

# Lovingkindness Meditation and Navigating Harm: a Community-Engaged Qualitative Study with Diverse Meditators during COVID-19

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## Abstract

**Objectives:** Inclusive research is needed to understand how contemplative practices are used by people across a range of identities. Lovingkindness meditation (LKM) may be particularly relevant for people to committed to equity and justice because of the social nature of the practice. Using community-based participatory research and an intersectional framework, this qualitative study focuses on how people in a diverse meditation community teach and practice lovingkindness or *metta* meditation.

**Methods:** In partnership between university researchers and a community-based meditation center, we conducted virtual focus groups on experiences with lovingkindness meditation during the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic. We used reflexive thematic analysis to analyze focus group data, with a member checking process.

**Results:** 47 people participated in 6 focus groups (mean age 47; 62% LGBTQ+; 32% white, 23% Asian, 19% Black, 13% Hispanic/Latina/o, 24%

multi-racial). Qualitative analysis revealed two central themes: (1) The use of skillful means to support diverse meditators' participation in a community of practice, including adaptation to virtual-only formats during COVID-19; (2) Meditators' use of *metta* to navigate harmful situations, both individual stressors and systems of oppression.

**Conclusions:** Diverse participants in a meditation community found lovingkindness practice supportive for coping with the stress of microaggressions and structural oppression. They utilized LKM to navigate hardships caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, offer compassion to themselves and others, and cultivate the ability to hold multiple difficult emotions. Community-engaged approaches to meditation research are feasible during the COVID-19 pandemic and other times of crisis and should be used more widely.

*Keywords:* loving-kindness, meditation, community engagement, COVID-19, contemplative practice

Contemplative practitioners and scholars draw on legacies of socially engaged Buddhism in applying meditation practices to issues of inequity and justice. In these contexts, contemplative practices can bring awareness to inequities, and may help transform damaging effects of oppression at intrapersonal, interpersonal and societal levels (Magee, 2019; Yang, 2017). Amid the growing use of meditation in the United States for stress

reduction, coping with physical and mental health conditions, and performance enhancement (Burke et al., 2017), many meditation centers reflect and attend to primarily “upper-middle-class, Euro-American” practitioners, meaning that both teachers and students are often white, wealthy, and able-bodied (Razak, 2019: 65). Similarly, much existing research on contemplative practices has been conducted with groups of people who are predominantly white, highly educated, of middle or upper socioeconomic status, and live in industrialized and democratized countries (also known as “WEIRD” population samples) (DeLuca et al., 2018; Henrich et al., 2010; Waldron et al., 2018; Weng et al., 2020). Since clinical and neuroscience research on meditation has not been representative of United States or international populations, its generalizability may be limited and, importantly, the experiences of meditators from historically marginalized groups (e.g., Black people in the United States, people with disabilities) are not well-considered. To address this deficit, we used a qualitative community-based participatory research approach to study lovingkindness meditation among diverse meditators.

Lovingkindness meditation (LKM) may be particularly relevant for efforts towards equity and justice because of the social nature of the practice, where wishing kindness and well-being towards people who vary in social relationship can increase responses of social connection, positive emotions, and prosocial behavior (Klimecki et al., 2014; Weng et al., 2013). The Buddhist concept of *metta*, translated into English as “lovingkindness,”

“loving-friendliness,” and “goodwill,” is defined as expanding outward from one’s own concerns and engaging in an experience of universal love and caring toward others (Gunaratana, 2019; Thanissaro, 2013). Lovingkindness meditation practice typically begins with extending goodwill to oneself, followed by extending it to other beings—a benefactor, a good friend, a neutral person, a person who the meditator finds challenging, and all beings. *Metta* practice as it has spread throughout popular culture in the United States, taught by acclaimed Euro-American Buddhist teachers such as Sharon Salzberg and Jack Kornfield, involves the repetition of short phrases such as “May I/you be free from suffering. May I/you be filled with love. May I/you be at peace.” Research on lovingkindness meditation and compassion meditation has found positive effects on the emotions of practitioners. For example, a randomized controlled study of 200 university students found that both LKM and compassion meditation resulted in increased happiness and overall positive emotions, as well as decreased sadness, with greater effect sizes for LKM (Sirotina & Shchebetenko, 2020). Other studies have found LKM effective in treating chronic pain, and a combination of LKM and compassion practices may be effective in treating depression, anxiety, and PTSD (Alba, 2013; Graser & Stangier, 2018). Research has found that LKM and compassion-based practices increased feelings of social connectedness by shifting the perception of meditation from an individualistic, religious, or relaxation practice toward its potential to connect meditators with other people. Social connectedness is essential

for psychological well-being, and reports of connectedness following LKM indicate that human contact is not necessarily required to increase one's subjective sense of connection to humanity (Aspy & Proeve, 2017; Gentile et al., 2020; Trautwein et al., 2016). Some researchers have addressed what they see as underreported aspects of the meditation experience among Buddhist practitioners in the Global North, specifically "experiences characterized as challenging, difficult, distressing, or impairing" (Lindahl et al. 2017:15). Findings show a range of distress levels among experienced meditators, and report on the enduring impact of challenging meditation-related experiences, though very few such experiences were appraised by meditators as adverse.

To bring these streams of practice and research together, the perspectives of people with marginalized identities must be included in LKM research to understand how people practice LKM. For example, meditators may practice LKM to ease personal suffering due to oppression (LKM towards the self) or to mitigate automatic reactions and biases towards people who belong to different identity groups. Based on these first-person perspectives, quantitative psychological and neuroscientific approaches can then be developed to accurately capture mental states during LKM practice as well as outcomes of practice. Existing research underscores that many Buddhist and secular meditation spaces in the United States are exclusionary to people of color, LGBTQIA+ people, people with disabilities and chronic health conditions, and those of low

socioeconomic status. For example, Arisika Razak (2019) writes that although many people of color are drawn to Buddhism, they may “feel unwelcome in predominantly white Buddhist establishments” due to a number of issues, including absence of other people of color, unfamiliarity with practices or teachings, and, tellingly, a lack of social justice awareness (68). Watson, et. al. (2016) noted that while Black women in her study of meditation appreciated exposure to these practices within a research study, they did not enroll in subsequent yoga or mindfulness classes due to their cost. Razak (2019) considers these barriers, both social and material, as embodied realities that reflect intersectional lived experiences.

