

# Seeding the Heart

Loving-kindness Practice with Children

Gregory Kramer



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# Introduction

The practice of loving-kindness or *mettā*, can be done in one of two ways: Either in intensive prolonged meditation to develop deep states of concentration or in daily life at any time one meets with people and animals or thinks about them. The systematic practice of loving-kindness for deep concentration as it is practised in various meditation centres has been discussed in detail by such teachers like late Venerable Mahasi Sayadaw and Venerable Sujiva.\*

To learn about the radiating of *mettā* to all beings with children, we have to tap into the store of knowledge accumulated by lay people and parents. It must be knowledge which has grown out of years of living and loving with children and young adults. Gregory Kramer, father of three boys, shows us in his short essay with what subtle but precise adjustments in the standard practice of loving-kindness he was able to anchor it in the lives of his children. There are three aspects in Mr. Kramer's *mettā* practice with his sons, which seem to me particularly important for his success:

- Parents should know themselves how *mettā* feels like and be in the habit of radiating it to their children and all beings.
- Children should never be coerced into sending, wishes of well-being to themselves or others.
- Parents should trust their intuitive understanding of their children and be flexible enough to adjust the method to the age and unique personalities of the kids.

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\* See: *Brahma Vihara Dhamma* by Mahasi Sayadaw.  
*Meditation on Loving Kindness* by Ven. Sujiva.

There are many wonderful ways to radiate loving-kindness with children and young adults. I hope that this essay will encourage parents to share their own experiences, successes and obstacles, in their family mettā practice.

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Bodhisāra  
Penang, 1997

‘One has do learn to live with oneself,  
to be a friend with oneself,  
to be at peace with oneself,  
to somehow learn to be happy with oneself,  
because where you go, you take you with you.’

— Ajahn Brahmavamso

I believe the fruits of the loving-kindness meditation as advocated by Gregory Kramer and borne from his personal experience will help us and our children — for those of us with young children — achieve the goals set out above by the Venerable as necessary to one find peace here and now.

— C. T. Teo

Ever since my first child was just about old enough to understand speech, I have practiced loving-kindness meditation with him at bedtime every evening. I've done the same with my other two children. It's been about sixteen years now. I would be happy to pass along some of what I've learned.

Loving-kindness is a meditation practice taught by the Buddha to develop the mental habit of self-less or altruistic, love. By arousing within ourselves feelings of good will towards ourselves, those near to us, and all beings, we make it likely that these feelings will arise rather than other, less desirable feelings. Hatred cannot coexist with loving-kindness; it dissipates and is not replenished if we supplant thoughts rooted in anger with thoughts rooted in love.

Loving-kindness makes the mind more pliable, counteracts the judgments that arise as we become more perceptive about ourselves and others, and brings us beyond our selfishness. This outward movement is very important to balance the inner focus of meditation practice. The benefits of loving-kindness practice extend far beyond those who meditate. It offers to all the opportunity to kind selflessness, joy, adaptability, and expansiveness. It is a truly universal practice and need not be associated with any particular religious concept.

I've always given my three sons a choice. Most evenings they clearly want to do this. If, however, one of them is cranky or upset, I'll say, "Would you like to do loving-kindness tonight?" and if the answer is no, then I'll say, "OK, honey," give him a kiss (through the blanket if necessary), and say goodnight. So they know it is for *them*. If they see it is OK with me not to do it — it won't hurt my feelings — then it is alive and part of their lives. It prevents it from becoming a ritual with little meaning.

Feeling good about doing this meditation is what brings it into their lives. They associate their own happiness and peace with a meditation that wishes happiness and peace for themselves *and* others.

It also feels good that the practice has become part of our evening, just as the story and my lying down with them. It is a special time of attention, gentleness, fantasy, mind opening, and familial love.

It tells me something about how this practice feels to them when, following a tense time, such as an argument, they still want me to practice loving-kindness with them. At times like these the pleasant and wholesome associations of loving-kindness meditation are of unique value.

I long expected the day to arrive when my eldest son, who is now eighteen, would not want to practice anymore. Even as I expected this, he and I benefitted from the connection we felt at bedtime (and, of course, through many other times.) The wedge of *teenagerdom* and his growing, independence was a challenge at times, but this special connection was very strong. I am now finding a similar connection with our middle child as he enters his teenage years.

