
Discovering Our Capacity to Love

Before presenting the details of the technique of meditation practice and explaining how it leads to mindfulness—before we even begin to meditate—I'd like to look at our mentality. We often approach life as though we were defending ourselves from an attack. Many of us, when we were growing up, were frequently reprimanded in ways that made us feel bad about ourselves. Whether the criticism came from our parents, a teacher at school, or someone else, it tended to reinforce a feeling that there was something wrong with us. Criticism often produced a feeling of isolation, a feeling of *you* and *me*, separated by a great divide. We learned many defense mechanisms at an early age, thinking that a good defense would be the best protection from further reproach. We have continued this approach as adults. Whether it's a confrontation with a stranger on the street or an argument with our partner in the bedroom, we believe that we need good excuses to explain ourselves and good logic to defend ourselves. We behave almost as though we were professional negotiators, our own little lawyers.

In Western psychology, some approaches stress the importance of reinforcing ego to enhance self-esteem. We may misinterpret this to mean that we should promote ourselves at the expense of others. A person may become very self-centered with this attitude. It is like you are saying to the world, "Don't you know who I am? I am what I am. If I'm attacked for that, that's too bad. I'm on the side of the right." You feel justified in what you're doing, as if you had God on your side, or at least law and order on your side.

When we're first learning these techniques for self-defense, our logic may be somewhat feeble, but eventually we become powerful and convincing negotiators for ourselves. The whole process is based on one-upmanship. This sort of self-justification may be quite successful, but it is very aggressive.

We learn to apply this approach throughout much of our lives. We try to gain the upper hand with everyone, from university registrars to our boss at work. When we join an organization that collects dues, we might try to negotiate our way out of paying them. Maybe a few things are not negotiable, such as the price of a movie ticket, but if we don't like the movie, we'll try to get our money back. We try to negotiate everything in life to get the best deal for ourselves. It can become the basis for even our most intimate relationships: raising our children and dealing with our spouses, relatives, and friends.

Much of this goes back to our education and upbringing. We're still afraid that we'll be criticized or we'll fail if we don't assert ourselves. On some level we worry that we won't be functional if we aren't assertive. We might not be able to brush our teeth or comb our hair properly. We might never leave the house if we don't pump ourselves up.

Perhaps we should reexamine these assumptions, to see what really works. We need to investigate whether it's beneficial to build ourselves up, especially to do so by putting others down. We need to seriously question what is harmful and what is beneficial. In my own experience, I have found that employ-

ing a self-centered approach and being defensive are not helpful.

Rather than reinforcing our "me-ness" selves constantly, we should base our lives on powerful and trustworthy. If we develop real constant self-defense is no longer required, good, but what are we going to trust in with, we need to conduct another examination look within ourselves. When we look, what yourself: Is there something worthwhile about me? Of course there is! But it's so simple to discount it. When we look into ourselves on our neurosis, restlessness, and aggression, on how wonderful, accomplished, and invulnerable those feelings are usually superficial, coverties. Take a look.

There is something else, something more we are willing: willing to wait, willing to smile, willing. We shouldn't discount that potential, that gentleness. Even the most vicious animals protect and gentleness for their young. That exists in every being. We don't have to be angry or try to hide it. We don't need to cast ourselves as girls or as heroines or tough guys. We can edge and cultivate gentleness and, first of all, be better. If we don't appreciate ourselves, we work with ourselves.

The alternative is extending aggression and resentment—to our parents, our teachers, our leagues, our employees, our friends, and our world seems full of thorns that cover the ground, poisonous fumes are everywhere. Aggression ever there's a blind spot produced by your anger, see anything. Then, no appreciation or friendship.

When you don't accept yourself, you

ing a self-centered approach and being constantly on the defensive are not helpful.