An emerging body of research has explored the use of meditation and its potential benefits among people of color in the United States, with a primary but not exclusive focus on Black people (Burnett-Zeigler, Hong, et al., 2019; Cornelio-Flores et al., 2017; Woods-Giscombe et al., 2019). Scholars have noted challenges with the accessibility of meditation programs for Black participants, including time constraints, location, and travel barriers, possible cultural incongruence of mindfulness meditation, and religion-related stigma associated with meditation practices (Biggers et al., 2020; Watson et al., 2016). This body of research also provides strong rationale for the usefulness of mindfulness-based meditation for people of color due to high rates of exposure to chronic stress, including the stressors of gendered racism and subsequent health consequences (Biggers et al., 2020; Watson et al., 2016). Despite the noted challenges of accessibility of

existing meditation programs for many Black participants, clinical study findings show positive outcomes associated with improved health and wellbeing for Black participants when they participate in meditation programs (Biggers et al., 2020; Burnett-Zeigler, Satyshur, et al., 2019; Watson et al., 2016).

Socially engaged Buddhism provides pathways for connecting “inner and outer transformation” (Rothberg 1992: 2). The work of Thich Nhat Hanh, His Holiness the Fourteenth Dalai Lama, and others have long connected meditation practice with issues of societal and political concern. Recent US scholarship on socially engaged Buddhism attends to racism, sexism, and “embodied identities,” such as sexuality and gender identity (Vesely-Flad, 2017: 241). Vesely-Flad, for example, focuses on how Black Buddhists both embrace and challenge socially engaged Buddhism by drawing attention to racism and oppression via the importance of embodiment and encouraging white *sangha* members to do the same. Blackwell (2019) writes about the essential role of embodiment in addressing systemic oppression, particularly as it applies to people of color, and offers meditation and somatic practices as a necessary intervention for healing. Arguing that both racism and healing are body-based experiences, Blackwell states that meditation and embodiment practices prepare participants to be more authentic and vulnerable in their interpersonal and community relationships (22). In other words, for Buddhism to fulfill its socially engaged mission, practitioners must attend to the impacts of racism

and other forms of oppression on marginalized communities and offer the teachings as tools for addressing this suffering and harm.

Intersectionality offers a useful framework to further understand socially engaged Buddhism and diverse secular meditation spaces. Intersectionality was initially conceptualized by legal scholar Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw (1997), who argued that feminist and anti-racist discourses rarely accounted for how the intersection of racism and patriarchy uniquely shape structural, political, and legal aspects of violence against Black women. Collins (2015: 1) explains intersectionality as a paradigm for understanding that race, class, gender, nationality, sexuality, ethnicity, ability, and age operate as “reciprocally constructing phenomena.” She says, “Such intersectional paradigms remind us that oppression cannot be reduced to one fundamental type, and that oppressions work together in producing injustice” (Collins 2015:18). Intersectional approaches illuminate the co-constitutive nature of multiple axes of oppression, creating a more finely tuned framework necessary for understanding diverse lived experiences and addressing complex systems of injustice. For example, a person of color who has a disability may have less access to contemplative spaces and may feel socially excluded within the dominant culture.

Ikeda (2019) argues that intersectional awareness is compatible with Buddhist teachings, stating that intersecting systems of oppression illustrate the teaching that all beings are interconnected and layered.



“Skillful means,” a term in English translated from the Buddhist word “upaya,” is a concept that can incorporate both socially engaged Buddhist principles and frameworks of intersectionality (Buswell, Jr. & Lopez, Jr., 2014). Federman (2009) describes skillful means as “meeting people where they are,” an approach that can be utilized by teachers and meditators, regardless of practice level. When someone struggles to understand the dharma, Federman writes, a friend or teacher can use skillful means to offer guidance. If this guidance arises from compassion for and understanding of the person’s inability to access the teachings, an act of skillful means will be tailored to the situation.

Both Ikeda (2019) and Vesely-Flad (2017) demonstrate application of the Buddhist teaching of “No Self” when teaching meditators of color. “No Self” can be described as “the expansion of the limited and suffering self in the direction of the infinite and universal self” or as the particular insight that there is “no fixed or permanent self” (Ikeda, 2019, 32). Vesely-Flad argues that this teaching, when received by people struggling with systemic oppression, can “be interpreted as diminishing the corrosive experience of racism that has resulted in pervasive anguish and suffering” or “dismissing the weight of colonialism, genocide, slavery, and systemic racism” (2017, 243). She asserts that Black Buddhist instructors have the positionality and skill to effectively communicate the “No Self” teaching “in such a way that the reality of the body in society is acknowledged” (244). Ikeda states that transformative racial justice in Buddhist settings means teachers must

directly address issues including racism, privilege, and oppression in their teachings and practices, modeling “how they hold their own power and unearned privilege” (2019, 36). As Vesely-Flad notes, including Black Buddhist teachers and instructors in meditation spaces helps create inclusive spaces for LGBTQIA+ identity within Buddhist communities (2017, 239). In other words, teachers acknowledging their own intersectional identities can increase access to meditation for marginalized people and, ultimately, all beings.

Our team’s past research formulated “intersectional neuroscience” as a method that utilizes community engagement to create more welcoming and inclusive research processes and facilitate the recruitment of diverse study participants, particularly those with multiple marginalized identities (Weng et al., 2020). This approach aims to embody compassion within a research framework by including perspectives of diverse meditators and sharing resources, including agency within the research process, grant funds, and authorship. In previous research, we included diverse meditators from the East Bay Meditation Center (EBMC; Oakland, CA) in research development using community engagement (Wallerstein & Duran, 2010) to develop studies more inclusive of people of color, people who are LGBTQIA+, people with disabilities and chronic illness, and people with lower income and education. Our past study used individualized neuroscientific methods that accommodate each individual’s unique brain structure and function to identify diverse mental states during breath-

focused meditation (Weng, et al., 2020). We integrated as much feedback from community partners as possible to make the study more inclusive, while maintaining the scientific goals of studying attention during meditation.

