

Cultivating a Garden of Love

In the cherry blossom's shade
there's no such thing
as a stranger.

- Issa, quoted in Sharon
Salzberg's, *Lovingkindness*

Mindfulness meditation is a direct path to freedom. To be such a straight shot, it must cut right through the bogs and mosquito-infested swamps of our psyche. Awareness is a spotless mirror, reflecting whatever it comes in contact with - the good, the bad and the ugly. Pema Chodron uses the phrase "the wisdom of no escape" to describe the transforming power of attention. If we don't distract ourselves, mindfulness will reveal the pith of wisdom to us. We taste freedom when we see that, in the space of kind attention, difficult mind states are not as terrifying as we thought. When we are mindful of emotions we move from being the victim of them to the witness of them. We don't have to be poor Wile E. Coyote standing in front of an oncoming train, pleading for it to stop with a puny outstretched palm. When fear and anger come roaring towards us we can just step aside and feel the rush of smoke and iron hurtling through the station.

It takes courage to walk such a direct path of transformation. Maybe the hardest thing for any of us to do is to face ourselves. We would rather bungee jump or slay dragons than face the restlessness, boredom, and anger in our minds. Remember Evel Knievel of the 1970s, who had to keep outdoing himself with more and more daredevil jumps on his motorbike? After clearing a world record 13 Mack trucks he set his sights on the logical next step—jumping the ¾-mile wide Snake River canyon in Idaho. When he launched his X-2 Skycycle, a combination rocket/motorbike, from one side of the canyon it flew into a graceful arc, only to peak way short of the far wall. His parachute floated him to the bottom of the canyon unharmed. Evel retired soon thereafter. He was shortly convicted of tax evasion and assaulting his biographer with an aluminum bat. Not the best testimony for the healing power of thrill-seeking.

We are intensity junkies in this culture. We'll take Tabasco over brown rice any day. Anything that will distract us from the mess inside. The late Tibetan meditation teacher Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche called meditation a path of warriorship. Ultimate bravery, he said is "not being afraid of yourself." I love thinking of meditators as

warriors. Yet we are warriors who look so ordinary on the outside. We don't wear swords or battle armor and are surely not mounted on gilded steeds. But on the inside it can feel very much like we are slaying dragons and subduing armies.

This kind of warriorship requires more than the unflinching mirror of awareness. Sometimes mindfulness is just a little too humbling to handle without lovingkindness. Kindness is the twin companion of awareness, the absolutely necessary sister principle of the meditative path. Can we as warriors be brave enough to be gentle, tender, vulnerable, open-hearted? Can we embrace our experience with an active, positive regard? Only with these qualities can we fully access the deep happiness that Buddhism promises.

The Power of Kindness

When I asked a meditation class what was the first thing that came to mind when I said, "The Dalai Lama," people said, "Kindness, compassion, warmth." His Holiness is an amazing force on the planet, a global ambassador of love and goodness. And he is a lot more than a kindly, grandfatherly monk. In 1950, at the age of 16, he earned his geshe degree, the Tibetan equivalent of a Ph.D., in Buddhist philosophy. By this age he had already mastered the most complex teachings on the 30-some kinds of emptiness and the major tenets of the four Tibetan Buddhist schools of philosophy: the Vaibashika, Sautantrika, Cittamatra, and Madhyamaka. At 16 he also became spiritual and political head of Tibet. Since then, the Dalai Lama has seen 20% of his population wiped out by the Chinese, which in U. S. numbers is the equivalent of a staggering 60 million people. In spite of his towering intellect and the tragic plight of his people, he is still able to say, "My religion is simple. My religion is kindness."

The Dalai Lama brings the power of kindness into every arena of life he touches. In just one example, he has spearheaded a movement to do scientific research on meditation. Every two years he meets with psychologists, neuroscientists, and physiologists to discuss findings and plan future studies. In *Destructive Emotions*, a book summarizing the meeting of 2000, Daniel Goleman tells a story about Paul Ekman, a participating psychologist who knew little about Buddhism. When Ekman and his daughter approached The Dalai Lama during a break with

a personal question about relationships, His Holiness alternately held, and affectionately rubbed, each of their hands. That small encounter, Paul later recounted, was what "some people would call a mystical, transforming experience. I was inexplicably suffused with physical warmth during those five or ten minutes—a

wonderful kind of warmth throughout my body and face. It was palpable. I felt a kind of goodness I'd never felt before in my life.