What finally did happen, as the eldest reached about sixteen years of age, was I became busier at bedtime with his two brothers and he simply became less insistent on my presence for the practice. Every now and then I ask him if he still practices loving-kindness on his own and am pleased to find that he does.

Now, I have to point out, this can all take a lot of time. The stories (usually made up rather than read), the loving-kindness meditation, and the “be with” time can add up to twenty or thirty minutes. With children in separate rooms this can add up to an hour each night. As

wonderful as it can be, sometimes I can't do it. And it's good to know that even a five minute practice has great value.

Interestingly, when I'm busy the boys still request a "quick loving-kindness" even before a story or "be with" time. When I have to be away, they do just fine without me. Here is how we do the loving-kindness practice. I ask them to close their eyes and relax. I suggest that they pay attention to their bodies, noticing, the sensation of lying down. Then, they think along with me as I say the following:

Send loving-kindness to yourself.

Really love yourself.

Want yourself to be happy.

Think:

I love myself.

May I be free from anger.

May I be free from sadness.

May I be free from pain.

(I really want to be free from pain.)

May I be free from difficulties.

May I be free from all suffering.

May I be healthy.

May my body be healthy and strong.

May I be filled with loving-kindness.

May I know the joy of generosity and love.

May I be happy.

May I really be happy.

May I be at peace.

I spread this loving-kindness out.

I send love to Dad and Mom.

May Mom and Dad

be free from difficulties.

May they be free from pain and sadness.

May they be free from attachment,

Free from anger and ill will.

May they be free from all suffering.

May Mom and Dad be healthy and happy.

Completely healthy and happy.

May they be at peace.

I send loving-kindness to both my brothers.

May they be free from sadness and anger.

May they be free from sickness.

May they be free from all suffering.

May they be happy and free.

Free from suffering, free from difficulties.

May they be well and happy.

May they be at peace.

I send loving-kindness to my teachers

and the kids at school

(Even the ones I don't know).

May they all be free from sorrow

and suffering.



May they be free  
from anger and difficulties.  
May they be happy.  
Free from all difficulties and sadness.  
May they be well and happy.  
May they be at peace.

I send love now to all the people  
I don't know everywhere on the earth.  
May all beings on the planet be free  
from suffering.  
May they be free from pain, grief,  
and despair.  
May they be happy,  
Truly happy.  
May they be at peace.

May all beings in the universe be free  
from suffering.  
May all beings in all universes,  
everywhere, be free from suffering.  
May they be well and happy.  
May they be at peace.

May all beings of all kinds, in all directions  
be happy and at peace.  
Above and below,  
Near and far,

High and low.  
All types of beings.  
Humans and non-humans.  
Seen and unseen.  
All the animals, birds, and fishes.  
All beings and creatures,  
With no exceptions.  
May they all be happy.  
May they be free.

I open my heart  
And accept the loving-kindness  
    of every being and creature in return.  
I let that love into my heart.  
And I share the benefits of this meditation  
    with every one.

May all beings be well and happy.  
May all beings be well and happy.  
May all beings be well and happy.  
May there be peace.  
May there be peace.  
May there be peace.

Following, the meditation, each child gets a kiss and an “I love you.” I lie there briefly, then leave.

This practice is slightly different from the one I do with my adult meditation students. There are nuances that I adjust with age and mood, to make the meditation

something that kids can relate to directly and emotionally. As they mature and their world grows, the scope of the meditation can grow and still be congruent with that world.

By beginning with some instructions rather than the practice itself, I'm setting the stage and the mood. This creates a transition from listening, to stories to focusing, on their feelings and then growing those feelings towards love. Another adjustment is that each person, group, or region towards whom the loving-kindness is sent has slightly different words. I do not want this practice to become rote. By avoiding repetition, we help the meditation stay alive and relevant.

Then, we grow the feelings of love in the most fertile soil: logically the closest and most loved people (or animals or plants). The children themselves get the most attention, based on the simple fact that we all want to be free from pain and difficulties. When we know how that feels for ourselves, we can, with identification and understanding, spread that feeling to others. After all, they are just like us and must also want to be free from pain, discomfort, and other suffering.

