

# The Essential Guide to **Practices for the Heart**



LION'S ROAR



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**COMPASSION, FRIENDLINESS,** kindness, love—these four virtues are the keys to a good life. This is something humanity has always agreed upon. It doesn't matter who we are or where we're from, or what religion we do or don't practice. An open heart is universally understood to be a good, even powerful, thing.

What sets Buddhism apart are its many methods for empowering us to *cultivate* our open-heartedness. The Buddhist approach to living with more kindness and love is very proactive. If our “kindness muscles” are underused or undeveloped, the solution is to use them more.

There are Buddhist teachings and meditations that can help us do that—regardless of what we believe in or where we are in our lives. By practicing them, we can do something about our all-too-common feelings of isolation and disconnection from one another—and from ourselves. We begin to see how closed hearts and closed minds go together, and that we can instead enjoy a life that's decidedly more open.

As with physical exercise, it can feel good. And the more we do it, the easier it gets. But first, we have to get started.

In this guide, you'll find insightful teachings and easy-to-follow meditation instructions for cultivating compassion, joy, equanimity, and of course metta—also known as loving-kindness, friendliness, or goodwill. It's all good reading, but it's your intention, your practice, and your heart that will make the teachings real.

—Rod Meade Sperry | Editorial Director, Lion's Roar Digital



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## Bodhicitta: The Excellence of Awakened Heart

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The mind of enlightenment, called bodhichitta, is always available, in pain as well as in joy. **Pema Chödrön** lays out how to cultivate this soft spot of bravery and kindness.

It is only with the heart that one can see  
rightly; what is essential is invisible to the eye.  
—Antoine de Saint Exupéry

WHEN I WAS ABOUT SIX years old I received the essential bodhichitta teaching from an old woman sitting in the sun. I was walking by her house one day feeling lonely, unloved and mad, kicking anything I could find. Laughing, she said to me, “Little girl, don’t you go letting life harden your heart.”

Right there, I received this pith instruction: we can let the circumstances of our lives harden us so that we become increasingly resentful and afraid, or we can let them soften us and make us kinder and more open to what scares us. We always have this choice.

If we were to ask the Buddha, “What is bodhichitta?” he might tell us that this word is easier to understand than to translate. He might encourage us to seek out ways to find its meaning in our

own lives. He might tantalize us by adding that it is only bodhichitta that heals, that bodhichitta is capable of transforming the hardest of hearts and the most prejudiced and fearful minds.

*Chitta* means “mind” and also “heart” or “attitude.” *Bodhi* means “awake,” “enlightened,” or “completely open.” Sometimes the completely open heart and mind of bodhichitta is called the soft spot, a place as vulnerable and tender as an open wound. It is equated, in part, with our ability to love. Even the cruelest people have this soft spot. Even the most vicious animals love their offspring. As Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche put it, “Everybody loves something, even if it’s only tortillas.”

Bodhichitta is also equated, in part, with compassion—our ability to feel the pain that we share with others. Without realizing it we continually shield ourselves from this pain because it scares us. We put up protective walls made of opinions, prejudices and strategies, barriers that are built on a deep fear of being hurt. These walls are further fortified by emotions of all kinds: anger, craving, indifference, jealousy and envy, arrogance and pride. But fortunately for us, the soft spot—our innate ability to love and to care about things—is like a crack in these walls we erect. It’s a natural opening in the barriers we create when we’re afraid. With practice we can learn to find this opening. We can learn to seize that vulnerable moment—love, gratitude, loneliness, embarrassment, inadequacy—to awaken bodhichitta.

An analogy for bodhichitta is the rawness of a broken heart. Sometimes this broken heart gives birth to anxiety and panic; sometimes to anger, resentment and blame. But under the hardness of that armor there is the tenderness of genuine sadness. This is our link with all those who have ever loved. This genuine heart of sadness can teach us great compassion. It can humble us when we're arrogant and soften us when we are unkind. It awakens us when we prefer to sleep and pierces through our indifference. This continual ache of the heart is a blessing that when accepted fully can be shared with all.



We can learn to seize that vulnerable moment—love, gratitude, loneliness, embarrassment, inadequacy—to awaken bodhichitta.

The Buddha said that we are never separated from enlightenment. Even at the times we feel most stuck, we are never alienated from the awakened state. This is a revolutionary assertion. Even ordinary people like us with hang-ups and confusion have this mind of enlightenment called bodhichitta. The openness and warmth of bodhichitta is in fact our true nature and condition. Even when our neurosis feels far more basic than our wisdom, even when we're feeling most confused and hopeless, bodhichitta—like the open sky—is always here, undiminished by the clouds that temporarily cover it.



Given that we are so familiar with the clouds, of course, we may find the Buddha's teaching hard to believe. Yet the truth is that in the midst of our suffering, in the hardest of times, we can contact this noble heart of bodhichitta. It is always available, in pain as well as in joy.



Those who train wholeheartedly in awakening unconditional and relative bodhichitta are called bodhisattvas or warriors—not warriors who kill and harm but warriors of nonaggression who hear the cries of the world.

A young woman wrote to me about finding herself in a small town in the Middle East surrounded by people jeering, yelling, and threatening to throw stones at her and her friends because they were Americans. Of course she was terrified, and what happened to her is interesting. Suddenly she identified with every person throughout history who had ever been scorned and hated. She understood what it was like to be despised for any reason: ethnic group, racial background, sexual preference, gender. Something cracked wide open and she stood in the shoes of millions of oppressed people and saw with a new perspective. She even understood her shared humanity with those who hated her. This sense of deep connection, of belonging to the same family, is bodhichitta.

Bodhichitta exists on two levels. First there is unconditional bodhichitta, an immediate experience that is refreshingly free of concept, opinion, and our usual all caught-up-ness. It's something hugely good that we are not able to pin down even slightly, like knowing at gut level that there's absolutely nothing to lose. Second there is relative bodhichitta, our ability to keep our hearts and minds open to suffering without shutting down.

Those who train wholeheartedly in awakening unconditional and relative bodhichitta are called bodhisattvas or warriors—not warriors who kill and harm but warriors of nonaggression who hear the cries of the world. These are men and women who are willing to train in the middle of the fire. Training in the middle of the fire can mean that warrior-bodhisattvas enter challenging situations in order to alleviate suffering. It also refers to their willingness to cut through personal reactivity and self-deception, to their dedication to uncovering the basic undistorted energy of bodhichitta. We have many examples of master warriors—people like Mother Teresa and Martin Luther King—who recognized that the greatest harm comes from our own aggressive minds. They devoted their lives to helping others understand this truth. There are also many ordinary people who spend their lives training in opening their hearts and minds in order to help others do the same. Like them, we could learn to relate to ourselves and our world as warriors. We could train in awakening our courage and love.

There are both formal and informal methods for helping us to cultivate this bravery and kindness. There are practices for nurturing our capacity to rejoice, to let go, to love, and to shed a tear. There are those that teach us to stay open to uncertainty. There are others that help us to stay present at the times that we habitually shut down.

Wherever we are, we can train as a warrior. The practices of meditation, loving-kindness, compassion, joy, and equanimity are our tools. With the help of these practices, we can uncover the soft spot of bodhichitta. We will find that tenderness in sorrow and in gratitude. We will find it behind the hardness of rage and in the shakiness of fear. It is available in loneliness as well as in kindness.

Many of us prefer practices that will not cause discomfort, and at the same time we want to be healed. But bodhichitta training doesn't work that way. A warrior accepts that we can never know what will happen to us next. We can try to control the uncontrollable by looking for security and predictability, always hoping to be comfortable and safe. But the truth is that we can never avoid uncertainty. This not knowing is part of the adventure, and it's also what makes us afraid.

Bodhichitta training offers no promise of happy endings. Rather, this "I" who wants to find security—who wants something to hold on to—can finally learn to grow up. The central question of a warrior's training is not how we avoid uncertainty and fear, but

how we relate to discomfort. How do we practice with difficulty, with our emotions, with the unpredictable encounters of an ordinary day?

