

Understanding Loving Kindness Meditation; Western meditators' views of their practice

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Introduction

Loving Kindness (Metta): A practice which focuses on sending feelings of kindness to the self and others

Existing research: increases empathy¹, positivity towards strangers², performance on cognitive tasks³, reduced levels of pain intensity, has an effect on implicit attitudes towards the self and others⁴ and increases in frequency and intensity of positive emotions in participants who have schizophrenia⁵

Rationale: Lack of research conducted on Loving Kindness Meditation, inconsistencies in how the practice is explored within research, and potential implications of the specific focus of the practice on social connectedness and relationships.



“...the cultivation of a steady, unconditional sense of connection that touches all beings without exception, including ourselves”⁶

The overarching, broad aim of the project is to:
Understand the effects of LKM

Explore how LKM is being defined currently by practitioners

Examine the cognitive and social effects of LKM with students

Stage 1 – Qualitative interviews

Stage 2 – Quantitative methodology

Stage 3 – Quantitative project – student population

1. Interviews

Rationale: Explore how LKM is being defined and understood by experienced meditators. Also identify “key” components of the practice to feed into student sessions (stage 3)

Participants: Five “experienced” meditators with between 10 and 25+ years experience practicing LKM. Varied backgrounds and ways of practicing e.g. being Buddhist, coming to meditation following crisis.

Analysis: IPA was used to explore meditators’ understanding of their practice, what it meant to them, and how it related to other forms of meditation.

Themes:

Importance of the practice;

- For personal change and becoming a “better person”
- Daily practice and intention in achieving personal change

Components of the practice;

- Importance of the Self within practice
- Personalisation of practice

Relation to other practices;

- Seen as separate practice
- “Essence” of Metta and way of living

Being a Western meditator;

- View of LKM as being almost opposite of Western way of living
- Conflict between wanting to live in more “UK” way, but environment sometimes causing conflict

2. Q-study

Rationale: Explore understanding of LKM with wider group of meditators – to include all “experience levels”. Further identify key components of the practice and commonalities/differences across meditators.

Method: Q is used for finding out attitudes towards a topic so was seen as an appropriate method choice. It asks participants to sort a set of statements into a forced distribution which allows for existing groups of opinion or understanding to emerge.

Participants: 19 LKM meditators with between 10 months and 15 years experience.

Statements: should reflect all opinions about a topic; statements were drawn from interview transcripts in stage 1.

Analysis: Uses a mixture of correlations and factor analysis to explore patterns in how participants sort their statements as a whole set. Qualitative analysis of the emergent groups can be written up and described as themes.

Findings: Statistically QM1 main factor; commonalities in sorting statements at the negative end. But at the other end of the distribution, clear differences emerging in three factors.

Factor 1: The practice and me

Loving Kindness is the something with an energy that is always there in the heart (25, +4)

Loving Kindness can change difficult attitudes (23, +4)

Loving Kindness then order physiological and physical manifestations (21, +3)

Factor 2: The practice and its components

Loving Kindness is the something that is always there in the heart (25, +4)

Loving Kindness has a spiritual element (23, +4)

Loving Kindness is the practice that is always there in the heart (25, +4)

Factor 3: The practice is a life-changer

Loving Kindness has made me a better person (25, +4)

Loving Kindness has made me a better person than I used to be (23, +4)

Loving Kindness practice is a fundamental part of me and my life (21, +3)

3. Student groups

Learnings from stage 1 and 2



Conclusions

- Variation in ways of practicing as well as understanding and view of the practice, including differences in language used and potential challenges in misunderstanding what “Metta” is.
- Clear differences in views and understanding of the practice, but commonalities when it comes to what was sorted as “negative”; enemies as core part of LKM, and the importance and value of the practice.
- Therefore, focus on Self and “enemies” very important to practice and need to be emphasised when introducing practice to novices.
- Practice has self-reported effects on behaviour and provides support to explore this further.
- Reported effects include inter and intra personal benefits as well as increased compassion, empathy and a difference in perception of emotion.
- Seen as practice that has it’s own benefits and effects, so supports further exploration in stage 3.

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