. We breath in slowly and out slowly to settle ourselves, giving attention to our breath. Then we return our breathing to it's normal pace. We feel ourselves grounded by feeling our bottom grounded on the chair, our feet grounded on the floor and our mind grounded in the body.

Having settled and grounded ourselves “we gently repeat phrases that are meaningful in terms of what we wish, first for ourselves and then for others” (Salzberg, 2002 pp. 29-30). Traditional phrases are: “*May I be happy*” “*May I be well*” “*May I be at ease*” We repeat the phrases with gentle pacing , saying them on the out breath if that suits. Then we move on to bringing to mind a benefactor, someone who has been good to us, someone that we are grateful to and repeat the phrases “*May you be happy*” “*May you be well*” “*May you be at ease*” Then we move to a loved one repeating the phrases for her/him. Next we move to a neutral person someone for whom we have no strong positive or negative feelings but who crossed our path e.g. someone who served us in a shop, and repeat the same phrases.

At any stage if we get distrated we notice that and bring our attention gently back to the breath and the phrases. Then we think of someone we are having difficulties with and we say the phrases for them. We start with someone we have minor or moderate level of difficulties with (rather than major). Then we say the phrases for groups of people e.g. in a higher education context our students and then our colleagues, wishing them happiness and wellbeing. Then we say the phrases for all beings. We can change the phrases to ones that have more meaning for us. Lastly we dedicate the practice, that the seeds planted will bear fruit in acts of kindness, care and warmth in our work lives (e.g. in higher education) and in our personal lives.

3. Summary of Some Research on the Impact of Lovingkindness Practice

From a neuroscience perspective, the specific behaviour of engaging in a loving-kindness based compassion training programme resulted in “elicited activity in a neural network...associated with positive affect and affiliation” in a series of fMRI brain scan experiments (Klimecki et al, 2013). The practice of lovingkindness meditation has resulted in increased empathic brain activity (Lutz et al., 2008). In a randomized control study of employees the impact of a lovingkindness meditation course on participants in terms of positive emotions was researched (Fredrickson et al., 2008). This study showed that the practice of lovingkindness meditation for novice meditators resulted in small increases of positive emotions over time and suggests that “people judge their lives to be more satisfying and fulfilling, not because they experience positive emotions per se, but because the greater positive emotions help them build resources for living successfully” (Fredrickson et al, 2008, p.18). These increased personal resources included increases in mindfulness, purpose in life and social support and decreases in illness symptoms. Lovingkindness was found to be a durable method for inducing positive emotion and the impact on the amount of positive emotion generated per hour of meditation increased over time and participants (like me) did not become bored with the practice (Fredrickson et al, 2008).

A further longitudinal study of faculty and staff of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill compared a lovingkindness mediation group with a waiting-list control group (Kok et al 2013). Those on the lovingkindness intervention group “increased in positive emotion relative to those in the control group, an effect moderated by vagal tone, a proxy index of physical health” (Kok et al, 2013, p. 1123). This study found that the causal link between positive emotion and vagal tone was people’s perceptions of their positive social connections with others. This study suggests, ”positive emotions, positive social connections and physical health forge an upward-spiral dynamic” (Kok et al, 2013, p. 1128). This study highlights the impact of lovingkindness meditation on physical health.

At CCARE (the Centre for Compassion, Altruism and Research) at Stanford University students are offered an eight week Compassion Cultivation (CCT) Programme which focuses on them understanding and practicing lovingkindness meditation. People who

completed the CCT programme resulted in improvements in all three orientations of compassion, namely self-compassion, compassion for others and compassion from others compared to a waitlist group. A very interesting finding of this study was that: “The amount of formal meditation practiced during CCT was associated with increased compassion for others” (Jazaieri et al, 2013, p.1113). The authors acknowledge the limitations that this research is based totally on self-report inventories and that additional measures would be needed in future research. Subsequently a further research paper based on the same programme and participants (Jazaieri et al, 2014, p. 23) found that “ Compared to WL [wait list group] CCT increased mindfulness and happiness as well as decreased worry and emotional suppression”. They reported that higher amounts of formal meditation were related to greater reductions in worry and emotional suppression. A very interesting finding of this study is that lovingkindness practice may enhance mindfulness, whereas others (Gilbert and Choden, 2013) argue that mindfulness is a prerequisite for compassion practices. Taken together these studies are useful in that they show that the amount or “practice dose” of loving-kindness meditation is important in relation to these beneficial outcomes i.e. the more you practice the greater the impact.

The results of a doctoral study on the impact of lovingkindness meditation (LKM) on student teachers “indicated that LKM training assisted pre-service teachers in stress management as well as helping them develop greater understanding of empathy and compassion towards themselves and their students” (Császár, 2012, p.110). The research to date therefore (including Fredrickson et al, 2008; Lutz et al, 2008; Császár, 2012; Kok et al, 2013; Jazaieri et al, 2013; Klimecki et al, 2013; Jazaieri et al, 2014) on the impact of lovingkindness generally and in higher education settings in particular is encouraging. However, it is important to heed Davidson’s (2012) advice that this area of science is in the early stages and that more work needs to be done in conceptualising compassion and meditation, developing appropriate and effective measures for interventions based on specific practices, the design of appropriate and effective control groups and in measuring long-term as well as short-term effects of compassion cultivation programmes. Further research on the impact of lovingkindness practice on staff and students in higher education is required to inform future developments.

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Further Resources

CCARE, The Centre for Compassion and Altruism Research and Education, Stanford University.

<http://ccare.stanford.edu>

Fredrickson, Barbara, *Positivity Resonates*. Meng-Wu lecture, CCARE Stanford University.

<http://ccare.stanford.edu/videos/meng-wu-lecture-barbara-l-fredrickson-ph-d/>

Salzberg, Sharon, Guided Lovingkindness Meditation with Sharon Salzberg

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W3uLqt69VyI>

Salzberg, Sharon Street Lovingkindness Youtube

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=17Hv07IXYMU>