

Loving-Kindness Meditation is a Radical Act of Love

As the pace of our lives continues to accelerate, driven by a host of forces seemingly beyond our control, more and more of us are finding ourselves drawn to engage in meditation, in this radical act of being. We are moving in the direction of meditative awareness for many reasons, not the least of which may be to maintain our individual and collective sanity, or recover our perspective and sense of meaning, or simply to deal with the outrageous stress and insecurity of this age.

By stopping and intentionally falling awake to how things are in this moment, purposefully, without succumbing to our own reactions and judgments, and by working wisely with such occurrences with a healthy dose of self-compassion when we do succumb, and by our willingness to take up residency for a time in the present moment in spite of all our plans and activities aimed at getting somewhere else, completing a project or pursuing desired objects or goals, we discover that such an act is both immensely, discouragingly difficult and yet utterly simple, profound, hugely possible after all, and restorative of mind and body, soul and spirit right in that moment. It is indeed a radical act of love just to sit down and be quiet for a time by yourself.

Formal loving-kindness practice can function to soften one's relationship to overwhelmingly afflictive mind states, so that we can avoid succumbing completely to their energies. It makes them more approachable and it makes them less intractable.

Loving-kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy and equanimity are rigorous meditation practices, used for the most part to cultivate one-pointed concentrated attention, out of which the powers of these evoked qualities emerge, transfiguring the heart. Just naming these qualities of

heart explicitly and making their role explicit in our practice may help us to recognize them when they arise spontaneously during mindfulness practice. As well as to incline the heart and mind in that direction more frequently, especially in difficult times.

Mindfulness Meditation

Mindfulness meditation is a mental training practice that teaches you to slow down racing thoughts, let go of negativity, and calm both your mind and body. It combines meditation with the practice of mindfulness, which can be defined as a mental state that involves being fully focused on "the now" so you can acknowledge and accept your thoughts, feelings, and sensations without judgment. In general techniques, mindfulness meditation involves deep breathing and awareness of body and mind. Practicing mindfulness meditation doesn't require props or preparation (no need for candles, essential oils, or mantras, unless you enjoy them). To get started, all you need is a comfortable place to sit, three to five minutes of free time, and a judgment-free mindset.

Impact of Mindfulness Meditation

Regular practice of mindfulness meditation has benefits for your physical as well as your mental health. Some of these include:

Reducing stress: Mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR), a standardized therapeutic approach to mindfulness meditation, has been shown to reduce symptoms of stress in healthy individuals.¹ The practice has also been found to be beneficial for a number of mental and physical disorders including anxiety, depression, and chronic pain.

Lower heart rate: Heart disease is one of the top causes of death in the United States and research suggests that mindfulness may be beneficial for your heart. In one study, participants either enrolled in an online mindfulness meditation program or were added to a waitlist for traditional treatment for heart disease.² Those who participated in mindfulness meditation had significantly lower heart rates and performed better on a test of cardiovascular capacity.

Improved immunity: Research also suggests that mindfulness practices may improve your body's resistance to illness. One study compared the impact of both mindfulness and exercise on immune

function.³ They found that people who had taken part in an eight-week mindfulness course had greater gains in immune function than those in the exercise group.

Better sleep: Studies have also shown that practicing mindfulness meditation might improve sleep and even be useful for treating certain sleep disturbances. One 2019 study found that mindfulness meditation significantly improved sleep quality.⁴

Making mindfulness meditation a regular practice can lead to stronger effects, but that doesn't necessarily mean that you need to do it every day. Studies have found that meditating three to four times per week can have big benefits—and, regularly meditating for eight weeks will actually alter the brain, according to neuroimaging studies.