Ekman grew up with a violent father. At age 18 he told his father he would not follow his footsteps into medicine but would instead study psychology. His father said he would not support him. They got into an argument and Ekman's dad knocked him to the floor. This upbringing may help explain Ekman's next statement:

"About once a week for the last 50 years I've had an anger attack that I regretted." But things changed on the day in Dharamsala when Paul had that private encounter with His Holiness. "After that, I didn't even have an angry impulse for the next four months, and no full episode of erupting in anger for the whole last year. I'm someone who has struggled his whole life with flare-ups of anger, but even now, almost a year later, they're very rare. I believe that physical contact with that kind of goodness can have a transformative effect."

The Buddha said that lovingkindness could be developed infinitely in the human heart. If there are any living examples of the Buddha's claim, surely His Holiness must be one of them.

Why Kindness?

The Buddha taught lovingkindness to address the inescapable truth of interdependence. Because no one is fundamentally separate, to take care of oneself, one must also take care of others. Even something as basic as the oxygen we breathe is an expression of interdependence. Western science tells us that not only do plants continually replenish oxygen in the earth's atmosphere, but the oxygen being there at all is due to events billions of years ago. back when the only life forms were single-celled organisms, bacteria evolved a metabolic process that gave off oxygen as a waste product. Their activity over millions of years filled the atmosphere with oxygen. Multi-celled organisms soon evolved to take advantage of this potent new energy source.

Ecology teaches another example of interrelatedness: motor oil spilled in a parking lot will always end up in water bodies because rainstorms will wash the oil downhill into the lakes and rivers that are the low points of watersheds. Each of us are mindstreams in the vast watershed of humanity. If we stay open, what happens in society can't help but spill into us. Violence and bloodshed committed anywhere trouble our psyches, as the heart does not distinguish between pain inside or outside of

us. Because of this, the Buddha taught that to be fully happy we must develop unconditional love for all beings. The Buddha taught that not only is such a love possible, it is actually the most basic nature of the human heart. How can we develop this love in a world where people are causing so much harm?

Actor and Action

An important step, says mindfulness teacher Sharon Salzberg, is to separate our view of people from their actions. When someone hurts our feelings, our problem is not really with a person, but with the action that has caused us pain. This very same person on another day can be kind and generous to us. The Dalai Lama echoes this sentiment in *Wisdom of Forgiveness*, a book written by a Chinese friend (the author uses His Holiness' broken English):

I always tell people, it's very important to make distinction: actor and act. We have to oppose bad action. But that does not mean we are against that person, that actor. Once action stopped, different actions come, then that person could be friend. That's why today Chinese is enemy; the next day, there's always the possibility to become friend. And that's why I have no problem forgiving the Chinese for what they've done to my people.

An ability to forgive this strongly can only be rooted in the deepest discriminating wisdom. His Holiness' clarity is so simple and penetrating: we can oppose harmful actions without negating the humanity of the person committing those actions. After all, making any conclusions about a person based on a few actions is pure superstition. Such views are based on limited data. Can we learn to oppose harmful actions while loving the actor? A beautiful Zen koan that could gestate in your heart for years to come.

The Metta View

What is the view of people that Salzberg encourages us to keep in mind? The metta view is that what we have in common is so much more fundamental than what separates us. Every human heart has a deep and innocent yearning to be happy, to love and be loved, to avoid suffering, and so on. These truths are so much deeper than that which separates us – nationality, race, gender, occupation, social standing, personality traits, etc. The metta view also holds that even those committing harm are doing so as an attempt to be happy, albeit a misguided one. In addition, those who harm others are doing so out of suffering and ignorance, and the harm they cause only contributes to

their own future suffering. Anyone caught in such a vicious cycle is truly worthy of compassion. Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, as quoted in Salzberg's, *Lovingkindness*, sums up the wisdom of metta: "If we could read the secret history of our enemies we should find in each man's [woman's] life sorrow and suffering enough to disarm all hostility."

Choosing Reality

A Buddhist concept underlying the metta view is that reality is not pre-given but is an interaction between perception and the material world. Reality is what we choose to pay attention to. Last winter I was cross-country skiing up a mountain trail and noticed that the sensations in my legs were heavy and unpleasant. When I switched my attention to my breathing, the sensations were relaxed and pleasant. Was skiing pleasant or unpleasant? Both, or either, depending on where I placed my attention. We do this all the time in every aspect of our lives. Look up from this text. What do you see? Was that in your reality before you read these words? Notice sounds. Where were those before reading this prompt? You are choosing to read these words to the exclusion of other sensory input. You are choosing reality.