We designed the present qualitative research study to focus on the lived experiences of diverse meditators teaching and practicing lovingkindness meditation (LKM), or *metta*. We invited participants to share how they used *metta* in daily life during the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic. This qualitative study may be used to inform the development of future quantitative research in these areas. It may also help guide the development of meditation programs engaging diverse communities and contribute to interventions that can address systemic oppression and the stress it causes in individuals and communities.

## **METHODS**

### **Participants, Setting and Context**

This study built on an existing university-community partnership between the UCSF Osher Center for Integrative Health and East Bay Meditation Center (EBMC). EBMC offers teachings on mindfulness, spiritual wisdom, and compassion from Buddhist and other spiritual traditions with a commitment to serving people of color, LGBTQ+ people, people with disabilities, and those who have been otherwise marginalized from meditation spaces, through transparent democratic governance, generosity-

based economics, and environmental sustainability. As in the prior study (Weng et al., 2020), we used principles of community-based participatory research (Wallerstein et al., 2019) to inform study procedures. These included seeking feedback from EBMC staff and community members at multiple stages and paying key EBMC staff as consultants. Study participants were recruited by EBMC staff through the organization's listserv and social media, using text and images collaboratively chosen by UCSF and EBMC staff. Eligible study participants included anyone involved in EBMC as a teacher or program participant with an active lovingkindness meditation practice. All procedures were approved by the UCSF IRB, and participants were compensated for their time with gift cards to grocery stores.

EBMC strives to provide a welcoming environment for people from marginalized communities, with a mission that includes “[fostering] liberation, personal and interpersonal healing, social action, and inclusive community building” (East Bay Meditation Center, n.d.). Study participants included members of multiple EBMC programs including self-organized Practice Groups, which are community-led and meet weekly. EBMC defines practice groups as “gatherings of people practicing meditation or mindful movement together.” (East Bay Meditation Center, n.d.) Since practice groups tend to include direct meditation instruction as well as dharma talks by teachers, they are led by EBMC-affiliated teachers, who were also eligible to participate in this study. We also recruited participants from

EBMC's peer-led Deep Refuge Groups, which are intended to "provide a safe, intimate, and community-led space" to explore Buddhist spiritual teachings (EBMC website). Deep Refuge groups often self-organize around specific themes of study based on shared identity, interest, or neighborhood. While some groups are open to all, many are identity-based groups, including People of Color Sangha, Every Body Every Mind, Alphabet Sangha, and others (see Figure 2 for full list). Practice groups, like all EBMC programming, operate on a *dana*-based gift economics model in which participants pay the center and teachers a donation of their choice. This gift economics model reflects EBMC's commitment to inclusivity across socioeconomic status and invites members to give at their greatest capacity.

## **Procedures**

This study was designed and planned before the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, but all data collection procedures were carried out during COVID restrictions in our region (April – August 2020). We had planned to conduct in-person focus groups at EBMC before weekly sangha sessions and provide meals to all participants. However, we conducted the focus groups virtually to ensure physical safety during the pandemic. All sessions took place via videoconference on the Zoom platform, were recorded, and were professionally transcribed. Participants were paid \$75 in gift cards for participation in a focus group or feedback session.

We began by offering a study overview webinar study that was open to all EBMC community members. Attendees had the option of participating in a study feedback session immediately after the webinar. Four EBMC community members participated in this session, in which we shared a draft of the focus group format and questions and asked for feedback on each item. We integrated participant feedback into the focus group guide that was used for subsequent sessions and invited participants to take part in a focus group.

We conducted six two-hour focus groups with EBMC community members with the goal of enacting inclusivity in our procedures. Each focus group was co-facilitated by two research team members, with an additional person providing logistical support (e.g., monitoring the chat during Zoom sessions, ensuring participants completed the demographic questionnaire). Focus groups began with a brief study overview, opportunity to ask questions about the study, and verbal consent from all participants. We asked each participant to introduce themselves (name, location, pronouns) and contribute a *metta* phrase that was resonating with them. A focus group facilitator then led a brief lovingkindness meditation that included all focus group members' phrases to promote a sense of emotional safety and group cohesion (see Figure 1). We included focus group questions on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, and how meditation practice may support coping. During frequent racial justice protests in summer 2020, we invited focus

group members to discuss the impact of racist violence and ongoing social movements in their lives and meditation.

The initial focus group was open to anyone in the EBMC community; for the reminder, we recruited from specific segments of the community. Two focus groups were for EBMC-affiliated meditation teachers, and others were for people connected with specific identity-based sanghas, to support a sense of community for members who belong to those sanghas. We held specific focus groups for the following sanghas: People of Color, Practice in Transformative Action (a year-long, social justice-focused, secular mindfulness program), Every Body Every Mind (people with disabilities or chronic health conditions), and Alphabet (LGBTQIA+, Two Spirit, and Same-Gender Loving).

We invited participant feedback on focus group process and content and made adaptations based on this input and study team members' facilitation experiences. For example, we began providing short breaks during the two-hour sessions and letting participants know how much time the group would have to address each question. Notably, we had anticipated that participants in a specific *sangha* would have pre-existing relationships with one another. However, due to COVID, all EBMC events were taking place virtually. The virtual format also allowed for inclusion of participants outside of the Bay Area who had begun participating in EBMC events since the COVID pandemic began, as well as people with disabilities who would have had difficulty traveling to an in-person event.

Based on research team discussions, we decided to invite all participants to a follow-up focus group. These focus groups addressed an early study finding that participants' lovingkindness practice related to experiences with identity (including race/ethnicity, gender identity, sexual orientation, disability status), both day-to-day interactions and navigating systems of oppression. We offered two follow-up sessions, one that was open to all who had participated in a previous focus group and one that was specifically for people of color to discuss racism alongside other intersecting identities.

## **Measures**

All study participants completed a post-focus-group survey that included demographics such as age, years of meditation experience, sexual identity, gender, race and ethnicity, education, income, religion, chronic conditions (see Table 1). We used a demographics form that had been developed in collaboration with EBMC for our past study, in which participants reported both open-ended, self-identified demographics and standardized categories based on NIH guidelines (Weng et al., 2020). This strategy allowed participants to share the ways they personally identify, while also collecting data as it is typically reported in scientific publications.

