

Meditative Story Transcript – Rohan Gunatillake (Loving Kindness Meditation)

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ROHAN GUNATILLAKE: I have a confession to make.

When I first got into meditation, I couldn't stand the style known as loving-kindness practice. Compared to the rest of the mindfulness tradition, which I thought at the time was all about being with what is here, I found loving-kindness a bit artificial since the technique uses thoughts to create some kind of results. As a beginner, I found the idea of using thoughts to be the opposite of meditation. Wasn't it about getting rid of thoughts after all? Wasn't it?

I remember early on in my meditation life, meeting someone of a similar age who said his main practice was loving kindness practice. What a loser, I remember thinking... HA!

Then about six months later, something really quite interesting happened. I remember going for a walk around Oxford, where I was living at the time. It was a bright spring day, maybe in May. The air is just the right temperature, cool enough so the mind feels fresh, yet not so cool as to make you cover up much.

So I'm on this walk, not going anywhere in particular. And with my mind quiet and time on my side, I spontaneously start doing what I guess you'd call walking kindness meditation. When I take a step with my left foot, I say 'may I be well and happy,' and when I take a step with my right foot, 'may all be well and happy'. It's a surprise and I go with it, dropping the classic phrases of loving kindness meditation with my stride, even though it feels quite strange at first. After a while, the longer phrase drops and on the left stride I say 'me' and on the right stride 'all,' and the feeling of kindness and openness is felt in my chest. After a longer while still, there are no words and it's just a feeling. Or more accurately it's a flow. I walk for over four hours and explore parts of the city I've never been to before — yes perhaps in some kind of reverie, but also connected and aware of the space and things around me.

This afternoon in Oxford helps me unlock loving kindness meditation for the first time and I start to do it more and more alongside the watch your breath, watch your mind kind of stuff.

I read Sharon Salzberg's seminal book on the practice, and start to understand why traditionally it was taught as equal to the now more dominant insight meditation techniques.

So if you're feeling comfortable, let's give it a go. The core practice of loving-kindness meditation, also known as metta, is to bring different people to mind and to send them kind thoughts.

In today's version we'll start with someone dear to us: a teacher, loved one or friend, to whom it feels easy to send kindness. It is only then, when we've warmed up a little, that we switch the kindness inwards and then open it out from there.

When sending kind thoughts, the practice uses phrases: 'may you be well', 'may you be happy'. These are the classic phrases, but you should use whatever feels most appropriate to you.

If, and only if, it's safe to close your eyes, please feel free to do that. And let the body be comfortable as much as it can be.

First up we're going to bring to mind someone very dear to us.

It doesn't matter who it is, as long as it's someone you know well and have a great deal of affection for.

It can be a partner, a parent, a child, a friend or someone in your family.

As long as you find it easy to feel kindness for them.

The first person you think of is probably the right choice.

So bring this wonderful person to mind and if you'd like to smile a little, that's more than allowed.

Keeping your special person in mind, we'll say a couple phrases:

May you be well. May you be happy.

Saying the words internally, meaningfully.

May you be well. May you be happy.

Keeping your wonderful person in mind, enjoying their radiance as they inhabit your thoughts.

May you be well. May you be happy.

Saying the phrases at your own pace, at a rhythm that feels best for you. Wishing your dear person well, sending them kindness.

Letting the kindness emanate out from your chest.

May you be well. May you be happy.

Relaxing the body, relaxing the mind, repeating the phrases.

Connecting with the phrases and meaning it every time.

Noticing if there are any pleasant sensations in the body and noticing if there's nothing much at all.

May you be well. May you be happy.

Now that we've warmed up a little, we're going to switch our well-wishing to ourselves.

Shifting the target to our own personal wellbeing, without any need for judgment.

May I be well. May I be happy.

Just staying with the phrases, allowing ourselves the luxury of this well-wishing.

May I be well. May I be happy.

This may feel self-indulgent but it is not.

There's probably no one we criticize more than ourselves.

And therefore there's no one who deserves our kindness more than ourselves.

May I be well. May I be happy.

Repeating the phrases at your own pace. Noticing if any self-judgment does arise and letting it go. Allowing yourself to be kind to yourself as you sit, or lie, or walk here.

May I be well. May I be happy.

Using whatever pace and rhythm feels most natural.

May I be well. May I be happy.

When the mind wanders away from the phrases just bringing it back.

May I be well. May I be happy.

Recognizing that at the most fundamental level, all you want for yourself is to be well.

May I be well. May I be happy.

Noticing any pleasant sensations in the body and just letting them be here.

Acknowledging any thoughts of unworthiness or self-judgment and letting them go.

May I be well. May I be happy.

Charging up your battery of kindness to yourself. Allowing a smile.

May I be well. May I be happy.

In the third part of this meditation we'll switch our well-wishing to everyone around us.

Going out in all directions from where you are.

Either those relatively close by such as in your building or in your street, or taking a bigger view such as in your town or in your region. Allowing yourself to smile and keeping all the space around you in mind.

And all the people within that large space.

May we be well. May we be happy.

For young and for old.

May we be well. May we be happy.

For the active and for the tired.

May we be well. May we be happy.

For those I know and those I don't.

May we be well. May we be happy.

For people I like and people I don't.

May we be well. May we be happy.

For the born and those to be born.

May we be well. May we be happy.

May we all be well. May we all be happy.

The idea at the heart of this meditation is that kindness can be trained. Just like concentration or awareness, kindness is a natural quality of heart that we all have to some degree — and with the right techniques and the right environment, it can be grown, cultivated.

Go well and take care.

We'd love to hear your personal reflections from today's meditation. You can find us on all your social media platforms through our handle @MeditativeStory. Or you can email us at: hello@meditativestory.com.