All too frequently, we relate like timid birds who don't dare to leave the nest. Here we sit in a nest that's getting pretty smelly and that hasn't served its function for a very long time. No one is arriving to feed us. No one is protecting us and keeping us warm. And yet we keep hoping mother bird will arrive.



We can ask ourselves this question: 'Do I prefer to grow up and relate to life directly or do I choose to live and die in fear?'

We could do ourselves the ultimate favor and finally get out of that nest. That this takes courage is obvious. That we could use some helpful hints is also clear. We may doubt that we're up to being a warrior-in-training. But we can ask ourselves this question: "Do I prefer to grow up and relate to life directly or do I choose to live and die in fear?"

All beings have the capacity to feel tenderness—to experience heartbreak, pain and uncertainty. Therefore the enlightened heart of bodhichitta is available to us all. The insight meditation teacher Jack Kornfield tells of witnessing this in Cambodia during the time of the Khmer Rouge. Fifty thousand people had become communists at gunpoint, threatened with death if they continued their Buddhist practices. In spite of the danger, a temple

was established in the refugee camp, and twenty thousand people attended the opening ceremony. There were no lectures or prayers, but simply continuous chanting of one of the central teachings of the Buddha:

*Hatred never ceases by hatred  
But by love alone is healed.  
This is an ancient and eternal law.*

Thousands of people chanted and wept, knowing that the truth in these words was even greater than their suffering.

Bodhichitta has this kind of power. It will inspire and support us in good times and bad. It is like discovering a wisdom and courage we do not even know we have. Just as alchemy changes any metal into gold, bodhichitta can, if we let it, transform any activity, word or thought into a vehicle for awakening our compassion. ❁



## Say Yes to an Open Heart

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**Diana Winston** reflects on the intertwining of mindfulness and compassion, as practiced with an open heart.

I'd like to propose that mindfulness—true blue mindfulness—is the open heart. Sure, the purists can define mindfulness as “paying attention to the present moment with an open and curious stance,” but that definition can be staid, sort of dull, and inadvertently can take the heart out of a practice, which is, in truth, all heart.

I remember in my early years of mindfulness practice, I got attached to subtle mental states of concentration. I was intensely curious and amazed by my mind, but secretly I felt the practice was a little dry—too much in the head. So I spent a few years seeking out gurus in India, hoping for a *bhakti* hit to make my practice juicier. I later realized I was looking for love in all the wrong places—outside myself instead of inside.

That's when I discovered that mindfulness practice itself is the open heart. And here's how it works: First you start out on the cushion (or chair for the less pretzelly inclined) and you attend to your present moment experience, no matter what it is—good, bad,

or ugly. And as you practice and get some skill—“Hey I can sit here and be okay in the midst of knee pain, in the midst of my aching back, my frayed nerves”—then you realize just this: the capacity to be mindful means having an open heart. It’s not a theory, it’s a heart/body-felt insight.

Why is this so? Because as you sit there, hour after hour, you learn to say yes. Yes to your jagged breathing, yes to your itchy scalp. Yes to the leaf blower dude across the street, yes to your grief and pain and shame and grandiosity and fear. Not because you want to act on these things, but because they’re true, and fleeting, and simply part of who you are (but not the half of who you really are). Your nervous system begins to relax—at last you’re acknowledging the truth of things.

Saying yes means attending to and surrendering to your experience, whatever it is. It means feeling your body when you’re in the midst of a strong reaction or emotion, and letting whatever you find be there. It means coming back to your breath, again and again. It means noticing that thoughts and feelings and sensations come and go.

You say yes to your pride, your stupidity, your murderous rage. Naturally you don’t act on your murderous rage, but you allow it to be true within you. It is a very inclusive practice. Nothing is ever left out.

You discover that if you are pushing away your experience, even ever so slightly, your mindfulness is not fully realized, not quite formed. It is tainted by aversion, even just subtly. Now

sometimes you truly can't say yes, and then you say yes to the no: *I hate that I'm not feeling okay, but I'm actually okay with not being okay.*

Saying yes in mindfulness practice eventually begins to spill over into your everyday experience. You start to say yes—with awareness—again and again: yes when that guy cuts you off in traffic, yes when your email box is spammed to the brim, yes when your doctor is an hour late, yes even when you lose a treasured person, place, or thing. You say yes to your experience of the present moment, whatever it is. You no longer reject and armor your heart. Not that you necessarily agree with the moment, or would wish it on anyone, or think it's desirable, or wouldn't try to rectify injustice, but you say yes because whatever life brings is just that, life as it is. And by saying yes, you let go deep down inside and can step forward with poise and balance and clarity to the next right thing.

My six-month-old daughter has been waking me up hourly this week to night-nurse. Sometimes I say no. *Oh god, not again, what's wrong with her? Will I ever get to sleep again?* In those moments, mindfulness is a vague “good idea” somewhere in my sleep-deprived brain. But other nights this week when she cries I simply, without thought, say yes. *Yes, darling, feast. Yes, I'll be with you. Yes, I'm awake and that's just how things are.* I listen to the



stillness of the night (rare in Los Angeles), feel her warm body and attend to her snuffling slurps, and sigh that yes, this is life. A deep peace sets in over me.

By doing this practice of yes, by mindfully embracing each moment with a willingness to accept things as they are, with a willingness to be with life—inner and outer—exactly as it unfolds, you may be able to look down at your chest and realize that your heart is gigantic. It's expansive, spacious, broken open, like a big, fat suitcase overflowing with warm, comfy, oh-so-familiar clothes.

You open and open, you attend and attend, you say yes, again and again, and then over time, the mindfully opened heart is more and more just who you are. ✨



## Only Genuine Compassion Will Do

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It's not sufficient, says the **Dalai Lama**, to simply think that compassion is important. We must transform our thoughts and behavior on a daily basis to cultivate compassion without attachment.

BEFORE WE CAN GENERATE compassion and love, it is important to have a clear understanding of what we understand compassion and love to be. In simple terms, compassion and love can be defined as positive thoughts and feelings that give rise to such essential things in life as hope, courage, determination, and inner strength. In the Buddhist tradition, compassion and love are seen as two aspects of the same thing: Compassion is the wish for another being to be free from suffering; love is wanting them to have happiness.

Self-centeredness inhibits our love for others, and we are all afflicted by it to one degree or another. For true happiness to come about, we need a calm mind, and such peace of mind is brought about only by a compassionate attitude. How can we develop this attitude? Obviously, it is not enough for us simply to

believe that compassion is important and to think about how nice it is! We need to make a concerted effort to develop it; we must use all the events of our daily life to transform our thoughts and behavior.

Many forms of compassionate feeling are mixed with desire and attachment. For instance, the love parents feel for their child is often strongly associated with their own emotional needs, so it is not fully compassionate. Usually when we are concerned about a close friend, we call this compassion, but it too is usually attachment. Even in marriage, the love between husband and wife—particularly at the beginning, when each partner still may not know the other’s deeper character very well—depends more on attachment than genuine love. Marriages that last only a short time do so because they lack compassion; they are produced by emotional attachment based on projection and expectation, and as soon as the projections change, the attachment disappears. Our desire can be so strong that the person to whom we are attached appears flawless, when in fact he or she has many faults. In addition, attachment makes us exaggerate small, positive qualities. When this happens, it indicates that our love is motivated more by personal need than by genuine care for another.

Compassion without attachment is possible. Therefore, we need to clarify the distinctions between compassion and attachment. True compassion is not just an emotional response but a

firm commitment founded on reason. Because of this firm foundation, a truly compassionate attitude toward others does not change even if they behave negatively. Genuine compassion is based not on our own projections and expectations, but rather on the needs of the other: irrespective of whether another person is a close friend or an enemy, as long as that person wishes for peace and happiness and wishes to overcome suffering, then on that basis we develop genuine concern for their problem. This is genuine compassion. For a Buddhist practitioner, the goal is to develop this genuine compassion, this genuine wish for the well-being of another, in fact for every living being throughout the universe. ✽

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Adapted from *The Compassionate Life*, published by Wisdom Publications



## The Heart Is Tender

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**Gina Sharpe** says the most important Buddhist teaching for the world today is to have a compassionate heart.