The Buddha's teachings on metta emphasize that we should focus on the positive, on what makes us feel kindly towards others. This goes against the grain of many messages in our culture. We tend to see positive thinking as Pollyanna, as a denial of reality. Yet, whether one is optimistic or pessimistic, one is still choosing reality. Given this, why not choose a reality that makes one happy, that is in harmony with one's Buddha nature? I believe that the spiritual quest is not a search for pure truth, but for whatever it is that makes one most deeply happy, with the caveat that it not create any division between self and others. The hedonistic "If it feels good do it" motto of the 1960s, when sprinkled with a dash of spirituality, is pretty spot on: "If it makes you truly happy do it!"

Love Knows No Bounds

Quite possibly, love and connection are all that we are seeking. But we limit ourselves by thinking we can only love a select few, imprisoned by ideas about whom we can tolerate. On a retreat I attended, a teacher told a story about Nelson Mandela's many years in jail. After much time in solitary confinement he inventoried all the difficulties of being so isolated. He felt he could bear all of them except one: he had no one to love. Then it hit him. He could love his guards! He finally realized he did not have to let his outer incarceration imprison him on the inside. There is always someone to love, if you are willing to let yourself.

We often get compromised by far less severe situations. I had a difficult encounter recently in Paonia with a hermit who lives along a small dirt road far from town in a shack sided with black garbage bags. He has appointed himself as the speed troll of the road. I got a sense of why this man might be such a loner when I drove the road a bit too fast for his liking. As I passed his home he yelled at me to slow down. I stopped to apologize and he let loose a string of expletives as if I had beaten up his child. I was taken aback by his aggression, because we had been quite friendly in previous encounters. Later, after I had processed my anger, I became sad that this person was willing to sacrifice our connection over what seemed to me such a little thing. Although we might not limit our connections so blatantly, aren't we all a bit like this at times?

We limit our love not just with divisive ideas, but by basing our love for people on what we want from them. This is limited because we rarely get everything we want from another person. In addition, we love people for being a certain way - kind, or patient, or giving. We may even judge people for how they love. A satirical headline from *The Onion* says: "Father Only Expresses Love Through Concern for Proper Tire Inflation." The article describes how emotionally distant Earl Kolchak of Rocky Mount, North Carolina expresses his love for his 17-year old daughter, Jessica, "The only way he knows how: by inquiring about the pressure of the four Firestone Radial tires on her 1995 Ford Festiva...Kolchak took his love for his daughter a step further by personally checking the tires with a hand-held pressure gauge, but later felt embarrassed by the expression of intimacy." We probably all know people like this. Can we just accept them as they are and see their good intentions? Loving (or not loving) people for how they are is a kind of attached love, a love that is insecure because people are always changing. Metta is love that is always available, that cannot be taken away by a person changing or not doing what we want them to do. With metta, you do not even have to like the person you love!

We can come closer to who we most deeply are by practicing metta, or unconditional friendliness. Just as we can become more mindful through practice, we can also become more loving through practice. We do not have to wait until our lives are just right to practice love. We can do it in any moment we remember to do so. Anne Frank said, "How wonderful it is that nobody need wait a single minute before starting to improve the world." All our ideas about who we are and what we like and dislike inhibit this deeper love. Saint Augustine said that, "God is closer to you than you are to yourself." Maybe love is also closer to us than we are to ourselves.

My teacher Joseph Goldstein tells a story about doing a retreat in India in which he picked the gardener at the retreat center as the subject for his lovingkindness meditation. Even though he had never spoken to the man, as Joseph's meditation deepened, he began to feel so much love for this person. He would walk past him in the garden and just beam at him. The lesson: love is not something we either feel or don't feel for people. It comes mostly from within, from what we chose to do with our thoughts and our intentions. Rather than merely follow the heart, says Joseph, "We can train the heart." The metta instructions below show how we can do this.

