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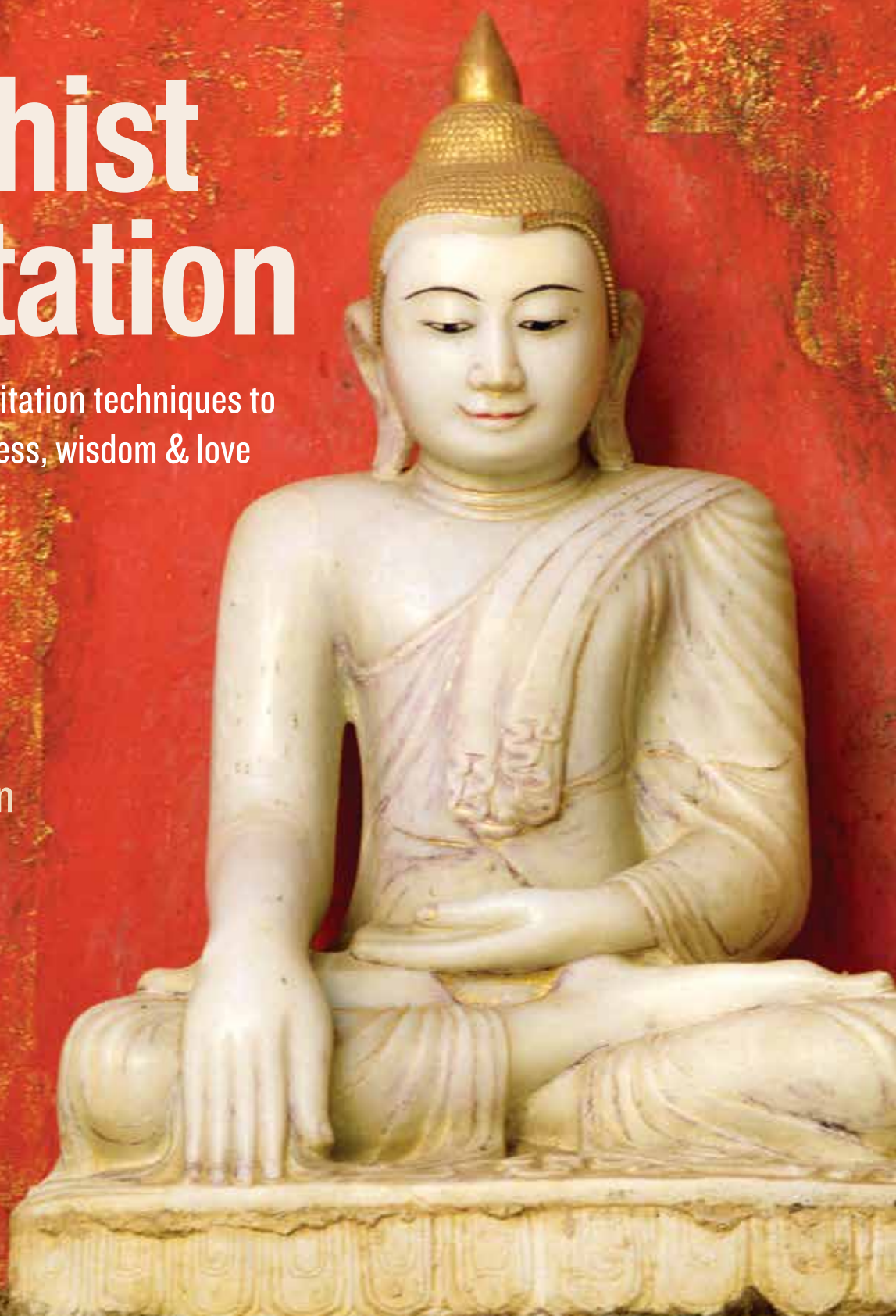
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Head of the Buddha, Borobudur, Indonesia, Shailendra Dynasty, ca. 825 C.E. The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art.

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Loving-Kindness It Starts with You

JOSH KORDA on how to free your naturally loving heart and expand your goodwill to include all beings.

HAVEN'T HAD A DRINK or a self-prescribed mood-altering drug in nineteen years. I make that statement with both pride and wonder, given the amount of suffering that preceded my renunciation of booze, pills, and the like. I mostly attribute my sobriety to my spiritual practice, the support of my Buddhist community, and our local twelve-step gath-

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erings. But if one practice or tool has helped me get and stay sober, it is the practice of Metta, or loving-kindness.