THE ESSENTIAL TEACHING of the buddhadharma is that suffering is universal and not foreign to any life. To respond to suffering with kindness and compassion is fundamental to Buddhist mind/heart training.

Often our reaction to suffering is to recoil and armor the heart. We believe that suffering signals that something has gone terribly wrong or someone is to blame for this very human experience. This produces enmity, hatred, and warfare, which are ubiquitous in our world today.

In the face of loss and pain, the Buddha encouraged us to cultivate the *brahmaviharas*. These four qualities of heart—loving-kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy, and equanimity—are powerful antidotes to conflict, inviting loving wisdom into relationship. Our usual reactivity views the world as hostile, triggering

isolation and self-protection. Instead, the heart can be trained to engage others with loving-kindness and compassion, based on friendly awareness, mutual resonance and natural connectedness.

This is not separate from the instructions uttered some twelve times in the mindfulness instructions of the *Satipatthana Sutta*: to be mindful internally of our own experience, externally of the experience of others, and both internally and externally of our connection with others.



Compassion mandates that we extend understanding, warmth, sensitivity, and openness to the sorrows of the world in a truthful and genuine way.

Compassion is empathy for suffering arising from the heart's fearless capacity to recognize universal kinship and belonging, transforming resentment into forgiveness, hatred into friendliness, and fear into kindness for all beings. It mandates that we extend understanding, warmth, sensitivity, and openness to the sorrows of the world in a truthful and genuine way.

The late Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche called this the spiritual warrior's tender heart of sadness: "This experience of sadness is unconditioned. It occurs because your heart is completely open, exposed. It is this tender heart of a warrior that has the power to heal the world." ❁

## From Blame to Love

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We humans are gifted at finding fault. Buddhist teacher **Tara Brach** teaches us how we can connect to compassion instead.

EVOLUTION HAS rigged all of us with a negativity bias—a survival-driven habit to scan for what’s wrong and fixate on it. In contemporary society, a pervasive target is our own sense of unworthiness. We habitually fixate on how we’re falling short—in our relationships, work, appearance, mood, and behaviors. And while self-aversion is our primary reflex, we also fixate on the faults of others—how they’re letting us down and how they should be different. Whether we’re focusing inwardly or outwardly, we’re creating an enemy and imprisoning ourselves in the sense of a separate, threatened self.

While negativity bias is a key part of our survival apparatus, when it dominates our daily life we lose access to the more recently evolved parts of our brain, which contribute to feelings of connection, empathy, and well-being. What can decondition the negativity bias? How do we shift from limbic reactivity to “attend and befriend”? Here are three ways that help us awaken our full potential for natural presence and caring.

## Look for the Vulnerability

First, look toward the vulnerability, starting with ourselves. When we're blaming ourselves, we can ask, "What's really going on here? What has driven me to behave this way?" Perhaps you'll see you were afraid to fall short, and that fear made you act exactly how you didn't want to act. Or maybe you'll see you wanted approval because you were feeling insecure, so you ended up betraying yourself and not acting with integrity. When you begin to understand that you're hurting, you'll naturally shift out of blame and into self-compassion.

When triggered by others, first bring a kind presence to your own feelings of vulnerability. Once you're more present and balanced, try to look through the eyes of wisdom at what might be behind their behavior. How might this person be caught in their own sense of inadequacy or confusion? If you can see how this person might be suffering, you'll reconnect with a natural sense of tenderness.

## Actively Express Compassion

When compassion arises, the next step is actively expressing it. This is what brings compassion fully to life. If you're working on self-compassion, look to the vulnerable part of yourself to sense what it most needs from you. Is it forgiveness? Acceptance? Companionship? Safety? Love? Then from the wisest, kindest place in your being, try to offer what's most needed. Either mentally or with a whisper, you might say your name and send a message of



kindness to yourself. Perhaps place a hand gently on your heart or cheek, or even give yourself a hug as a way of conveying, from your more awake heart, “I’m here with you. I care.”

If you’re working with compassion for others, it’s powerful and healing to communicate your recognition of their suffering and your care. We all know that when we’re with somebody we love, if we actually say the words “I love you” out loud, it brings the love to a new level. If you want to reverse your negativity bias with someone—to reverse your habits of blaming or distancing—look for their vulnerability and then, either through prayer or in person, offer them understanding and kindness.

## Include Those Who Seem Different

Part of our negativity bias and the cause of much racial, religious, and other domains of violence, is we assume potential danger—something wrong—associated with those who are different. A practice that evolves us (and our larger society) toward inclusive loving is intentionally deepening our relationships with others of difference. When we communicate on purpose, trying to understand, it opens us to the larger truth of our interconnectedness.

While our brain has a flight/fight/freeze mechanism, it also has a compassion network, which includes mirror neurons that allow us to register what it’s like for another. We can sense that others want to feel loved and loving, safe and happy. When we feel that connection, it enables us to act on behalf of each other, the relationship, or larger community. But unless we purposefully take

time to pause and listen to others of difference, we won't automatically engage that part of our brain. To have these heart-awakening dialogues, we need to intentionally create safe containers.

In the same way we train on the cushion, we can train in conscious communication with each other and gradually widen the circles to connect with those who may be more notably of difference. There are many effective practices, such as insight dialogue, nonviolent communication, and circles of reconciliation, which offer formal structures for communicating. Importantly, we need to practice in our close relationships. A couple of times a week, my husband and I meditate together and have a period of silence where we reflect on inquiries such as "What are you grateful for right now?" and "What is difficult for you right now?" We also ask "Is there anything between us that's getting in the way of an open, loving flow?" The other person listens with a kind, accepting presence, and we each get to name what we're experiencing.



From the wisest, kindest place in your being, try to offer what's most needed.

What about those who aren't willing to engage in conversation with us? Fortunately, our capacity to feel connection isn't hitched to their capacity to connect to us. Of course, it's easier to feel it when there's mutuality, but we can offer kindness from our hearts regardless. It's possible to do this in every situation, with every person we meet.

I have a morning prayer that's really simple: "Teach me about kindness." When I move through the day with that informing me, the moments become filled with presence, tenderness, and aliveness, even when I encounter challenging people, myself included!

It's natural that in the face of hurt, injustice, and deception we feel fear, hatred, and anger. But the negativity bias can lock us into being at war with ourselves and others. It's important that we pause, be with ourselves and each other, and open fully to the feelings that arise. When we honor those feelings, we can get beneath them, down to our human vulnerability and the care that's really our essence. It then becomes possible to respond to our world aligned with our hearts. 🌸



## How to Do Metta

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**Jack Kornfield** on beginning this time-honored, heart-opening practice.

IN OUR CULTURE, people find it difficult to direct loving-kindness to themselves. We may feel that we are unworthy, or that it's egotistical, or that we shouldn't be happy when other people are suffering. So rather than start loving-kindness practice with ourselves, which is traditional, I find it more helpful to start with those we most naturally love and care about. One of the beautiful principles of compassion and loving-kindness practices is that we start where it works, where it's easiest. We open our heart in the most natural way, then direct our loving-kindness little by little to the areas where it's more difficult.

First, sit comfortably and at ease, with your eyes closed. Sense yourself seated here in this mystery of human life. Take your seat halfway between heaven and Earth, as the Buddha did, then bring a kind attention to yourself. Feel your body seated and your breath breathing naturally.

Think of someone you care about and love a lot. Then let natural phrases of good wishes for them come into your mind and heart. Some of the traditional ones are, "May you be safe and protected," "May you be healthy and strong," and "May you be truly happy."

Then picture a second person you care about and express the same good wishes and intentions toward them.

Next, imagine that these two people whom you love are offering you their loving-kindness. Picture how they look at you with concern and love as they say, “May you too be safe and protected. May you be healthy and strong. May you be truly happy.”

Take in their good wishes. Now turn them toward yourself. Sometimes people place their hand on their heart or their body as they repeat the phrases: “May I be safe and protected. May I be healthy and strong. May I be truly happy.”

With the same care let your eyes open, look around the room, and offer your loving-kindness to everyone around you. Feel how great it is to spread the field of loving-kindness.