We used a common set of questions across the focus groups, making minor edits between sessions based on participant feedback and to facilitate active participation. The questions focused on people's experience



practicing or teaching lovingkindness meditation (where, when, and with whom; phrases and imagery used in practice; emotions and body sensations). Additional questions explored how participants integrated lovingkindness practice into daily life, changes in internal experiences or external behavior, and challenges with practice. We asked participants to reflect on their *metta* practice during times of exacerbated uncertainty such as the COVID pandemic and how *metta* practice related to their identities (e.g., building community around specific identities or coping with experiences of oppression).

## **Data Analysis**

We used reflexive thematic analysis to analyze focus group data (Braun & Clarke, 2020). A team of five authors was actively engaged throughout data analysis, including several months of biweekly meetings, with additional input from other authors and EBMC community members. We began with six team members familiarizing ourselves with the data, concentrating on a single focus group transcript, and taking reflective notes, including potential codes. Over the course of several meetings, we finalized a list of inductive and deductive codes and systematically coded all transcripts using Dedoose analysis software. Two team members coded each focus group transcript and wrote brief memos with questions for the full analysis team, with authors' positionality in mind (e.g., racial/ethnic identity, who had facilitated which focus group). Once all transcripts were

coded, we generated initial themes from coded data, memos, and group discussion.

We invited all focus group participants to a member checking session to review and provide feedback on initial themes to help us improve the accuracy of our analysis. This two-hour session with eight focus group participants was facilitated by two authors (ATL and snh) and included both study updates and discussion of initial themes. We presented a selection of quotes and initial themes, and asked participants, “Does what we are seeing match your experience and perceptions? What do you want to add or correct?” Participants provided additional detail that we included in the dataset, as well as suggestions about inclusive language related to gender, sexual orientation, disability, and chronic illness.

With this initial member-checking feedback, five authors used additional team discussion and memo-writing to define and name the themes explored in this manuscript. We hosted a virtual event with the wider EBMC community to share information about the study and present findings. As part of this event, we presented the themes including sample quotes, and sought feedback from attendees about how to refine themes. Participants gave feedback about the experience of study participation as well as on the themes themselves. For example, attendees with extensive meditation training said it was important not to differentiate between what we were calling “formal” and “informal” *metta* practice, because Buddhist teachings on the subject do not do so; attendees provided recommendations

of language to use instead. This and other feedback were used in the writing of this manuscript.

As a study team we were aware of our own social identities and how they might affect focus group members' comfort in discussing sensitive topics. We acknowledge that all researchers approach "data through the lenses of their particular social, cultural, historical, disciplinary, political and ideological positionings." (Braun and Clarke 2020: 12). We constituted our intergenerational research team to include people with a range of professional and personal identities, including varying levels of experience with meditation and qualitative research, as well as diversity in racial/ethnic identities, professional roles, sexual orientation, and experience with chronic health conditions. Two authors (SHN and MI) were employed by EBMC, while the remainder were affiliated with the UCSF Osher Center for Integrative Health as junior and senior faculty members and graduate students. Including study team members with deep contextual knowledge of both EBMC and academic research was essential for our analysis. In study meetings at all phases, we shared elements of our own positionality and how they were informing our reading of the data. For example, focus groups that were specifically for participants of color were facilitated by study team members who themselves are people of color to facilitate emotional safety, with the acknowledgement that these focus groups included people with a range of identities not necessarily matched in our research team.

## **RESULTS**

Forty-seven people with an average of seven years' experience with *metta* practice participated in focus groups. Participants had an average age of 47; 91% had completed a bachelor's degree or higher level of education; more than half (52%) had household income of <\$50,000, and 56% reported having a disability or chronic health condition. Participants reported both self-described and standardized reporting categories of race/ethnicity, gender, and sexual orientation (see Tables 1 and 2 for detailed demographics). This was a diverse group of people in each of these areas. Using standardized reporting categories, 32% of participants identified as white, 19% Black, 23% Asian, 13% Hispanic/Latino, 23% multi-racial. When invited to self-report racial and ethnic identities, many participants identified multiple specific identities, e.g., a list of up to five countries, or a list of three categories such as Black, Asian, and white. We have condensed these into categories to protect individuals' anonymity. 62% of participants identified as female, 13% as male, and 23% another gender identity such as non-binary or trans. A total of 62% participants identified their sexual orientation as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or pansexual.

Our findings focused on two central themes. The first theme is the importance of a community of practice for creating a welcoming space and sense of belonging that allowed participants to deepen their *metta* practice within a social justice framework. Teachers who participated in this study noted that EBMC's identity-based practice groups offer them a space to skillfully tailor Buddhist teachings to new, diverse audiences and the needs

of their sanghas. EBMC's shift to online programming during the COVID-19 pandemic opened practice groups to many new participants locally, nationally, and globally who could previously not attend in-person due to health, disability, lack of access to transportation, or physical distance. Additionally, study participants described the occurrence of "stealth *metta*," a practice in which meditators offer spontaneous lovingkindness phrases to suffering beings and themselves. Study participants noted the spontaneous emergence of compassion for themselves and others as well as a greater sense of equanimity. The second theme is that the organization's attention to socially engaged Buddhism led participants to reflect on their own identities and use LKM amid challenging experiences, racial harm, and suffering. Focus group attendees (including teachers, experienced practitioners, and novice meditators) asserted that their meditation practice equipped them to better handle and address stressful situations. These experiences ranged from difficult or tense relationships to traumatic experiences to ongoing harms due to systemic oppression. We argue that utilizing *metta* as a tool for navigating challenges such as COVID-19 and suffering arising from racial, gender, and other forms of discrimination, is an exercise of skillful means by meditation teachers and students.

### **Community of Practice**

Prior to the COVID-19 public health crisis, most EBMC groups were attended by consistent groups of people. EBMC aims for these to be safe

spaces for participants—including teachers-- to deepen their practice and form a community. In addition to shared meditation practice, many participants volunteer for specific roles within EBMC and contribute to organization-wide policies and practices. For example, the Every Body Every Mind sangha contributed to EBMC's fragrance-free policy which has been shared widely outside of the organization to facilitate inclusion of people with sensitivities to chemicals in scented body, hair, clothing and household products.

