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**Conference or Workshop Item**

**Title:** Understanding loving kindness meditation: western meditators’ views of their practice

**Creator:** Sheffield, K.


**Version:** Presented version

[http://nectar.northampton.ac.uk/7129/](http://nectar.northampton.ac.uk/7129/)
Understanding Loving Kindness Meditation; Western meditators’ views of their practice
Kimberley Sheffield; kimberleysheffield@northampton.ac.uk

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

Existing research: increases empathy, positivity towards strangers, performance on cognitive tasks, reduced levels of pain intensity, has an effect on implicit attitudes towards the self and others, and increases in frequency and intensity of positive emotions in participants who have schizophrenia.

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

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 practising LKM. Varied backgrounds and ways of practising 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

Findings: Statistically ONE main factor; commonalities in sorting statements at the negative end. But at the other end of the distribution, differences emerging in three factors
I don’t see the value in sending Loving Kindness to ‘enemies’ (-4)
I think directing feelings of Loving Kindness towards my self is more a familiarity (-3)

Cluster 1: The practice as a life-changer
Loving Kindness practice is a fundamental part of me and my life (42;+6)
Loving Kindness has made me a better person than I used to be (27;+3)
Loving Kindness has helped me to see my emotions in a different way (27;+3)
Loving Kindness has improved my physical and psychological implications (27;+4)

Cluster 2: The practice and its components
Loving Kindness is more like friendliness than love (27;+4)
Loving Kindness Meditation has helped me realise that I deserve love more than anyone else (27;+3)
Loving Kindness helps me to see my emotions in a different way (27;+3)
Loving Kindness Meditation has helped me see my emotions in a different way (27;+3)

Cluster 3: I am my practice
Loving Kindness Meditation has improved my daily happiness and wellbeing (24;+4)
Loving Kindness Meditation has helped me improve my physical and psychological implications (24;+4)
Loving Kindness Meditation has helped me see my emotions in a different way (24;+4)
Loving Kindness Meditation has a physical element (12;+6)
Loving Kindness Meditation can change default attitudes (24;+4)
Loving Kindness Meditation helps me understand other people’s feelings (24;+4)
Loving Kindness Meditation helps me understand and empathise with others (24;+4)
Loving Kindness Meditation helps me understand other people’s feelings (24;+4)
Loving Kindness Meditation helps me improve my physical and psychological implications (24;+4)
Loving Kindness Meditation has improved my daily happiness and wellbeing (24;+4)
Loving Kindness Meditation has helped me to see my emotions in a different way (24;+4)
Loving Kindness Meditation helps me understand other people’s feelings (24;+4)
Loving Kindness Meditation helps me improve my physical and psychological implications (24;+4)

3. Student groups
Learnings from stage 1 and 2

Wait-list control
LKM
Mindfulness

10 weeks of meditation sessions 2-3 testing points
Strop test; Self-compassion; Perceived Stress; Mindfulness: Life Satisfaction; PANAS

Conclusions
• Variation in ways of practising 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 its own benefits and effects, so supports further exploration in stage 3.