Now think of yourself as a beacon, spreading the light of loving-kindness like a lighthouse around your city, around the country, around the world, even to distant planets. Think, “May all beings far and near, all beings young and old, beings in every direction, be held in great loving-kindness. May they be safe and protected. May they be healthy and strong. May they be truly happy.”

The Buddha said that the awakened heart of loving-kindness and freedom is our birthright as human beings. “If these things were not possible,” he said, “I would not teach them. But because they are possible for you, I offer these teachings of the dharma of awakening.” ❀



## We Need More Heart

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It's not just about mind and meditation, says **Ravi Mishra**. To meet the needs of this time, Buddhists must take special care to develop their hearts.

AT LONG LAST, a social justice lens has emerged in convert American Buddhism. Slowly but steadily, we have begun to identify systemic biases—the psychologies of capitalism, patriarchy, white supremacy, and so on—and the imprints they've left on our fledgling tradition. These include, but are not limited to, secularism, intellectualism, a disdain of faith-based philosophies, and an escapist tendency to bypass the realities of the world.

I believe something fundamental is finally being exposed in the process—that our tradition, as practiced today, needs more heart.

When we think of “the ideal Buddhist,” we might envision a meditator, perhaps even Siddhartha Gautama himself, sitting in serene practice. But this is not the whole story. We should remember, for example, the story of young Gautama, the Buddha-to-be, weeping at the death of an insect.

Just as a bird needs two wings to fly—as the fully realized Buddha would later teach—a student of the dharma must develop, nourish, and rely on the interdependent qualities of compassion and wisdom. To make the most of our collective moment, modern Buddhists should take special care to develop the heart.

Here are three ways we can start.

## Practicing Heart-Centric Meditations

As the teachings, especially those related to mindfulness meditation, say, cultivating stability of mind through concentration practice allows insights and wisdom to emerge. These ideas about how meditation can affect the mind are fascinating, and true—but we mustn't overlook the heart.

In 2013, I spent a month and a half in a Tibetan Buddhist monastery in a remote village in the Ladakh region of India. Although it may sound stereotypical, I was struck by the warmth and cheer of the everyday villagers. Yes, there is danger in the racial trope of suggesting that Tibetan society is perfect. It is not. Yet it seemed to me that many of the Ladakhis I encountered moved with joy, a joy rooted in deep realization.

What was their practice? *Om Mani Padme Hum*, the mantra dedicated to the bodhisattva of compassion, Chenrezig (Avalokiteshvara in Sanskrit). This was not their preliminary practice, nor a side practice. It was the primary, lifetime practice of old and young alike, holding at once joy, grief, ecstasy, and sorrow.

If the profound peace in turn exhibited by them is any measure, we should feel no compunction in saying this practice works. We ought to take notice. Instead, many American Buddhists subtly (and not-so-subtly) look down on practices, and even entire traditions like Pure Land Buddhism, that center on compassion. *Metta*, or loving-kindness, meditation is still only an occasional practice in most convert lineages in the West, despite the clear results it offers.

Such a heart practice is a tool for meeting all of our moments—from expressing gratitude in times of joy to offering desperate prayers in times of deep pain, and everything in between. For those who don't resonate with the sometimes impersonal nature of concentration meditation, it can be radically more accessible. So it is my hope that we start to make room for heart-centric meditation as a primary practice within convert American Buddhism.

## Committing to Learning with Heart

If convert American Buddhism is truly to flourish, we must reemphasize the traditions of committing to a trustworthy teacher and learning how to be a student.

We Americans are married to our individuality and squeamish about commitment and faith. We believe we can have many teachers, picking and choosing teachings as we see fit. And yet, isn't it remarkable how the most enlightened people also seem to have the most devotion to their teacher?



This is no accident. The teacher, ideally, serves as a conduit for our liberation. The world is too much, too large and unknown and scary, to open to fully on our own. In developing deep devotion to a teacher, we practice the exact type of opening that allows us to let the whole of life into our hearts—and that is liberation.

Such liberation flows from the teacher's heart and into our own in a way that is magical, mysterious, and direct—beyond our ability to grasp, beyond words and letters. But it's real, and it holds our awakening. Learning from a teacher is not an exercise of the intellect; it's a process of transformation that rests on the bedrock of the heart-energy of devotion.

## Cultivating Fellowship

I formally train with a well established Zen lineage. We have a monastery and a city center, brimming with robust programming on the arts, the dharma, and, of course, meditation. I see the same faces frequently, exchanging hugs and hellos, feeling the warmth of the sangha.

Yet, after three years of practicing regularly with them, I probably know only fifteen of my sangha-mates' names, and intimate details of about three or four of their lives. This is, unfortunately, not untypical.

We develop the heart in fellowship. Sanghas should get to know each other, not just in the quiet of practice but in the messiness and depth of our lives, deepening our bonds as we walk the road of liberation. The strengthening of these bonds is exactly

the practice of heart: in growing closer to each other, our hearts expand, and in seeing what blocks us from this, we understand where we can further grow. Moreover, community is the foundation for the tougher aspects of awakening, like social justice work. How are we supposed to explore the ways we're still blind to our biases except from a place of deep love for those around us?

The jewel of sangha offers us both goal and method for going beyond any undue emphasis on individual liberation in convert American Buddhism. By participating in potlucks, volunteering, even casual nights out together, we can foster genuine connection and community in our sanghas.

## Looking Backward to Move Forward

Individualism, capitalism, and the privileging of certain bodies, mindsets, and experiences have all shaped convert American Buddhism. They have given emphasis to certain bits of the Buddhist tradition and left others behind.

What's been left out—the bits deemed less important by the men (for the most part) who have defined the tradition thus far—contains gold. Reclaiming this gold is crucial for the continued development of our tradition. We have no further to look than the many heritage Buddhist communities to see how heart-centric meditation practice, devotion to a teacher, and fellowship can be centered.

I realize this is no small matter. In fact, it calls for a fundamental shift: from the too common conception of Buddhism as an individualistic, intellectual, and secular philosophy and practice to a model of both personal and social awakening that draws on faith, devotion, and compassion as antidotes to suffering. Now that the seed of Buddhism has been planted in America, the flower should get all the love it needs to blossom. 🌸



## Loving-Kindness: Healing Your Inner Child

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**Peggy Rowe Ward** and **Larry Ward** on how to give yourself the love and compassion you deserve. And send some of that love to the wounded child inside you. They need it.

THICH NHAT HANH, our teacher, described love as an extremely powerful energy that has the capacity to transform ourselves and others. But many of us find it difficult to direct love toward ourselves. We quickly become aware of negative feelings like shame, guilt, and self-criticism that make it hard to love and care for ourselves. Unfortunately, this is all too common.

Luckily for us, the seeds of love, compassion, joy, and equanimity are in our store consciousness, ready and waiting to grow. We can study and practice in such a way that we shrink the seeds of self-aversion, self-criticism, shame, and guilt inside us and grow our hearts as wide as the world. When we are able to practice self-love consistently, returning over and over to maintain a soft heart in the face of our own suffering, eventually we're able to let go of our negative thought patterns and find ourselves transformed.

Thich Nhat Hanh talked about healing the inner child within each of us as a key way to give ourselves the love and compassion we need. For children to feel a sense of belonging, they need to feel understood and loved. They need the feeling of connectedness that comes when they are seen and held in love. But if our parents, teachers, or society didn't listen to or respond to our fears, or sent messages that we were not good enough, we may continue these behaviors with ourselves as adults. We may disconnect from and bury parts of our inner life because they are too painful to face.

The inner child may hold memories of abuse, neglect, and other traumas we endured during childhood. Adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) are traumatic events in a child's life that can have lasting negative effects on our health and well-being.

ACEs may include the following: psychological, emotional, physical, or sexual abuse; violence against their mother; neglect; bullying; or living with household members who were substance abusers, mentally ill, suicidal, criminal, or imprisoned. Such maltreatment causes chronic stress that can disrupt early brain development and the development of the nervous and immune systems. Over time, ACEs can lead to post-traumatic stress, migraines, chronic muscle tension, fatigue, and chronic illnesses such as autoimmune diseases and skin conditions.