COVID-19 led EBMC, like many organizations, to shift from exclusively in-person to virtual programming. As a result, the community expanded in number and by location. During 2020, enrollment in EBMC programming increased by 50-175% for all programs, and participants joined from multiple states and internationally. Study participants shared that virtual programming can be more accessible to people with disabilities or chronic illness, including those who need ASL interpreting or closed captioning which the center offered for a selection of programs for the first time after shifting to virtual formats. Access was also expanded for those with demanding work schedules, caregivers, and people with limited transportation. One study participant shared, "I was diagnosed with cancer...and I really didn't know what to do to calm down...I knew I needed some grounding; I needed some calmness to calm my mind...My mind was just constantly going, going, going, going. Then I found EBMC on Zoom."

This person was one of several in our study located outside of California and newly participating in EBMC's online programming during COVID-19.

Others described how online programming expanded their access to communities of people with shared identities. One explained that where they live, "in the meditation culture, there aren't many racial mirrors for me. But through Zoom, I've been able to be on and participate through guided meditations and Dharma talks with hundreds of other Black and African and other people of color, Indigenous folks, which has been really a beautiful, amazing, invigorating sight for me." Meditation practice in groups, especially those built around specific identities, are important community spaces. In line with its mission to foster liberation and social action, EBMC also provides specific programming for white meditation practitioners to explore their identities from an anti-racist approach. One participant who teaches programs examining white conditioning, race, and white supremacy articulated the value of addressing "this conditioning that we've grown up with," highlighting the importance of confronting the systems of racism, ableism, and other oppressions in which all people live. Study participants' positive experiences with this programming underscores the value of discernment in creating identity-based practice groups, and also an unforeseen benefit that emerged during the COVID-19 pandemic—access via Zoom to a virtual meditation community for people who may not otherwise have access to a meditation community with shared identities.

The rapid, COVID-19-induced changes in programming were largely acceptable to meditators who cited the benefits of accessibility and identity congruence. Further, the virtual *sangha* that expanded internationally invited new members to benefit from meditation-focused community at a time of prolonged stress related to COVID-19, and heightened awareness of racism and anti-Blackness after the police killings of Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, and George Floyd. (After data collection was completed, EBMC's programming has also reflected the need to address anti-Asian American violence). Importantly, participants explained that practicing lovingkindness meditation in community was an aspect of their coping with the effects of isolation resulting from physical distancing through the COVID-19 pandemic. Although some sangha intimacy was lost due to the influx of new participants and lack of shared physical space, EBMC's commitment to social justice—evidenced by its attunement to creating programming for the diverse experiences of its community members—contributed to successful COVID-19 adaptations.

### **Lovingkindness meditation and skillful means**

Skillful means arise fluidly throughout the EBMC community's lovingkindness meditation practice and teaching. EBMC teachers and *sangha* members adapt *metta* practice and teaching with close consideration of lived experiences and identities. Most participants were active in identity-based practice groups, which cultivated spaces for deeper



exploration of Buddhist teachings, their connection to positionality, and ways to be involved in social action, such as the racial justice protests, during our research. Study participants who were EBMC teachers spoke about how their work with practice groups both allowed and required them to tailor lovingkindness practice to the identities and experiences of people participating in practice groups. One teacher explained, “I’m often teaching in the trans community and folks have a lot of trauma, and in my experience, the practice of lovingkindness is the most trauma-informed, inherently trauma-informed piece of the teachings as I’ve received them. Often focusing on the breath and other awareness practices just aren’t accessible for folks with trauma.” Lovingkindness as a particularly accessible practice for many people, and one whose language could be easily adapted to be congruent with people’s lived experiences, arose in most focus group sessions. One participant with a disability shared that *metta* practice allowed them “to get out of that mindset of...the desire to fix things, the desire to cure, the desire to heal, the desire to make things right. I think especially for people with disabilities to wish ourselves happiness without wishing to be different than we are, it’s really very fundamental and very important.” Many people described identity-based practice groups as a welcoming and nurturing space for people whose identities are often marginalized in other spaces.

All study focus groups discussed the design of EBMC programming that allows participants and teachers to experience dharmic teachings and

reflect on their positionality at the same time. This attention to positionality is reflective of EBMC's social justice-oriented mission, which is infused into most core programming and often asks members to identify and name their needs and privileges. Utilizing EBMC's Agreements for Multicultural Interactions as a framework, core programming asks groups members to commit to making the collective space more accessible for all members of the community, for example by avoiding the use of scented products at in-person events (East Bay Meditation Center, n.d.). Further, the small group settings of identity-based practice groups allows for long-term conversation about positionality, carried out with nuance and continuity. One participant explained the significance of EBMC's unique approach, stating, "With my disability I couldn't always be there in person, but just knowing that it's there gives me a lot. And the times that I have been able to go in person, oh my God. I just really like it. My body relaxes. It takes less energy and so I appreciate that." This participant was one of many who shared the positive impact of being part of a meditation community where their needs were met and where they could be with other people with shared experiences.

### **Cultivating Compassion**

In traditional Buddhist teachings, the four Brahmaviharas (translated as divine abodes, and "highest religious states") include lovingkindness (*metta*), compassion (*karuna*), empathetic joy (*mudita*), and equanimity (*upekkha*) (Buswell, Jr. & Lopez, Jr., 2014). Many participants discussed

increased compassion and sometimes growing equanimity as emerging from their lovingkindness practice. Focus group attendees described compassion as a sense of gentleness, kindness, or empathy that arises as an outcome of *metta* practice. This can occur during practice, as LKM invites meditators to bring to mind different categories of beings, or after practice in everyday life encounters. One person shared an experience of using a *metta* chant “that reads, ‘May even acts of harm help the violent awaken. May they all come to know each and every joy.’ And recently when I was chanting that I started to cry, and so I think this chant helped me get in touch with some compassion that's already there for those who are the most violent....It helped me connect to compassion that I already felt but maybe didn't know.”

Nearly unanimously, participants shared their experiences described practicing *metta* spontaneously throughout the day in brief moments or during daily tasks. This spontaneous practice was known by some as “stealth *metta*,” (a term that one participant brought from another meditation community, Soma Dharma). Most people in this sample live in urban areas and many described using *metta* when they observed people who were struggling in public. As one person described, “I do a lot of stealth *metta* with homeless people, and it feels like I'm doing a lot more lately as the number of people in San Francisco living on the streets and in tents increases through the pandemic.” For multiple participants, stealth *metta* served as a kind of compassion in action.

