

Practicing Boundless Lovingkindness

By Scott Tusa

Hi, I'm Scott Tusa. Welcome back to our series on opening your heart. In today's session, we're going to be working with the second of the four boundless states, boundless lovingkindness. Boundless lovingkindness is one of the core practices here, as the experience of love is something innate to being a human being. Of course, we can cultivate this further and deeper on the Buddhist path or on our spiritual path. But I just want to start out by saying that within Buddhism, love, or lovingkindness, is seen as an innate quality. Sometimes we can describe this innate quality as our sense of basic warmth, or basic OKness. And in Buddhism, this is connected to our wider quality of buddhanature, or awakened nature. And this is possible, because lovingkindness is at the root of what we seek, and what others seek. When we look at our actions, when we look at the actions of others, we all seek happiness, we all seek connection, we all seek to be loved, and to give love. So we can reflect on this and see that one of the root emotional states of why we do what we do, is because we love. I like to think about lovingkindness like this, because then it's not so much of a stranger, it's something we can connect to within the basic makeup of how we interact each day.

Now, of course, we might also struggle with the heart being closed toward some of our own emotions, or closed toward others in our life, or in certain situations. And we can work with that. But it's good to remember from time to time that connected to our buddhanature, connected to our basic sense of OKness, or warmth, is the ability to love is the ability to feel connected and to open to care. Normally when I talk about lovingkindness in a little bit more of a deeper way, I talk about it more as a circular process. What I mean by a *circular process* is that normally we're thinking of love as a linear thing, as something we give or receive, wherein boundless lovingkindness practice, there's a way to work with it that's more circular, where we're both receiving love as well as giving it at the same time. So this is another way to practice lovingkindness. And that's what we're going to do in a few minutes when we work with the guided meditation in more of a circular process of lovingkindness.

But before we get into that, let's define lovingkindness a little bit. In the Buddhist tradition, we define lovingkindness as the wish for ourselves and others to be happy and to have the causes of happiness. Happiness is this elusive thing, but we all know what it feels like. We all know what it feels like to receive care, to offer it, to experience warmth. So I usually like these terms, care and warmth. But if care is a difficult term or word for you to incorporate in the meditation, just use the word warmth, right? We all know when we feel warmth. We all know when we are offering warmth to another, whether they are able to receive that or not. And so warmth is there. As I said, warmth is at the base of our being. And so in this practice of lovingkindness. We're cultivating that. I also like to bring in generosity here, because normally we think of generosity as a material thing. But actually, within lovingkindness practice, we're offering generosity in the form of warmth. We're offering generosity as a spirit, as a way of being with ourselves and others, again, in this circular way. So in one way, we could think of this practice as a cultivation of lovingkindness. But in another way, we can think of it as just allowing and uncovering our innate light or innate warmth toward ourselves and others. I personally prefer this second style,

because it allows me to recognize that I'm not cultivating something, or I'm not embodying something that I don't already have. I'm actually just enhancing it and trying to bring it out more, or I'm trying to remove what's obscuring that light of warmth through that light of love within this practice. So [those are] just a few things to reflect on that might be helpful to you as well that have been helpful to me in my cultivation of boundless lovingkindness.

With that said, let's go ahead and do a practice of boundless lovingkindness. Just as we did for the practice of boundless equanimity, go ahead and find a space where you can relax into a posture that's both upright and at ease. The idea here is to allow the body to be restful, but also not to be hunched over, but somewhat upright, not too tight, not too loose. Feel free to close your eyes for the practice, or, if you'd like, you can keep them half open or fully open. And just as we did in our previous meditation, we'll go ahead and connect to the breath or connect to the body. I personally like just feeling my feet flat on the floor if I'm sitting in a chair, feeling my connection to the earth and allowing the breath to connect to feet and Earth. So as I breathe in through the nose, I breathe into my feet, up from the earth and into my feet. As I breathe out, I relax into my feet and their connection to the ground below me. And, of course, you can just allow the breath to be felt in the abdomen as you inhale through the nose, allowing the abdomen to relax as you exhale. If that's a place where you feel more grounded, that's fine. Or if there's some other way you can start to connect with yourself and connect with body and breath, go ahead and do that.

Just as we incorporated with our practice of boundless equanimity, we're going to incorporate visualization of felt experience, helpful or creative thinking, and, of course, mindful awareness.

So if you're newer to boundless lovingkindness practice, you can simply just work with one of the three fingers, you can choose to work with the close one if you want. If you're more intermediate or advanced, you can work with the difficult person or the person you feel more neutrality or indifference toward. And you're welcome to bring in the same people, or beings, from the last meditation on boundless equanimity. Or you can bring in completely fresh relationships. But choose one of these categories. The close one, difficult person, or someone you have more indifference or neutrality toward. We're just going to work with one person today. And we're going to begin to invite them into the room with us and you can imagine them in the space in front of you. I like to imagine that they've also agreed to be here. The reason for that is like already a closeness starts to form. We're kind of deliberately inviting them. Just notice what arises for you in your feeling world in your body as you invite them into the room. And this could either be visualizing them, feeling their presence, or some of us are more auditory, so you can even just imagine their voice, that's fine. We really need to take advantage of our talents here. If we have a talent to visualize, or have a talent to feel in a more intuitive way, use that. Or if you have a talent to recognize through sound, use that. If you don't know, try all three and see what works best.