These childhood traumas can impact our capacity for self-love as a result of stress trapped in the body. This is one of the reasons that the following meditation begins by strengthening our heart and mind with the somatic sensations of love and peace.

However, it is important to remember that the inner child is not a separate, unchangeable self. It is not a permanent essence or state of being, but rather deep patterns resulting from many causes, conditions, and perceptions that are both individual and collective. While these patterns may arise in any moment, it is our good fortune that there is a natural neuroplasticity of our brain and mind. This plasticity allows for deep healing and transformation illuminating the divine child hidden in the suffering of adversity.

Healing that inner child within us is the first and most important expression of love and kindness toward ourselves. Here are several ways we can practice love for ourselves, heal the wounds within us, and expand our capacity to love other people, because to fully love others we must first love ourselves.

## **Send Love to Your Five-Year-Old Self**

When we experience our own suffering, the first invitation is to name this experience. In Thich Nhat Hanh's words, "We call it by its true name."

Whatever arises, you can name it and send it the energy of loving-kindness. You can say, "I am experiencing the energy of shame and self-criticism. I put my arms of love around these

feelings.” Although you are not trying to fix or change anything, the practice of holding your suffering in arms of love will help it to shrink and your self-love to grow.

Perhaps you have an experience of being held this way. A few days after Peggy’s first husband, Steve, passed away, a close friend came to the house. Peggy remembers: “I was sitting on the couch. He put his arm solidly and yet loosely around me and held me for at least half an hour. He didn’t fidget, speak, or move. He didn’t squeeze or pat. He just sat with me. He met me where I was. I cried for many minutes and then experienced a great peace. He didn’t want anything from me. He was just there to be with me in my suffering.”

This is the kind of love in which we hold the suffering child within us.

Sometimes, though, you may experience that the suffering child is afraid to appear. Sometimes it seems this child is in a lost place. Sometimes the child does not trust you. This is to be expected. You will have to move slowly. You have observed that with children and animals, you shouldn’t approach them too quickly. The best method is to let them come to you in their own time.

There are several practices from Thich Nhat Hanh’s tradition that have helped each of us build a loving and trusting relationship with the suffering child within us. One practice is to have a

family altar. On this altar, Thich Nhat Hanh encouraged us to have photographs of ourselves as young children. This practice helps us build a relationship that honors our inner child.

## A Meditation to Heal Your Inner Child

The following meditation has helped us heal from early childhood experiences. We regularly practice this meditation because it provides a kind space for the body, heart, and mind to gently remember. It offers a living space of inclusivity and compassion for childhood memories and all previous experience as we continue to deepen and grow in self-love.

### 1. Tap Your Resources of Love and Support

Thich Nhat Hanh once spoke about cooking up love. He reminded us of how we can use pieces of straw or paper to start a good fire. Our resources for love are the pieces of straw that help us generate the energy of loving-kindness.

Resources that help us develop self-love include people, places, pets, activities, and beautiful memories that soften our hearts and nourish our gratitude, love, and compassion. In your practice, take a few minutes to recall such a resource deeply. Make it come alive by activating your senses.



One resource we are both grateful for is the wise and compassionate therapists, body healers, and shamans who have supported our journey of transformation and healing. We often tell our friends that a somatic and trauma-informed therapist can be an essential support person for those on a spiritual path.

A resource that opens our hearts is our dog, Charlie. Peggy imagines the weight of his body in her lap and the feel of his fur under her hand. She pictures his jaunty, bouncy walk and smile. When she brings Charlie to mind, she feels her body relax and her face and eyes soften.

When Peggy needs even more support with her practice, she imagines the *Pieta* in the Vatican, a beautiful statue by Leonardo da Vinci of Mary holding Jesus. She says, “Sometimes Jesus is holding me, but more frequently, I rest myself in the arms of the Mother Mary. Mary helps the mother in me who is learning how to love myself with each breath.”

It is very important to take the time to savor your own resources of love so they are committed to long-term memory. Use all of your senses and anchor these sensations of goodness in your body and mind as you direct the energy of loving-kindness toward yourself.

## 2. Attend to Your Body

Once we are able to experience the positive sensations of being in touch with our resource, we attend to our body. The first foundation of mindfulness is the body. We love our self by being connected with our body and recognizing the miracle of our body.

Find a place where you can slow down without distraction so that you can be aware of the body and the breath with some degree of comfort. Be thorough in your practice of establishing your posture so that your breath is easeful and you can truly be present.

Scan your body, feet to crown, bringing your mindful attention to your entire body with kindness. Invite your body to relax and soften, settling the body, sinking into your cushion or chair. Thich Nhat Hanh reminds us that this is how we keep our appointment with life. He said, “We stop, we calm, we rest, we heal, and we transform.” Sending this mindful energy of kindness to your body is an act of self-love.

## 3. Offer Love to Your Inner Child

Then the invitation is to silently offer these words of guided meditation to yourself:

*Breathing in, I know that I am breathing in.  
 Breathing out, I know that I am breathing out  
 I bring my kind attention to the in-breath  
 I bring my kind attention to the out-breath.  
 Breathing in, I am aware of my whole body, right here  
 Breathing out, I am aware of my whole body, right here  
 Aware of body, here and now  
 Breathing in, I see myself as a five-year-old child,  
     *fragile and vulnerable.*  
 Breathing out, I smile to myself as a five-year-old child.  
 Breathing in, I am aware that the five-year-old child is in me.  
 Breathing out, I hold this child tenderly.*

Allow as much time as you would like to experience holding this child that is you. When we first practiced with the little one inside of ourselves, we found it took patience and persistence to connect to the child within. Larry would visualize the child or else he'd visualize a black panther to support his practice. As a kinesthetic learner, Peggy found it helpful to experience the sensation of holding a puppy or kitten. We had to build our relationship and trust by continuing to practice just welcoming this child. Find your own way that helps you to feel solid and at ease.

This meditation has helped us to see ourselves as children and experience the very real vulnerability of human beings. We find that we frequently underestimate our resilience and strength, as well as our fragility and vulnerability. They are not separate. There is great power and strength in our vulnerability and fragility. Being in touch with vulnerability, while it may not be easy at first, is a

powerful opportunity to be in touch with life and our own goodness. In doing so, the hidden divine child within can be healed and strengthened.

Larry captures benefits from his practice of honoring the inner child with these lines from a poem he wrote: “I am here now, waking up in the changing room of my soul’s department store. I am becoming what my young self once knew, gazing at stars from the attic window following a yellow and green caterpillar on the sidewalks of Cleveland to new worlds.”

Blessings on your practice of love. ✨



## How to Practice Metta for a Troubled Time

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**Mushim Patricia Ikeda** teaches us how to generate loving-kindness and good will as an antidote to hatred and fear.

METTA MEDITATION is not a magical spell you can cast on the population of the U.S. in order to produce a state of utopian bliss. It is not a cure-all for oppression and the unequal distribution of power and privilege.

Metta meditation doesn't work like that. It's about being determined, courageous, and patient in purifying your own heart and mind.

Metta is a meditation practice that involves concentrating and reciting, either silently or out loud, phrases of good wishes toward yourself and others. *Metta* is usually translated as “loving-kindness,” but I prefer Thanissaro Bhikkhu's translation of *metta* as “good will.”

What this form of meditation is designed to do—and for many people does very successfully—is to purify us of hatred and ill will. Good will is the antidote to ill will. Good will, or loving-kindness, is the antidote to ill will, hatred, and enmity.

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., talked about the need for “aggressive nonviolence.” There are times and situations in which we have to show up and throw down, and this may be such a time. Whether I do that from a mind of toxic hatred, or from a mind that recognizes that every human being has at some point been my mother, my parent, or guardian, depends on how well I practice metta.



When you practice good will, you remove fear and negative reactivity from your mind.

When you practice good will, you remove fear and negative reactivity from your mind. For me, this is what is most important about many people practicing metta, together or individually, whenever it is necessary to reduce the conflict and hatred that emerge so quickly from fear and spread in a viral fashion.