Metta Practice Instructions

This is a concentration practice. It consists of choosing a subject of loving-kindness, holding an image or felt sense of the being, and repeating a set of kind wishes towards the subject. The flavor of this practice is one of kindness and ease. We start by doing what is easiest and gradually move to beings that are harder to send kindness towards. Traditionally, one starts with oneself, and then moves to a benefactor, a dear friend, a neutral person, a difficult person, and all beings.

In this practice, we use three or four simple phrases to express our kind intentions for a being. Sharon Salzberg, in *Lovingkindness: The Revolutionary Art of Happiness*, lists the phrases traditionally used in the practice in Asia:

- May I be free from danger.
- May I be free from physical suffering.
- May I be free from mental suffering.
- May I have ease of well being.

However, it is important to have phrases that really resonate with your wishes for yourself. Take some quiet time to consider what are your deepest aspirations in life. If the classic phrases do not fit your aspirations, devise metta wishes that do. You will use these phrases both for yourself and other beings. I use the following phrases:

- May I have peace of mind and ease of heart.
- May I love myself just as I am.
- May I be free from all forms of suffering.
- May I know the deepest happiness.

The practice of metta is quite simple. Like most other meditations, one needs to be still and comfortable. Sit with your spine erect and relax your body around this support. Close your eyes. Pick a metta subject. Traditionally, you start with yourself. If

this proves difficult, then start with the benefactor. The point is not to whom you are sending the wishes, but that you are able to most easily develop the feeling of lovingkindness. Start by remembering your deepest intentions in life. Then remember some things you like about yourself. This is a practice of learning to focus on the positive. So start every metta session with positive thoughts about your metta subject.

One simply repeats the phrases over and over, concentrating on the image or felt sense of the subject and the meaning of the phrases. Sharon advises treating your metta subject like a precious but fragile object you are holding in your hands. You do not want to drop it, but you do not want to squeeze it and break it.

A very important point is that this practice is not about forcing feelings, but about remembering your deeper intentions. Repeating these intentions over and over will eventually lead to feelings of love, but we have no control over when this happens: maybe after 5 minutes, or ten years of trying! Sharon describes metta as a deep understanding of interconnection with all beings. The metta feeling can come and go, but the understanding is always available. It is actually a relief not to force yourself to feel a certain way.

Dharma teacher Guy Armstrong uses a nice image for metta practice: what we are doing is cultivating seeds of intention. We can plant the seed, till the soil, and water and fertilize it, but we cannot make a plant grow. We cannot pull on the leaves of a plant to make it bigger. So, plant your kind wishes and let dharma take care of the rest.

If you find that you have become lost in thought, as is bound to happen, just gently note "thinking" and come back to the phrases. The key here is to infuse the meditation process with kindness. Forgive yourself for getting distracted and return to the present. You can even celebrate that you woke up!

The categories of beings are as follows:

- Self
- Benefactor - a person you are grateful towards, someone who has helped you a great deal in life - a kindly adult, a teacher, a therapist, a pet etc.
- Dear friend - a friend that is easy for you to feel loving towards. Generally, choose someone of the sex to which you are not attracted.
- Neutral person - someone you do not have strong feelings towards.
- Difficult person - someone you have difficulty with. Do not choose the most problematic person in your life, but someone you have moderate

difficulty with.

- All sentient beings - people, animals, deities and any other beings you can think of. Some traditions include plants as sentient beings, some do not. You can do this in two ways:
 - Send your phrases to all beings in the eight compass directions (N, NE, E, SE, S, SW, W, NW), and below you and above you.
 - Send in all directions at once, using dyad categories: humans and animals, sick and healthy, unhappy and happy, etc. You can make up your own categories, five to eight total, that split beings into two groups

Except for the all beings group, pick one person to represent each category. Pick the easiest person within each category, which may not be who you think you should pick. Maybe a benefactor is a pet! Or maybe your best friend is a little more complicated to send love to than someone you know less well. Who you pick is not so important.

There are different ways to move through the categories. Since this is a concentration practice, the simpler the better. It is simplest to stay with oneself until, over a period of time, or even within one sitting period, you have developed strong feelings of love. Then it is natural for these feelings to spill over to the next category. Stay with this new subject until the love can spill into the next category.

You may also want to start every sitting with metta for yourself, and then choose one other subject to send love to. I like to stay with one category for a week at a time. In a 45-minute session, I will do 20 min. for myself, 20 min. for the second subject, and 5 min. for all beings. After a week of these meditations, I add a new subject for the second 20 minutes.