I grew up in an unpredictable household. My father, an alcoholic, could shift from pleasant joviality to rage-induced violence over the course of a few glasses of wine. I vividly remember plates suddenly flying toward my head during tense dinners and the sound of my mom's muffled cries while locked in a bathroom. In short, the stuff that leads to years of analysis later in life.

By my teens I was hypervigilant of others and self-absorbed, the victim of a self-critical inner tyrant. I felt unworthy of oth-

ers' love and worked hard to hide emotional states my father couldn't tolerate during his "episodes"—any sign of weakness, frustration, or sadness.

My underlying assumption was simple: if others could see these authentic energies, they wouldn't accept me either. Yet I desperately needed emotional tolerance and interpersonal bonding. My life around others became a self-conscious performance. Suppressing so much resulted in an agitated mind, which set me up for addictive behaviors. Alcohol and drugs, I found, relieved the stress created by my concealment and self-judgment.

The underlying darkness was kept at bay, until my world fell apart and I wound up in my final detox stint, everything and everyone lost as a result of my heedlessness.

My early days of sobriety were buoyed by the Buddhist practice I had developed over the years. But breath concentration and Vipassana practice weren't enough to deal with my deeply embedded feelings of low self-esteem. The self-critical tyrant remained on his throne, barking his angry rebukes and rebuttals, which I continued to believe, despite having a path in which I cultivated virtue and volunteerism. I was deeply despairing and incapable of lasting relationships and deep friendships. And so, when I heard of loving-kindness practice from wonderful teachers like Ajahn Sucitto and Sharon Salzberg, I dove in.

Metta is a powerful meditation practice that heals agitated minds with the development of goodwill toward ourselves and others. Of great therapeutic benefit, Metta relieves our stressful thought patterns and can result in immediate improvements in well-being.

How to Do Loving-Kindness Meditation

Traditionally, we begin loving-kindness practice by taking a comfortable seat. We can quietly shift positions when necessary, as this is not a time to investigate physical discomfort.

Once seated, we start by inwardly directing loving-kindness and goodwill to ourselves: perhaps toward a visual sense of our appearance or toward an area of the body where we experience core emotions, such as the chest or abdomen.

During initial forays into Metta the mind will often rebel; thoughts critical of the meditation's value or stories of our

unworthiness are swift to arise. All this means is that we need this practice, for, as the Buddha taught, we each deserve goodwill and if we cannot summon it easily for ourselves, we'll never feel true compassion for other beings.

When I first started my loving-kindness practice, developing thoughts of self-regard was a struggle, to say the least. Finally it occurred to me that I was addressing myself, in my thoughts, in ways I would never address anyone publicly, even those I detested. I made a pact in my practice that I would say the same things to myself that a good friend might say. My first choice of phrasing was begrudging, along the lines of "I suppose you deserve some happiness." It's a sign of the degree to which I've healed that my phrase of choice these days is "I love you, keep going."

Once some self-compassion has arisen, we bring to mind images of friends, mentors, or others we hold in high regard. This stage of Metta is generally uncomplicated, requiring little effort, as the admiration we feel for these people naturally results in goodwill.

Next, though, we direct goodwill in more challenging directions. We start with people we are indifferent toward, about whom we have neither positive nor negative feelings. This stage requires more effort, as the human mind is quite facile at developing opinions about people. Choosing a neutral person—for example, someone we see regularly during a commute or in a store we frequent—may require memory jogging.

Finally, we move to the most challenging stage of Metta practice: radiating goodwill toward those we've reviled or struggled with. (Dick Cheney and the Doobie Brothers

almost instantly come to mind, but maybe that's just me.) This part of the practice is as essential as developing self-compassion, since holding resentment is a primary source of agitation and suffering. The limits of our goodwill form the ultimate boundaries of our peace of mind, for we cannot achieve peace while aversion is present.

The goal of Metta practice is to free our natural feelings of benevolence from their limited confines. Loving-kindness and goodwill conditioned by agendas or expectations are not deeply beneficial. In Metta, we work to develop feelings of ease and love as boundless as the oceans that nourish and sustain our world. ♦



Josh Korda

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