When you practice metta, you kind of work up a ladder. You go from people like family and friends, people it’s easy for you to feel good will toward, to those you don’t know. Then, ascending as you are able to—not forcing anything—you extend wishes for safety, happiness, and peace to those you dislike and those you consider your enemies. Finally, at the ultimate level, you extend your good will to all living beings in the universe.

It’s a pretty tall order—although possible for some people—to feel loving and kind toward those who are perpetrators of violence and oppression. Even to feel good will toward them might

be difficult. So we can frame this meditation as the cultivation of nonhatred and nonfear in order to become stronger, more stable, and more centered. Then we can move forward in a positive fashion to battle oppression and create some improvement for our communities and the United States overall.

Metta meditation can be done in a brief flash of good wishes or it can be practiced continuously over many days. First, find a place to sit or lie down quietly and comfortably. Make sure that you're in a place of reasonable safety. You can close your eyes or keep them open a little. You might take a few deep breaths to begin, calming and steadying yourself to the best of your ability. You might want to gently and lightly place a hand on your heart or your cheek or another part of your body in any way that promotes a feeling of inner safety and that helps to connect you to your courage and compassion. Then you can begin the practice.

### **Good Will Toward Yourself**

Using these words or others—because you can adapt this however you like—you begin with these wishes of good will to yourself:

“May I be safe and protected from physical and mental harm. May I be strong and healthy and enjoy well-being. May I be peaceful and truly happy. May I live my life with more joy and ease.”

## Toward Friends

Now extend those good wishes to those whom you like, your family, mentors, good friends, and others: “May you be safe and protected from physical and mental harm. May you be strong and healthy. May you be peaceful and happy. May you live with joy and ease.”

## Toward Neutral Beings

Now we extend our good will toward neutral beings—people and other living beings we neither like nor dislike. It’s always useful to check in: do you actually have neutral beings in your life? I don’t. My mind will quickly divide, even very slightly, between those I like and those I don’t like. That is something worth noting if it’s true for you.

Then you can recite something like: “Though you are a neutral being to me—meaning I do not engage with you that much—I know you are like me in that you have joys, sorrows, and pain in your life. Therefore, I wish you well. May you live your life with more joy and ease.”

## Toward Enemies

Thich Nhat Hanh said, “While it is easy to love the lovable, it may be the unlovable who need our love more.” So the next stage is to express your good will, to the extent you can, toward someone who has caused you some slight injury. Then, to the extent possible, you can extend these good wishes toward people who have



caused you more pain, and to institutions and organizations that have caused you, your family, or your community pain and suffering. Let this develop naturally; relax and invite yourself to experiment with it.

## Toward All Beings

Finally, you extend metta to all living beings in the universe. You might visualize yourself as a kind of lighthouse, with good will and loving-kindness streaming out from your heart and body in every direction, including up and down. We want to be 360 degrees of metta. “May all beings be safe and protected from harm. May each and every being without exception be strong and healthy. May all living beings be peaceful and know true happiness. May each and every living being without exception live their lives with more joy and ease. And together may we complete the great journey of awakening.” ✨



## Tonglen: Bad In, Good Out

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A teaching on tonglen practice by **Pema Chödrön**, and how it begins by taking in our own suffering before we can help others.

IN ORDER TO HAVE compassion for others, we have to have compassion for ourselves. In particular, to care about other people who are fearful, angry, jealous, overpowered by addictions of all kinds, arrogant, proud, miserly, selfish — you name it — means to not run from the pain of finding these things in ourselves. In fact, one's whole attitude toward pain can change. Instead of fending it off and hiding from it, one can open one's heart and allow oneself to feel that pain, feel it as something that will soften and purify us and make us far more loving and kind.

The tonglen practice is a method for connecting with suffering — ours and that which is all around us — everywhere we go. It is a method for overcoming fear of suffering and for dissolving the tightness of our heart. Primarily it is a method for awakening the compassion that is inherent in all of us, no matter how cruel or cold we might seem to be.

We begin the practice by taking on the suffering of a person we know to be hurting and whom we wish to help. For instance, if you know of a child who is being hurt, you breathe in the wish to take away all the pain and fear of that child. Then, as you breathe out, you send the child happiness, joy, or whatever would relieve their pain. This is the core of the practice: breathing in another's pain so they can be well and have more space to relax and open, and breathing out, sending them relaxation or whatever you feel would bring them relief and happiness.



As you do this practice over time, your compassion expands naturally.

However, we often cannot do this practice because we come face to face with our own fear, our own resistance, anger, or whatever our personal pain, our personal stuckness, happens to be at that moment.

At that point you can change the focus and begin to do tonglen for what you are feeling and for millions of others just like you who at that very moment are feeling exactly the same stuckness and misery. Maybe you are able to name your pain. You recognize it clearly as terror or revulsion or anger or wanting to get revenge. So you breathe in for all the people who are caught with that same emotion and you send out relief or whatever opens up the space for you and all those countless others. Maybe you can't name what you're feeling. But you can feel it — a tightness in the

stomach, a heavy darkness, or whatever. Just contact what you are feeling and breathe, taking it in for all of us and sending out relief to all of us.

People often say this practice goes against the grain of how we usually hold ourselves together. Truthfully, this practice does go against the grain of wanting things on our own terms, of wanting it to work out for ourselves no matter what happens to the others. The practice dissolves the armor of self-protection we've tried so hard to create around ourselves. In Buddhist language one would say that it dissolves the fixation and clinging of ego.



Tonglen can be done for those who are ill, those who are dying or have just died, or for those who are in pain of any kind.

Tonglen reverses the usual logic of avoiding suffering and seeking pleasure, and in the process we become liberated from a very ancient prison of selfishness. We begin to feel love both for ourselves and for others, and we begin to take care of ourselves and others. It awakens our compassion and it also introduces us to a far larger view of reality. It introduces us to the unlimited spaciousness that Buddhists call *shunyata*. By doing the practice, we begin to connect with the open dimension of our being. At first we experience this as things not being such a big deal or so solid as they seemed before.

Tonglen can be done for those who are ill, those who are dying or have just died, or for those who are in pain of any kind. It can be done either as a formal meditation practice or right on the spot at any time. For example, if you are out walking and you see someone in pain — right on the spot you can begin to breathe in their pain and send out relief.

Or, more likely, you might see someone in pain and look away because it brings up your fear or anger; it brings up your resistance and confusion. So on the spot you can do tonglen for all the people who are just like you, for everyone who wishes to be compassionate but instead is afraid, for everyone who wishes to be brave but instead is a coward. Rather than beating yourself up, use your own stuckness as a stepping-stone to understanding what people are up against all over the world.

Gradually, as you do this practice over time, your compassion expands naturally and so does your realization that things are not as solid as you thought. As you do this practice, gradually, at your own pace, you will be surprised to find yourself more and more able to be there for others even in what used to seem like impossible situations. 🌱



## Generosity's Perfection

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Giving up, giving in, just plain giving—**Sharon Salzberg** says that's the truly transformative experience.

Generosity opens our heart, frees us from attachment and is the basis of all good qualities. It's the foundation of the Buddhist path.

The cultivation of generosity is the beginning of spiritual awakening. Generosity has tremendous force because it arises from an inner quality of letting go. Being able to let go, to give up, to renounce, and to give generously all spring from the same source, and when we practice generosity, *dana*, we open up these qualities within ourselves. Letting go gives us profound freedom and many loving ways to express that freedom. Generosity is the beginning of the path. When the Buddha taught, he always began with generosity.

I recall a Thai forest master who visited the West being puzzled by the sequence of teachings we seemed to be following here. In Asia, he said, the teachings proceed from generosity to morality, and then to meditation or insight. But here we appeared to begin with meditation, then say something about morality, and only after some time, as a kind of appendix, teach about generosity. He asked, “What’s going on?”

He was right to ask. We like the idea of a transformative, transcendental meditative state, and we are willing to put our effort into that. However, the springboard for genuine meditative states is the cultivation of generosity and morality. That's what allows insight to occur most gracefully and easily.

