

Buddhist and Jewish Traditions of “Metta” Practice

Judith Helburn, MA, CSL

Judith Helburn, CSL, writes about her daily practice of lovingkindness meditation, or “metta” practice, and Judith includes this definition from Wikipedia: “Mettā or maitrī means benevolence, loving-kindness, friendliness, amity, good will, and active interest in others. . . . The cultivation of benevolence is a popular form of Buddhist meditation.”

Judith continues: “In Judaism we also use a form of Metta as it is a prayer or chant of wellbeing beginning with ourselves and reaching outward: “May you feel safe. May you feel happy. May you feel at ease.” By repeating these words and other interpretative variations of the priestly blessing, we actively train our minds to quiet our defenses, soften our harsh judgments, and orient ourselves towards compassion. In the release of each breath, we call upon our hearts to love freely and without constriction.

“I have often used a Metta chant at the end of a session with participants of my Sage-ing classes or workshops. The focus, then, is the focus of the session, be it peace, forgiveness, facing difficulties. I always begin with the individual, then move to family, community, country, world—whatever is appropriate at the time.

“Additionally, I use the Metta on my morning walks in a neighborhood park. For me, it is important to send Metta messages to those with whom I have disagreements as well as to those I know are in distress or to those whom I love. Certainly, sending loving-kindness to those with whom I have differences won’t hurt, might help. Perhaps I’m being selfish, wanting others to be filled with loving kindness.”

Judith goes on to describe “Tonglen” instruction from Pema Chödrön, a well-loved Buddhist teacher: “So in the in-breath you breathe in with the wish to take away the suffering, and breathe out with the wish to send comfort and happiness to the same people, animals, nations, or whatever it is you decide.

“Do this for an individual, or do this for large areas, and if you do this with more than one subject in mind, that’s fine . . . breathing in as fully as you can, radiating out as widely as you can.

“I do not remember when I began this practice. I’m pretty certain that our founder, Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi of Blessed Memory, spoke about this during one of the times I was privileged to hear and learn from him. For me, now, it is automatic. I see a mother with an unruly toddler, and I breathe in her temporary fiery feelings, and send calm back. When I am driving and see a fire engine or ambulance, I do the same, for someone nearby is in distress. I touch my heart with my hand and guide loving-kindness outward.

“These simple practices, perhaps, help me more than others, but I believe that any island of calmness affects the space around. And, even beyond.”