Participants' invoking of spontaneous *metta* was a shared experience that included patterned, but informal, use of *metta* toward themselves and others as a coping tool through difficult or traumatic experiences. In one participant's words:

I've used *metta* to deal with traumatic content that arises in my body. So, every day, when I lock my doors of my car or my front door, I'm wishing safety and protection for everybody. And that comes from growing up where I grew up. I was always just terrified of violence. And then just out in the street as an anxiety management tool, or if I'm in front of somebody where there's a lot of intensity, I'm wishing that they be safe and protected and that I'm safe and protected. And at home...I'm sending *metta* to the water, and to my cat, and to my partner... so that it turns into a gratitude practice, and then it helps me come back to the present.

Teachers encouraged students to draw on *metta* in neutral situations. One explained, "If I'm washing the dishes, I will send *metta* phrases to everybody else on the planet who's washing dishes then, or whatever else I happen to be doing, taking a shower or watering plants, just to include everyone else who may be doing that." These examples show how LKM is woven into the fabric of practitioners' daily lives; teachers and participants alike highlighted spontaneous *metta* as an essential part of their practice.

Participants also described a growing capacity for self-compassion, including as they extended their *metta* practice to people with different identities with whom they had challenging experiences. One shared:

I feel like I have a complicated relationship with practicing with people who have more privileged identities because I already feel, I think particularly as a woman, that there's always pressure to understand other people and be really kind be open-minded, forgiving and all that...It's a sticky space in my practice where I do want to generate compassion, but I also feel like sometimes not trying to take

on that compassion towards white men or whoever it might be, is an act of compassion towards myself.

This person and others used *metta* practice to extend grace to themselves when difficult emotions arose or during times of tension. Participants spoke about LKM practice growing their capacity to deploy compassion even in very difficult circumstances in which they were harmed by others.

Equanimity was a concept that frequently arose unprompted in focus groups, and participants described it as a positive outcome of LKM practice. Some shared a description of being able to hold seemingly contradictory emotions at once. One said, “The practice really has, for me, been a refuge, and allowed me to imagine myself or my being as a container large enough to handle paradoxical emotions. Emotions that I thought were mutually exclusive, so to hold joy and sadness at the time, hope and despair at the same time, etc.” One person of color described a challenging interaction with a white person at a racial justice protest they attended the day of the focus group. This participant was happy with their own role in the interaction and said that “lovingkindness practice really just allows me to be very firm and clear, but also compassionate at the same time.”

Study participants captured equanimity something slippery to define. For some it was a process of letting go, recognizing when they were grasping onto an experience and using *metta* to achieve a more neutral or accepting state of being. Some participants described equanimity as a feeling of floating, flowing, being “rock steady whatever the situation is.” One described it as

A buoy out in the middle of the ocean, which in big waves is going to go all the way to the side, but it's going to right itself. So, it's not that in the face of extreme suffering, you're able to sit still and kind of meditate in the middle. No, you're affected by the suffering. But you aren't pulled and gripped and three days later, you're still not thinking about all of that suffering. You have resourced and you're back to center."

Others spoke of equanimity as an extension of self-compassion or practice in motion. One said, "All the things that seemed really upsetting to me before seemed much less upsetting after" LKM practice. *Metta* can lead to an experience of equanimity with an allowing of the self in whatever state it may be, allowing self-compassion and compassion for others in daily practice.

### **Metta and navigating harm**

A primary finding of this study involves participants using lovingkindness practice to cope with daily effects of systems of oppression. For participants, *metta* is a tool for coping with stress and trauma related to systemic oppression, especially racism, and many described using *metta* as something they "drop into" when dealing with common microaggressions and other effects of oppression. One Black participant articulated the importance of *metta* to reduce the negative impact of the chronic stress of racism. They explained, "I've come to this realization that for me, at least, walking through this world in a Black body is just really stressful, and really I'm on alert a lot. I am...trying to diffuse situations ahead of time so that other people are comfortable, so that my physical body is not at harm or at

risk. And taking time each day to just sit and be still and allowing myself to fall into parasympathetic nervous system...gives me a break. It's like relief." This is a poignant example of LKM offering a meaningful pause from the stress of existing in a racist society that requires hypervigilance to navigate.

Other participants shared how they leverage LKM to handle stressful encounters. One Asian participant shared that someone had asked if they were "eating with sticks. I said, 'You mean chopsticks? Yes, those are utensils that I eat with,' and so [that person is] also a part of that group that I try to meditate lovingkindness with... because of my *metta* practice I think I had taken a deep breath and just kind of slowed myself and just, okay. I'm just going to sit with that." This participant illustrates a two-part response that was common to coping with microaggressions: first, drawing from *metta* practice to pause (take a breath) and slow down (from reactivity), then over time incorporating the other person into their lovingkindness meditation. Other participants employed LKM to help them communicate in clear, uncompromising ways through difficult, discriminatory encounters—such as setting a boundary with white meditators persistent about joining a meditation session intended for people of color, or choosing not to "play along" to make a microaggressing person comfortable. One such instance was shared by a person living with chronic health conditions who described themselves as experiencing frequent "ableist microaggressions." This person explained,

I definitely feel a lot of hurt and anger and that does not really go away at all with lovingkindness practice...but I do feel I'm able to

hold both: that hurt and anger of my own, and also the other people I identify as responsible for it, in a space of compassion when I do lovingkindness practice. I'm able to see that it's not so much them being bad or mean people as we're shaped by these systems that we don't have control over. I feel I'm able to address the harm [inflicted by others]...trying to liberate both of us from a system that is doing all of us harm.

This participant was among many who connected their lovingkindness practice with their capacity to change how they respond to discrimination, microaggressions, and oppression.

*Metta* practice also helped people contextualize their experiences, validating both challenging emotions, such as anger and pain in response to discrimination, *and* an extension of kindness, hope, or teaching to an offending person. Some participants expressed difficulties employing lovingkindness toward “agents of oppression,” while also viewing lovingkindness practice as expanding their capacity to live into personal values and changing their responses to racism and other forms of discrimination. One explained:

An intention is to believe in goodness and to believe in love, and these things that it's very easy to become cynical about and doubt--especially as a person of color in the world or experiencing different oppressions. There's so much anger and outrage and that's 100% valid. And I'm usually not able to practice lovingkindness towards agents of oppression, but it's still setting my mind up with that intention of love and understanding, even if I can't access it for everyone. That's still my core value and belief. Lovingkindness allows me to access that just as a gesture, even sometimes....wanting to connect with the goodness of all beings.