The Buddha said that a true spiritual life is not possible without a generous heart. Generosity is the very first *parami*, or quality of an awakened mind. The path begins there because of the joy that arises from a generous heart. Pure unhindered delight flows freely when we practice generosity. We experience joy in forming the intention to give, in the actual act of giving, and in recollecting the fact that we've given.



In the practice of generosity, we learn to see through our attachments.

If we practice joyful giving, we experience confidence. We grow in self-esteem, self-respect and well-being because we continually test our limits. Our attachments say, "I will give this much and no more," or "I will give this article or object if I am appreciated enough for this act of giving." In the practice of generosity, we learn to see through our attachments. We see they are transparent, that they have no solidity. They don't need to hold us back, so we can go beyond them.

Therefore, the practice of generosity is about creating space. We see our limits and we extend them continuously, which creates an expansiveness and spaciousness of mind that's deeply composed. This happiness, self-respect and spaciousness is the appropriate ground in which meditation practice can flourish. It is the ideal place from which to undertake deep investigation, because with this kind of inner happiness and spaciousness, we have the strength and flexibility to look at absolutely everything that arises in our experience.

Think about what it's like when the opposite is happening, when the mind feels brittle, narrow, confined and dark. At that point, you feel on edge, uneasy, and you don't like yourself very much. With all that going on, how easy is it to accept calmly a painful or difficult experience? How easy is it to be with the experience without judging it—to accept it as it is, to allow it to be there? It's not very easy because of the narrowness of the mind that is receiving it. By contrast, a vast and spacious mind doesn't feel so bound, contracted and self-denigrating.

Conversely, when a pleasant experience arises, we don't lunge at it with desperation, because we don't really need it. We don't have that sense of needing it to feel good about ourselves. When an unpleasant experience arises, we don't fear that it's going to diminish us in some way, that we're going to be a lesser being because of it. We are whole and we are happy. What better way to be able to look at the vast array of experiences that come and go than with a spacious, generous heart?



The aim of dana is twofold, or else it's an incomplete experience. The first aim of dana is to free our minds from the conditioned forces that bind and limit us. Craving, clinging and attachment bring confinement and lack of self-esteem. If we're always looking for some person or thing to complete us, we miss the degree to which we are complete in every moment. It's a bit like leaning on a mirage only to find that it can't hold us; there's nothing there.

When we are continually moved by looking for the next experience and the next pleasure, it's like going from one mirage to another. We have no security. Nothing is holding us up. We practice generosity to free the mind from that delusion, to weaken the forces of craving and clinging so we can find essential happiness.

We also practice generosity to free others, to extend welfare and happiness to all beings, to somehow, as much as each one of us can, lessen the suffering in this world. When our practice of generosity is genuine, when it's complete, we realize inner spaciousness and peace, and we also learn to extend boundless caring to all living beings.

The movement of the heart in practicing generosity mirrors the movement of the heart that lets go inside. So the external training of giving deeply influences the internal feeling-tone of the meditation practice, and vice versa. If we cultivate a generous heart, then more and more we can unconditionally allow things to be the way they are. We can accept the truth of the present moment, rather than continually impose conditions on what's

going on: it must be this way or that way or you can't be happy. Your sitting must be perfect or you won't be happy. You must have no restlessness or you won't feel good about yourself. Reality moves along outside of our control, and yet we impose all of these conditions on it. Generosity allows that whole project to start to fall away.



Nothing stays forever. Nevertheless, we try to hold on.

The strength of our generosity is a primary factor in our ability to accept change. In any single act of giving, fear and attachment are diminished. Fear and attachment make us hold on to a pleasant experience when it comes. We like to have a pleasant sight or sound, a nice sensation in the body, or a sweet and lovely mental state. Because we think we need them to be happy, we don't simply enjoy them. We want to hold on to them; we want to make them stay forever. But nothing stays forever. Nevertheless, we try to hold on, to make our experiences last as long as we can.

I have a friend who said that from the time she was a child and first started to talk, her favorite phrase was, "I need it, I want it, I have to have it." She'd say this over and over again to her poor parents. I thought that was a perfect description of who we are. You can just feel that headlong rush to grasp, to cling, to mold things as we want them and keep them that way. This is our normal conditioning. But as we learn how to give at the most obvious

level—giving material objects to others—in that giving, we develop the ability to let go, to let things be as they are. We begin to see that compulsive attachment really doesn't bring us any happiness, whereas the benefits of learning to let go, learning to relinquish, being able to give fully with a pure intention, are innumerable.

The Buddha talked about many worldly benefits that come from being able to give. When people are generous, other beings love them quite a lot. Such love occurs without a sense of contrivance or expectation: we don't give so we can become popular. Being loved is not part of the motivation for the act of giving. It's just a law of the universe: as we give, we receive. So there is an openness that beings feel toward us and a great deal of love. If you think about somebody you know who's very generous, even if they haven't given to you directly, what does it feel like if you call this person to mind? There is so much warmth and such delight. That's how we regard people who are generous.



Trust develops toward those who are generous.

The Buddha taught that if a person is generous they can enter any group without fear. Once again, such courage is without contrivance; it's not thought out or planned. It's just the natural consequence of opening one's heart. A certain brightness grows within us as we learn to give, and people are drawn to us. Trust develops toward those who are generous.

These types of worldly happiness are all types of spiritual happiness as well. There's value in a single act of giving that goes beyond what we would normally conceive. The Buddha said that when we offer someone

food, we're not just giving that person something to eat; we're giving far more. We're giving them strength, health, beauty and clarity of mind, even life itself, because none of those things is possible without food. We're offering the stuff of life itself.

That single moment of offering someone food represents a tremendous proportion of the entire spiritual path. All four of the qualities that we talk about as the Brahma Viharas, or Divine Abodes, are found in that single moment.

Love, or metta, is there because we feel goodwill in that moment toward the person who is receiving; we feel a sense of oneness with them, rather than alienation. We feel friendship, which is the meaning of metta. We want them to be happy.

We feel compassion in that moment because we wish that being to be free from pain or suffering, to be happy. There's tenderness, that trembling of the heart that responds to a being and wants them to be happy.

We also experience the third Brahma Vihara, sympathetic joy. That means we rejoice in the happiness of someone else rather than feeling what we can so easily feel—envy, jealousy and wanting them to be just a little bit less happy so we can feel a little more happy about our own state. In an act of giving, we want another being's happiness to increase, and so we feel sympathetic joy for them.

The last of the Brahma Viharas is equanimity. That's also found in the act of giving because we have an object of craving that we're willing to let go of—to be without it ourselves and let it belong to others, to everybody.

All four of these qualities are found in that one moment. In that moment of giving, we're abandoning desire and grasping. We're abandoning ill will and aversion. Aversion creates separateness and withdrawal, a sense of not being at one with the other. Giving is an act of moving forward, of yielding, of coming forth, of coming closer. And we're abandoning delusion as well, because when we perform a wholesome or skillful action we understand that what we do in our life — the choices we make, the values we hold — matters.

It's not just happenstance that we don't live in some kind of crazy, haphazard universe. There are natural laws, laws of nature such as karma, that deeply affect how we are in this world. It matters what we care about and commit to, and to understand this is very important. The most powerful aspect of ignorance is the feeling that it just doesn't matter what we do, when in fact it matters so very much. We have so much power to create the life we want.

In an act of giving we're aligning ourselves with certain values. We develop love, compassion, sympathetic joy and equanimity. We let go of grasping, aversion and delusion in a single act of giving. That's why the Buddha said that if we knew as he did the power of giving, we wouldn't let a single meal pass without sharing something. You can even do it mentally if you don't actually hand

something over to the person sitting next to you, which might not be very wise. To create spaciousness all of the time, over and over again, is what giving is all about.

If we give a gift with this kind of motivation, without attachment to a certain result, without expectation of what will come back to us, it's like a celebration. It's celebrating freedom within ourselves as a giver and also freedom within the receiver. In that moment, we're not relating to each other in terms of roles or differences. There's no hierarchy. In a moment of pure giving, we become one. We're not thinking, "Well, this person has a lot more than I do materially, and so what difference does it make if I give them something?" We're not thinking, "Maybe they don't like me. Here I am about to offer them something, and I feel really foolish." All of those thought patterns that might go on in a single interaction in our lives fall away in one moment of true giving.