We extend loving-kindness toward ourselves, toward someone we love a great deal (DAD AND MOM), toward others we love (THE BROTHERS), then toward those we like (OUR FRIENDS AT SCHOOL) or at least feel neutral toward (TEACHERS, OTHER KIDS), then toward all beings. With adults, the practice goes from oneself to a loved one, then to a neutral one, then to one towards whom we feel anger, then on out geographically. With children, we slowly grow the world; we are not "pushing the river." When they are ready, we extend the loving-kindness toward people they feel some agitation toward. Even with the youngest child I will occasionally add

people he may feel anger towards. With my thirteen year old we do so often, though he seems to feel little agitation towards others.

There is an element of improvisation in the way I conduct this practice. If I feel the kids are in a particularly loving place, I may focus more on sending love to their teachers. “May they really be free from difficulties and suffering.” This would help them to see their teachers as regular humans, with pain, with lives outside the classroom, and not beyond error and emotion. I may also focus extra loving-kindness on someone in need, such as an ill grandmother. The child can then be helped to see that when there is need, you step outside yourself and you give extra.

In spreading the loving-kindness geographically, I try to walk the line between it becoming a mental exercise (“Where is that town?” “What is a continent?”) and being so general as not to invoke feelings of expansiveness (“Oh, we’re at that spreading thing that I don’t really understand, I’ll just lie here.”). This grows in sophistication with age.

But one must be careful not to turn it into a geography lesson, although a little intrigue doesn’t hurt (“I send loving-kindness across all of Asia, Africa, Australia; across all the oceans to all the creatures in the sea”). The feeling of expansiveness is paramount here. From me, to them, to all on earth, to all in the universe, to all in all directions, with no exceptions. This helps the heart grow and soften. It takes children (or us) out of themselves in a gentle way.

Questions come up with kids that may not come up with adults, like the time my youngest wanted to send loving-kindness to

YELLOW BLANKIE. First, I said to him that YELLOW BLANKIE doesn't have a consciousness. This did not impress him. Then I said we'd send loving-kindness to YELLOW BLANKIE, figuring, that "all beings" could include his fabric friend if my son so chose. However, when we began the loving-kindness practice, it went like this:

*ME:* "I send loving-kindness to Dad and Mom . . ."

*MY SON:* ". . . and YELLOW BLANKIE."

*ME:* "OK, and YELLOW BLANKIE."

As my eldest son matured and his emotional understanding was expanded, I gently expanded the meditation. Compassion is an extension of love, further along this trajectory of going beyond ourselves to embrace others. So the eldest may, having been instructed, after sending, loving-kindness to all beings, let himself feel the suffering of others, to let his heart resonate with the pain of others. This was done in a gentle and non-dogmatic way. There is a sense of respect and maturity that he may have felt, albeit subtly, for being able to grow in his practice in this way.

I can't say for certain, but it is my hope that this compassion will grow within my sons as they reach deeper into the rich and complex social world of young adulthood and thus act as counterbalance to the arrogance and judgment that comes with the territory. I particularly hope that they can develop a true compassion for those less fortunate than themselves, people without enough to eat, without adequate clothing or housing, people who are in war zones or are stricken by disease. In our privileged society, where many of us don't see the outer reaches of human suffering, I want actively to instil the capacity for

compassion. The compassion itself will grow with their experience.

I try to do this without too much attachment to results or to the process itself. If my children decide they don't want to do this anymore, I hope I can let go of it lightly. But for now, as for the past sixteen years, they value this practice of loving-kindness.

## About the Author



GREGORY KRAMER lives with his wife and three sons in Portland, Oregon, USA. He is long-time student of insight meditation (*vipassāna*), having, practiced with various Asian teachers. He has taught insight meditation for 18 years and conducted numerous retreats under the auspices of the METTA FOUNDATION and at the BARRE CENTER FOR BUDDHIST STUDIES in Massachusetts. Gregory Kramer also co-founded HARVEST WITH HEART, a hunger project in upstate New York. As the president of the METTA FOUNDATION, Kramer is directing their efforts to build a bridge between the study and practice of meditation and to develop artistic and scholarly supports for contemplation, he has investigated various approaches to mindfulness training and studied the Buddhist psychology, Abhidhamma.