Participants described *metta* practice as existing on a spectrum. Some used different phrasing for challenging people. For example, rather than using a phrase like “may you be happy,” one shared that “when I think about



[difficult people] or when it's harder to send *metta*, I just wish that there's no harm being done to them.” As this quote illustrates, lovingkindness practice generally did not include forcing positive emotions. Participants accepted not having the capacity to extend goodwill to difficult people, and some worked with this tension, offering themselves self-compassion and self-acceptance. Teachers encouraged this in their guidance of students, encouraging meditators not to force lovingkindness. Participants also articulated their own limits about extending *metta* and learning to navigate this difficult aspect of lovingkindness practice. In one participant’s words, “the more challenging aspects of lovingkindness practice I have found more recently are the more difficult people, including the people I don't know. It's very hard for me to think about extending lovingkindness to the police officer who killed George Floyd.”

Such limits of lovingkindness meditation are important to acknowledge, and participants described one meaningful way of working around this barrier by practicing *metta* with unembodied or representative beings. Some connected with ancestors, spiritual guides, or other sources of inspiration. Participants described holding the memory of deceased leaders such as John Lewis or Harriet Tubman, while others connected with a generalized vision of ancestral spirits. These practices were highlighted as a helpful way to generate a sense of belonging and cope with marginalization within systems of oppression. In these multifaceted ways, study participants showed how they leveraged lovingkindness practice to cope with and

navigate discriminatory experiences and systems of oppression, plus the challenges they encountered in this practice.

## **Discussion**

Our findings draw on socially engaged Buddhism and intersectional meditation research to explore diverse meditators' experiences practicing and teaching LKM during early months of the COVID-19 pandemic. We find several applications of skillful means and compassion in action: the community of practice, the adaptations that have been made to increase accessibility and respond to the pandemic, and the ways that people use *metta* to cope with oppression and support social action. While the research literature on LKM has generally focused on individual experience, we situate individual experience within several additional layers, including a community of practice, highly visible social movements for racial justice, and a global context including ongoing systems of oppression as well as uncertainty and stress due to the pandemic.

We aimed to use skillful means within our research methods to emphasize compassion in practice. As a collaborative partnership using community-engaged methods, we included study participant feedback at all stages of the research. We recruited a diverse group of study participants, and invited participants to self-identify their sociodemographic characteristics, including race/ethnicity, gender, and sexual orientation. Notably, we found that people's self-reported identities often did not align

with the standardized reporting categories in anticipated ways (see Table 2). All people have intersecting identities, and it is important that research seek increasingly accurate ways of describing study populations.

We view East Bay Meditation Center's approach to "radical inclusivity" as an application of skillful means, adapting meditation teaching for marginalized identities often unrepresented in meditation spaces. Without keen awareness of intersectionality and commitment to social justice, many Buddhist sanghas in the U.S. fall short of providing the refuge they promise, especially for people of color, LGBTQIA+ people, low-income communities, and people with disabilities. For many participants, EBMC evoked a feeling of "I belong here," for reasons ranging from teachers and practitioners who shared people's identity to receiving skillful adaptations of Buddhist teachings.

Scholars of socially engaged Buddhism have asked how Buddhists in capitalist societies can find the time to cultivate communities of practice (Rothberg, 1992). We suggest that an inclusive, dana-based approach and intimate communities of practice may be a model for doing so in the US context. Vesely-Flad suggests that Buddhist spaces established to provide support and community to practitioners can often perpetuate racism and oppression, particularly if they consist of predominantly white *sanghas* (2017: 248). Conversely, meditation spaces that acknowledge and center intersectional identities are essential to creating inclusive spaces for diverse meditators, so that *sangha* members are drawn in with a sense of

belonging that can lead to community building and social change. The organization in this study experienced shifts during the transition to online programming due to COVID-19, including an expansion of participants attending events from a much wider geographic area. While these changes increased attendance and *dana* for the center, they also changed the familiarity of community practice spaces as people unfamiliar with EBMC's social justice commitments participated in larger numbers. EBMC staff and volunteers reported that they sought to provide balance, care, and safety among these uncertainties. Teachers and staff adapted programming to reflect the tumultuous conditions of society and their impact on community members, such as creating programs that addressed anxiety and fear related to COVID-19 and physical distancing. Additionally, teachers and staff coordinated events supporting healing among Asian American and Black communities due to ongoing systemic violence and oppression. The development of these spontaneous, urgent curriculums reflects the application of Buddhist teachings in alignment with skillful means, adapting the teachings to the needs of the present.

Participants in this study demonstrated skillful means in their daily practice, including spontaneous *metta* practices and responses to harmful interaction. It appears that practicing spontaneously is easier for some people to sustain than a seated meditation practice. This is in line with classical Buddhist teachings, such as the Karaniya *Metta* Sutta, which says that people should practice "all through one's waking hours" and extend

*metta* to all beings (Buddharakkhita, 2013). In other words, “stealth *metta*” or spontaneous practice is key to cultivating lovingkindness. The extensive discussion of stealth *metta* in our focus groups and the shared experience of it being a favored form of practice suggested that *metta* practice allows people to cultivate expansive compassion for others, including strangers. Blackwell asks, “When we enact a microaggression, when we’ve been aggressed upon, when we witness harmful acts, can we stop, feel, and trust what is arising and use that information to discern our next steps?” (2019, 16). Participants describe the cultivation of compassion (including self-compassion) and equanimity in challenging interactions, including responses to microaggressions.

We also note that the COVID-19 pandemic has provided many opportunities to apply skillful means at individual, community, and institutional levels. Study participants had a wide range of experiences during the early months of the pandemic: many struggled financially, emotionally, and otherwise; some found increased access to supports and services including the EBMC virtual community. Participants experiencing varied levels of stress and uncertainty shared that they adapted their *metta* practice to the circumstances of COVID, police violence and resulting widespread protests, and individual challenges.