In 1984, I was on retreat at the Insight Meditation Society and because I knew everybody on staff and had a lot of friends in the community, people kept giving me things. I'd go back to my room and something would be outside my door. I began to feel bad for the people who were sitting the retreat who didn't know anybody and weren't getting all of these extra things. So I started giving them away. I chose someone who would see my door frequently and had seen most of what I had gotten. I felt the worst about this one person, so I gave her something. I left it outside her door, and somehow from that point on in the retreat, she started receiving packages from home. Then she kept giving them to me, and I had

to give them away to other people. An intense wellspring of affluence suddenly appeared. In that moment it felt as if we really were one; it didn't matter where the things had come from. They just arose from our interest in taking care of each another, being good to one another.



We all want to be happy; this is what we essentially share.

When we cut through all of our role differentiations, we see that our most basic drive—for every single one of us—is a longing for happiness. This is what every single, living, breathing being shares, no matter how we behave, no matter who we are. We all want to be happy. When we give something, this is what we're acknowledging. We acknowledge our oneness. We all want to be happy; this is what we essentially share. The ability to do this, to practice *dana*, both arises from and cultivates further an internal sense of abundance, the conviction that we have enough to share. What's interesting is that there's no objective standard for this. There are very poor people who have a strong sense of inner abundance. They have enough to share and keep giving, even though from the outside it looks like they have nothing to give. But they don't feel that; they give what they can. And there are some wealthy people in this world who have a tremendous sense

of inner poverty, and it's very difficult for them to let go of clinging to their possessions. It's very painful; it's very hard for them to give.

There's a quotation from the *Tao Te Ching* that says, "One who knows that enough is enough will always have enough." It's an inner sense. One of the great joys that comes from generosity is the understanding that no matter how much or how little we have by the world's standards, if we know we have enough, we can always give something. Then we can share, we can open, we can express loving-kindness. Our conditioning does not emphasize this. The dominant emphasis in our conditioning is wanting, getting and holding on. It doesn't emphasize the opposite qualities of yielding, letting go and relinquishing.

The world we live in, in the Buddhist context, is called samsara, a world of birth and death, of arising and passing away, where nothing happens unless conditions come together to bring it about. This is our life. One of the amazing attributes of samsara is that no matter what we have, somewhere out there we know there's always more. The potential for dissatisfaction is infinite because in this world of change, the possibility of comparing and looking for the next moment is infinite.

I have a friend who recently went to India. I talked with him the day before he was going to fly. It turned out he was flying with another friend who had made all of the travel arrangements, and this person didn't realize that for just a little more money they could have flown business class instead of economy class, which



would have been far more comfortable on such a long flight. We were talking about whether they could manage to change their tickets, and if there'd be a penalty and how much nicer it would be to go business class and to arrive rested instead of tortured and unhappy, and right in the middle of this conversation, my friend said, "I wonder how much it would cost to go first class?"



We need to loosen our grasping and our clinging, and we need to have the courage to defy our conditioning.

I know that state of mind so well. As soon as you get into business class, you start thinking about first class. This is how we are; this is samsara. There's always something else to want because the variety of opportunity and circumstance is infinite. We get into that mind state of looking for the next upgrade; it's endless. That's why practice is about turning around, deconditioning, getting out of that mind-state and discovering a radically different kind of happiness that is not so vulnerable, that does not lead to endless dissatisfaction. We need to loosen our grasping and our clinging, and we need to have the courage to defy our conditioning.

The primary question in the practice, and something I've held as a guiding principle throughout all my years of practice, is, "What do I really need right now, in this moment, to be happy?" The world offers us many answers to that question: "I need a new

this and a new that.” But do we really? “What do I lack right now? Does anything need to change in order for me to be happy? What do I really need?” Those are powerful questions.

When we practice in Burma (or in other Asian countries, but most of my experience in this regard has been in Burma), there is no charge for staying at the monasteries or the retreat centers, and all of the food is donated. Often it’s donated by village people or families who come to the center to make these offerings. I’m sure that each of these groups of people offer the best that they can, but each day what is offered can differ quite a lot depending on the circumstances of those who are offering. Sometimes it’s a lavish, bountiful feast. Sometimes it’s awful. In Burma we practiced the eight precepts strictly, which means no solid food is taken after noon, and lunch is served at ten o’clock in the morning. It’s over at ten thirty, and there’s nothing else until five o’clock the next morning. Lunch feels very important.

There was a Buddha image in the dining room, and it was customary to bow to the Buddha. Sometimes I would go in, bow three times, and I’d feel a wealth of gratitude and joy in just looking at the image and bowing. And then I’d look at the table and the food, and sometimes it looked like there was just nothing there to eat. I would feel all of the fear and misery and dread, and then I would look at the faces of the people who had made the offering. They come to watch you eat. They would be radiant, so happy that they’d had this opportunity to feed you, to offer something, and that you were going to be meditating and exploring the truth and

purifying your mind and heart on the strength of their offering. They were so happy. I'd go through amazing changes. I'd look at the Buddha, I'd look at the food, and then I'd look at them. In that moment, when they were so genuinely grateful for the chance to give, I would ask myself, "What do I really need right now in order to be happy?" I realized that in a powerful way I was getting fed a lot more by their joy and delight than I was by the food. It was more important, more nourishing.

The benefits of generosity have the power to change us. If we cultivate generosity, the mind will stop sticking to things. It's as if we've made a tight fist that is slowly opening, and we experience the relief of that. When the mind becomes suffused with the feeling of generosity, it moves out of rigid confinement into a less bounded space. Our world opens up because we can let go.

We can give in so many ways. We can give materially in terms of goods and money. We can give time and service. We can give care. In a retreat situation, even to give space is a kind of giving, to allow someone to be the way they are. If somebody's rushing ahead of you in the lunch line, you can let it go and be happy. We have enough—we don't have to fight or compete with one another.

To be able to let go and be generous with one another is a relief. If we practice this quality again and again, it will grow very strong. If we can do it externally toward others, we can do it internally as well. We will develop a generosity of spirit so when painful states arise within us, like depression or anger or desire or

jealousy, we can let them go. We are happier with their passing, so we allow them to follow their natural path of coming and going. We are not served or made happier by their staying.

The question as always is, “What do I really need right now to be happy?” If we hold this question as a guiding light, we’ll experience many different things: delight, surprise, chagrin, shock, all kinds of feelings. But what we come to is that only something as vast and deep as the truth will really make us happy. That can be the truth of this very moment, to see it as it actually is, to be able to let go.



We recall acts of generosity, not to bolster ego, but rather to acknowledge that we cared enough about ourselves and others to choose to give rather than hold on.

The Buddha talked about cultivating the spirit of generosity, and he also talked about reflecting on the good things we’ve done and taking delight in them. We recall acts of generosity, not to bolster ego, but rather to acknowledge that—in this world that offers so many choices and possibilities—we cared enough about ourselves and others to choose to give rather than hold on. This recollection will help us immeasurably in our practice. It’s so easy for us to dwell constantly on all of the awful things we’ve done or said. If I were to ask you to think for the next few minutes about

what you've really done well, when you've really been generous, and to appreciate yourself for having done that, it might be hard for you. It's kind of embarrassing to sit and think about that. It's so much easier to think about the time I almost gave something, but then I decided not to, and it's still in the attic.

To understand that the wish to be happy is appropriate and beneficial will motivate us towards skillful action. To rejoice in our ability to make choices, to cultivate the good, to let go of that which harms us and causes suffering for us, will give us the confidence and joy to keep practicing, to do things that are difficult and unfamiliar to us. As we keep rejoicing in generosity, we will keep on purifying.

No one of us can do these things perfectly; it is a practice. We practice generosity with others and with ourselves, over and over again, and the power of it begins to grow until it becomes almost like a waterfall, a flow. This is who we become, this is what is natural, and this is how we continually are able to touch on and deepen a true and genuine happiness. ❁