Thought Leadership

Loving-Kindness

SevenStones

Metta

Metta is a Pali (the language that the Buddha spoke) word that most teachers translate as Loving-Kindness. In Sharon Salzberg's book of the same name, she translates it is as "gentle friendliness."

What Is a Loving-Kindness, or *Metta*, Practice?

A *metta* practice is a prayer said while in a centered, or meditative state of mind. First get quiet and then we say a series of blessings on behalf of several people, including ourselves. The blessings and the order of people is not significant, though following a structure in the beginning can provide a strong touch point for developing rhythm and consistency in our practice. It is most important to be settled in a comfortable way and allow the mind to be directed to the intention of sending loving-kindness.

The Structure of *Metta* Blessings

Different teachers teach four or five blessings and may use different words for each. We offer several options below.

1. *May you be safe and protected from (Inner and outer) harm*

   May you be safe

2. *May you discover happiness and peace*

   May you be happy

   May your mind and body be healthy and strong

3. *May your body and mind be nourished and cared for*

   May you be healthy

4. *May you find ease and grace*

   May your heart be full of joy

   May you be at ease (live a life of ease)

5. *May you be free from suffering and the causes of suffering*

   May you be free from danger

   May you be free from neglect

   May you be free from struggle

   May you be free from (fill in the blank depending on my mood) (judgment, self-loathing, fear)

Then we say these blessings towards the following people:

- Ourselves
- Benefactor
- Friends and/or family members and/or work colleagues, perhaps as a group
- Neutral person
- Enemy
- All beings

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Why Have a Loving-Kindness Practice?

With any new practice, it helps to know why bother? After all, we are investing precious time and resources to something that sounds good, but will it actually make a difference? It is tempting to judge the practice, wondering why these words? Why in this order? Or to get caught up in what is neutral? Or feeling resistance to sending loving thoughts to an enemy or overwhelmed by the very idea of "all beings."

Best Practices to Begin, and Sustain, a Metta Practice

Beginning a practice like *metta* can be quite potent on a silent retreat with no music, media, reading, journaling or talking. No matter how forced or complicated, loving-kindness is actually something to do while we sit quietly on a cushion with no distractions.

Benefits of Loving-Kindness

- Connecting to a gentle friend within (as writes Sharon Salzberg↗)
- Finding a gentleness for ourselves through times of transition.
- A softening of our judgments toward people who annoy us; this small opening allows us to see each person's humanity more clearly.
- A calm serenity in the face of unfortunate circumstances, like when "bad things happen to good people"—wallet being stolen, freak car accidents, health crisis.
- Finding an easier stance with difficult emotions or bodily sensations, such as pain.
- A willingness to be transparent about hard feelings, challenging requests, everything.

Within Loving-Kindness most of us find a stance for social justice, creating a sustainable life and an overall experience of living a peaceful life. Even without a steady, regularly-timed meditation practice, when we sprinkle in metta wishes wherever we can, the benefits resound.

The Brain Science of Loving-Kindness

There is a growing body of evidence, with approximately 30 to 40 peer-review papers published each month demonstrating the connection to mindfulness practices such as metta to the health and wellbeing of the practitioner. The field of neuroscience especially provides convincing data using brain scans to compare what happens when someone is stressed to when they are focusing on one thing with a steady breath and steady mind.

When people are stressed, the part of the brain responsible for the "fight or flight" response—the amygdala—goes into a primitive survival mode. In this high-alert state, instead of being able to cope with more activity, the brain actually starts shutting down. It develops tunnel vision, unable to think around a problem, only able to fixate on it agitatedly.

Productivity, creativity, innovation, emotional intelligence when dealing with others and flexibility of thinking all plummet (Baldwin M et al, 2010; Arnsten, 2009).

Several studies confirm that mindfulness can act as an effective antidote to stress, calming the body down into a more productive state, with one even showing a reduction in the size of grey matter in the amygdala (Hölzel et al, 2010). Another study shows that mindfulness meditation can lower the level of the stress hormone cortisol (Tang et al, 2008). (Source: Personnel Today, Mindfulness: Helping Employees to Deal With Stress↗ September 3, 2012.)

How Does Metta Fit Into Business?

So how does this teaching of Loving-Kindness fit into the organizational framework laid out by the seven stones of building and conducting business inside of sufficiency?

> The inquiry into love as the ultimate tool and insight for individuals and organizations is supported by the practice of *metta* to cultivate that love.

Love is what we call the ultimate *Tool of Sufficiency*. It is also one of the values we say is necessary for an awakened organization.

The ultimate source of sufficiency now has a companion daily practice to help us cultivate the truth of love for ourselves, our organizations and the world. Bringing love as a practice to ourselves, our benefactor, our work colleagues, friends and family as well as neutral parties, enemies and all beings has brought joy, happiness and ease to our personal and professional journeys. We have appreciation and discernment for our work in exquisite sufficiency, and have more love and connection in our hearts for all beings.

Our clients report greater ease. One of our clients used loving-kindness practice with a particularly difficult direct report. She was struggling with this person and had a lot of judgment about him, what we might call mental "noise" or inner chatter that ranged from "he is incompetent" to "he wants to sabotage me." Though we did not call the practice "metta", we taught her the practice of wishing the person well while she was feeling the strong feelings of frustration, worry and anger. She was asked: "Can you think of at least one thing you could truly wish for him?" She said, "Yes, I can do that." The instructions were that whenever she felt the judgment or noticed her eyes began to roll, that she would think of a single wish for him and send it. She agreed to do this with two different direct reports and a month later, our coach checked in with her, because she had not brought up that person. "Oh, they are fine now," she said. And we said, "Oh, so the practice worked?" And she said, "Yes, it did."

We find this happens over and over where our client is struggling or suffering and when they do this practice, the problem disappears, so profoundly that they often do not recall it ever being an issue.

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Getting Started

Inquiry and Reflection

- Can I start a love practice today?
- Am I willing to send love to the people who have made an impact in my life?
- Can I embrace something new today regardless of my feelings about it?
- How well can I love myself today?

Being committed to love

With this practice we find we are just a little softer, a little calmer, less judgmental and experiencing compassion not from a place of pity or worry but as a lived experience of balance and connection.

Please join us in this Loving–Kindness practice. If you are interested to connect about it or learn how to do it send us a note to info@sevenstonesleadership.com.

ABOUT SEVEN STONES

Seven Stones is a leadership journeys company founded by Gina LaRoche and Jennifer Cohen in 2009. Our learning programs, coaching practice, organizational consulting engagements and groundbreaking thought leadership work are all designed to help bring about a world that is loving, courageous and just. We pursue this vision primarily by shifting the paradigm from one of scarcity to one of Sustainable Abundance® in the individuals, organizations and communities with whom we work.

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