Our findings suggest that lovingkindness meditation can not only increase positive emotions, as previous research has found (Sirotina & Shchebetenko, 2020), but also supports the capacity to experience emotions

of all kinds, including multiple conflicting emotions, in the experience of equanimity. Past research highlights the importance of meditation practice and its adaptations for specific populations (Proulx et al., 2018; Woods-Giscombe et al., 2019). For example, Watson and colleagues analyze how the “Strong Black Woman” trope can affect Black women’s ability to express stress and difficult emotions, and suggest that meditation “may equip African American women to engage in behaviors that mitigate the effects of gendered race-related stress” (2016: 1035). Extending intersectionality, this may also apply to other multiply marginalized groups in distinct ways.

### ***Limitations and Future Research***

Our virtual focus group format was an effective method overall but had several limitations. During focus groups, people did not consistently share their personal identities while speaking. While analyzing transcripts, therefore, we did not always have the broader context for participants’ comments on experiences of oppression and privilege. Future research could make changes to methods, as well as include more focused questions about some of the identity-specific themes in this study, such as Blackness, experiences as an immigrant, and LGBTQIA+ experience. Recruitment of study participants from a single community-based meditation center allowed for a strong partnership and diverse sample in many ways but meant that most participants were based in the San Francisco Bay Area and had college educations. A broader geographic sample might yield a wider

range of experiences. Finally, our research was largely cross-sectional, but those participants who participated in our member-checking process highlighted that their LKM practice was dynamic during the broader shifts of the COVID period. Longitudinal research on meditation experiences would provide additional depth and nuance. Literature on socially engaged Buddhism highlights the importance of understanding the embodied experience of meditation (Razak, 2019). While we did ask participants about their physical experiences during and after LKM practice, this seemed to be an area that was challenging to explain in a virtual focus group format.

EBMC's commitment to radical inclusivity, diverse teachers, and development of community-led practice groups creates an atmosphere in which practitioners investigate their positionalities and connect meditation with their efforts for social change, including participation in ongoing social and environmental justice movements. Intersectionality and socially engaged Buddhism are foundational organizing concepts that can influence specific skillful means (identity-based sanghas, adapted teachings) in diverse meditation communities. This allows meditators to practice lovingkindness meditation in dynamic ways, including during times of crisis. Teachers and practitioners alike highlight the benefits of these practices in producing feelings of belonging and empowerment which counteract isolation and anxiety.

**Ethics Approval:** All methods were approved by the University of California, San Francisco Institutional Review Board). Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

**Author Contribution Statement:** ATL, SA, MC, MI, and HW contributed to the study concept and design. Data collection was conducted by ATL, JZ, SNH, and HW. ATL, SNH, JZ, JH and HW conducted data analysis. The first draft of the manuscript by was written by ATL, SNH and JH, and all authors contributed to subsequent drafts. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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**Table 1. Participant Characteristics**

| Characteristic   | Percent<br>(n)  |
|--|-----------------|
| <b>Metta practice experience, mean years<br/>(range)</b> | 4.9 (0-15)      |
| <b>Age, mean (range)</b>                                 | 46.8<br>(26-68) |
| <b>Education</b>   |                 |
| Business/Technical certificate/degree                    | 2.2 (1)         |
| Associate's degree                                       | 6.5 (3)         |
| Bachelor's degree  | 19.6 (9)        |
| Some graduate work                                       | 8.7 (4)         |
| Master's degree  | 39.1            |
| Doctoral or professional degree                          | (18)            |
|  | 29.3            |
|  | (11)            |
| <b>Household Income</b>                                  |                 |
| < \$30,000   | 23.9            |
| \$30,000 - \$49,999                                      | (11)            |
| \$50,000 - \$79,999                                      | 28.3            |
| \$70,000 - \$99,999                                      | (13)            |
| \$100,000 or more  | 13.0 (6)        |
| Not specified  | 13.0 (6)        |
|  | 15.2 (7)        |
|  | 8.5 (4)         |
| <b>Has a disability or chronic health<br/>condition</b>  | 55.6<br>(25)    |

**Table 2. Participant Characteristics, Self-Identified and Standardized Reporting Categories**

|                            | Self-Identified Category  | Standardized Reporting<br>Category   | Percent<br>(n) |
|----------------------------|---|--------------------------------------|----------------|
| <b>Race/<br/>ethnicity</b> | Han Chinese, Chinese, Filipino, Korean American,<br>Punjabi-Indian, Vietnamese  | Asian                                | 23.4<br>(11)   |
|                            | African American, Black, Jamaican, Haitian, Choctaw   | Black or African<br>American         | 19.1 (9)       |
|                            | White, Caucasian, white/European American; Irish,<br>Eastern European, English, Italian, Luxembourg<br>Scandinavian, German, Scotch   | White                                | 3.19<br>(15)   |
|                            | Puerto Rican, Latinx of African descent, white; Thai,<br>Vietnamese, Chinese, Polynesian, Mexican, Indigenous,<br>Italian; Native, Mexican; Asian, Mexican, Indigenous,<br>Polynesian, Italian; Yoruba, Sicilian, Irish | Multiracial,<br>Hispanic/Latinx      | 12.8 (6)       |
|                            | Black, White & Asian; Black, native, white;<br>Multiracial Brazilian; South African-American; Eritrean<br>American  | Multiracial, non-<br>Hispanic/Latinx | 10.6 (5)       |
|                            | Middle Eastern  | Other                                | 2.1 (1)        |
|                            | cisgender female or female, fe, femme of center, woman/<br>womxn  | Female                               | 61.7<br>(29)   |
|                            | male, cismale, queer  | Male                                 | 12.8 (6)       |
| <b>Gender</b>              | Gender creative; Genderqueer, gender nonconforming, or<br>non-binary; Trans   | Another identity                     | 23.4<br>(11)   |

|                    |                                  |                        |              |
|--------------------|----------------------------------|------------------------|--------------|
|                    | Not sure                         | Not specified          | 2.1 (1)      |
| <b>Sexual</b>      | Fluid, Lesbian, Pansexual, Queer | Lesbian/Gay/Homosexual | 26.7<br>(12) |
| <b>Orientation</b> | Bisexual, Pansexual, Queer       | Bisexual/Pansexual     | 37.8<br>(17) |
|                    | Heterosexual, Straight           | Straight/Heterosexual  | 38.2<br>(18) |

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