As we sit with this person, we're going to do a brief practice of boundless equanimity, just remembering that just as any type of relationship in our life, this person wishes for peace. They

don't wish for difficulty or pain. And that applies to every single being that we share this earth with. Whether we agree with them, whether we like them or dislike them, they all wish for peace and ease. They all wish to avoid pain. And at their essence, they're all deeply worthy. Just connect to that for a moment, remembering equanimity and dropping into the body, if you can—feeling that in the body.

Now here, because we're going to practice boundless lovingkindness in a more circular way, and I'll describe what I mean by that in a moment, we're also going to reflect on ourselves. Just acknowledging and appreciating that we also wish for peace, we also wish for happiness and ease. We also wish to avoid pain.

Already, within that recognition, there's a recognition of warmth toward ourselves. Soften toward yourself and this other person in the room here with you, basically, reflecting on and removing the distance, and just recognizing at our essence we have the same basic aspirations. Of course, those can look different ways, and, of course, according to our different locations, that can vary in what we need or what we seek. But the basic principle remains. We both wish for happiness, we both wish to avoid pain, suffering, stress. And, of course, it's not that we can always avoid stress. But here, what we're recognizing is what we seek. And within that is a very profound, innate quality of awakening of boundlessness. It's not *getting* what we seek—that's a different thing. It's more the seeking itself.

[Here], I just want to clarify that the seeking itself makes us both not only deeply worthy of love and compassion, but also available to it. We wouldn't be seeking something we don't already have the basis for. That's the premise here within the Buddhist approach to these. Already, you might be connecting with a sense of warmth, but now we're going to make it more deliberate. So the circular process here is that we're both opening up to receiving care from this person as we're offering it.

Typically in the practice of boundless lovingkindness, one would repeat phrases, “May you be happy, may you be at ease.” If you want to do that, you can do that. And as you're also imagining receiving that from the person, they're also saying that or sharing that aspiration with you, toward you. Another way to do this practice is just to feel warmth, just to generate that as a wish for the other, and as a wish for oneself. But here, we're also allowing ourselves to open up to the other person's aspiration for us. And again, this is on the level of imagination, of course, but imagination is powerful. Just because it's imagination doesn't mean we shouldn't do it or use it.

To play with that, for a moment, opening up that circular process, it might feel a little odd in the beginning. It might feel a little linear, like first you have to give it, then you receive it, or first you receive it, then you give it. Start there if you need, but then start to open it up where the giver and receiver starts to dissolve a little bit.

So again, giving and receiving either with a phrase of lovingkindness: “May you be at ease, may be happy. May you be at peace.” [Use] whatever phrase feels or suits you best, or just connect

to a feeling of warmth and allow that to be sent and received. If a sense and any moment of the sender and receiver start to dissolve, just be with that warmth in a less dualistic way. This is called the openness of lovingkindness. In a way, sometimes when I first come to this practice, I just open up into an attitude of generosity. I want to be generous with this person. I want to be generous with myself, just allowing the barrier that blocks connection, this barrier of a strong sense of self, this barrier of a strong sense of the other, allowing that barrier to dissolve slowly through this practice. And then we start to enter the boundless quality of lovingkindness. Just rest with that with mindful awareness, either with the feeling or just the presence of that. So we can do this as a series, sending and receiving more specifically, and allowing that to expand into a circular process and then allowing that to dissolve and just resting with openness itself, with love itself. Also, we can imagine or feel that this person really receives our love. If you can, really imagine that you can receive warmth from them. So when they smile, how does that feel? within your heart, what does that open in you?

When they feel your love completely, when they feel the warmth you're sending, the warm wishes you're sending completely, how does that affect you? How does that affect them? What kind of space does that open up between you? Just allow yourself to connect more and more with that space. Again, less and less of a linear process. But, of course, linearity is OK. It's where we start. Just allow it to become more circular, less of a self and other and just rest in that.

We'll spend a few more moments working with this. Again, you have a few different levels to work with. So work with the one that you can connect to. It's just simply a phrase of lovingkindness, sending them warmth, sending them ease and peace. Silently repeat that in your mind and then allow yourself to receive that from them. It's on a level of imagination, of course, but like I said, imagination is powerful. We often ask the question within the traditional Buddhist path, what isn't imagination or what doesn't involve imagination?

OK, so if you'd like to continue this practice, feel free to go ahead and continue. As we begin to close, connect back to breath and body, connect back to the feet connected to earth, connected to breath. Wherever you want to allow your mindful awareness to fall for the moment, let what we've imagined fade into the background. If you want, you can thank the individual that you called forth, that you invited into this space of lovingkindness

Just settle into the body and breath. Without closing the practice, begin to open the eyes, letting the gaze rest in the space in front of you, allowing yourself to stay connected to breath body, just for a few more moments.

OK, well thanks so much for joining me for this practice. In our next session, we're going to work with boundless compassion. I hope you can join us.

