

The Practice of Loving Kindness
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In 2000 a colleague introduced me to the book Loving Kindness, by Sharon Salzberg. We were trainers for Shanti in San Francisco, the oldest volunteer AIDS service organization in the United States. Our work with volunteer managers of other non-profit organizations, as well as our work training Shanti's volunteers for our AIDS/HIV clients was intense and rewarding; and required open hearts and minds. The book and practice transformed my life and began a journey that continues to this day.

Pali is the language that the Buddha spoke and metta is the Pali word for loving kindness, it is also the word for friendliness, good will, active interest in others. The Buddha taught his disciples this spiritual practice as a way to lead them to "the liberation of the heart which is love." As Salzberg notes, "{His} teachings were meant to move the heart out of its isolating contraction into true connection."

I am not a practicing Buddhist. I identify more as a HinJew, if there really were such a denomination, because my spiritual teacher Amma, or mother, is an East Indian world-renowned spiritual leader who was honored with the Ghandi-King award for Her humanitarian and peace work by the United Nations in Geneva in 2002. She has helped me open my heart to myself and others; indeed cracked it open over these many years since I met Amma in 1997.

I believe that we all teach what we need to learn; creating a space for others to learn this meditation is how I continually learn to offer loving kindness to myself and the world. Again and again I see students in my communication classes, parents in support groups, participants in trainings, and clients from all aspects of my work, and of course, friends and family, suffering from the same dis-ease; the dis-ease of not loving themselves, the dis-ease of hosting an intense inner critic or inner critical choir. This critic makes life miserable as it recites a litany of inaccurate criticism and self-loathing. Many of us are relentlessly cruel to ourselves, holding ourselves to standards of perfection that simply do not exist. Our hearts remain closed to ourselves and closed in various ways, to others. The critic within is also a critic directed at loved ones, colleagues and at times, people we serve on a daily basis in our work. This voice separates us from ourselves and from the world.

This cruel voice, often so subtle or so habitual it is not noticed, is a barrier to compassion for the Self.

I teach this meditation in my communication classes and I also assign an Inner Critic journal due at the end of the quarter. Students begin to notice how their self-talk tears them down, cuts them off at the knees and doesn't permit them to fully show up in their lives. It also becomes a tool to examine their relationships with colleagues and intimates.

I do not see myself as separate from my students or clients. I too suffer from this closed heart, moments of self-judgment, moments of judgment of others. I am a work in progress as we all are.

All spiritual teachings show us that the closed heart is what keeps us in our suffering. The refusal to see others as ourselves cements our sense of separateness. If we can project onto others all the unlovable and even lovable qualities we do not see in ourselves then we continue to feel isolated, or see others as our personal punching bags; or we continuously admire others, never knowing that the very qualities we admire in them are also tucked away inside ourselves, waiting to be recognized, waiting to blossom.

In my daily practice I attempt to notice when my judging mind takes over and my heart contracts, and when my litany of criticism begins. I bring to this noticing great compassion- well, I try to! But as Yoda said in Star Wars, “there is no try, just do.”

Big sigh here, okay I do. I actively do the practice, over and over and-you get the picture. Compassion is the balm I offer myself when all else seems lost in a maze of recrimination, guilt and self-loathing. It is the same balm I extend to others when I can.

If I can sit with a heart overflowing with compassion for my clients and students, then why can't I also offer this to myself, or to other drivers on the freeway? Ah, there's the rub. So how do I extend this loving kindness to those who almost run me off the road?

How do I hold this compassion in my heart and mind when dealing with social issues and people whose views I oppose?

I take a moment to notice my breath. I notice where my attachment to my righteousness is. I notice how contracted and tense my body feels; I am gearing up for battle. I take another breath. I ask the Divine for help to see this person through Her eyes. If this does not work I simply ask for help in letting go of my anger, rage or hatred.

I notice that what I am upset with is also something inside of myself. I disengage from my reactivity. If I can I send a prayer for healing to that person; if I cannot do this then I simply choose to not send anger or hatred towards them.

Practicing loving-kindness stops the cycle of violence and opens my heart to embrace others as I see myself in them. I believe that the Divine lives in all of us, no matter what we choose to call this spark; this practice is but one way to open to that knowledge and let it inform my life. If I am Divine then you are too; simple to say but a challenge at times to remember. I wish you ease in your practicing.