Rather than reinforcing our "me-ness" and justifying ourselves constantly, we should base our lives on something more powerful and trustworthy. If we develop real trust in ourselves, constant self-defense is no longer required. That may sound good, but what are we going to trust in ourselves? To begin with, we need to conduct another examination. We need to look within ourselves. When we look, what do we see? Ask yourself: Is there something worthwhile and trustworthy in me? Of course there is! But it's so simple that we tend to miss it or discount it. When we look into ourselves we tend to fixate on our neurosis, restlessness, and aggression. Or we might fixate on how wonderful, accomplished, and invulnerable we are, but those feelings are usually superficial, covering up our insecurities. Take a look.

There is something else, something more than all that. We are *willing*: willing to wait, willing to smile, willing to be decent. We shouldn't discount that potential, that powerful seed of gentleness. Even the most vicious animals possess natural affection and gentleness for their young. That element of gentleness exists in every being. We don't have to be embarrassed about it or try to hide it. We don't need to cast ourselves as bad boys and girls or as heroines or tough guys. We can afford to acknowledge and cultivate gentleness and, first of all, to treat *ourselves* better. If we don't appreciate ourselves, we have no ground to work with ourselves.

The alternative is extending aggression, arrogance, and resentment—to our parents, our teachers, our relatives, our colleagues, our employees, our friends, and our lovers. The whole world seems full of thorns that cover the ground around us, and poisonous fumes are everywhere. Aggression is blind. Whenever there's a blind spot produced by your aggression, you don't see anything. Then, no appreciation or friendship is possible.

When you don't accept yourself, you often feel that you

have to lie and scheme in your self-defense. Once you start lying, you have to remember which lie you told to which person. But if you've told hundreds of lies, it takes a lot of energy to keep them straight, which puts a huge strain on you. It's neither effective nor maintainable in the long run. Eventually, you get caught in your own web of lies.

There is a much simpler way. If you decide to buy a shirt, you go to a store and pick one out on the basis of the cut, the fabric, the size, and the pattern. If the shirt fits, you generally feel good in it. Your new clothes feel clean and fresh. They don't come with dirt on them. Everything in life comes that way, without any need for logic to defend it. You might have trouble seeing this sometimes, but you yourself are also fine—excellent, in fact. Rather than deceiving other people and, more important, deceiving yourself, you can be as you are, which is more than good enough. It is worth appreciating ourselves, having affection for ourselves, and taking care of ourselves. Genuineness, goodness, and appreciation are extraordinary gifts. Ultimately, that is where we place our trust. This truth is so true that we don't have to pretend at all. It is real.

Every one of us is capable of loving ourselves. We are also capable of falling in love. We are capable of kissing our loved ones. We are capable of extending our arm to shake hands. We may offer a meal to someone, welcoming him or her to the table, saying, "Hello. How are you?" We are capable of these simple things. We've been performing such ordinary acts of kindness for a long time. Generally we don't make a big deal about this capability, but in some sense we should. We should celebrate or at least acknowledge our capacity for simple acts of generosity and gentleness. They are the real thing, and in the end they are much more powerful and transformative than aggression, egomania, and hatred.

When you appreciate yourself, you realize that you don't have to feel wretched or condemned. You don't have to artificially puff yourself up, either. You discover your basic dignity,

which comes along with gentleness. You have this, but you may never have recognized it. You have to be an egomaniac to appreciate you. You appreciate yourself more when you are free of that egotism, which is actually based on self-

Look in the mirror. Appreciate yourself. Look in a simple, humble way. When you choose to comb your hair, when you take a shower, when you have an element of complete and fundamental gentleness, and decency. There is an alternative to feeling. You actually can make friends with yourself.

This friendship with yourself is the basis of the practice of meditation. Meditation helps develop mindfulness and awareness, which allow us to have a dimension of understanding ourselves. This helps us make friends to ourselves and to our world. Even if, however, we can cultivate basic kindness. Without it, we have no way to move forward.

When I was first studying in Tibet, I saw that my tutors were trying to make me into a wise man, because what I was studying seemed to be my experience. However, when I received instruction from my teacher and started to practice, the things began to make sense. I began to realize something real that I could connect with. I myself were part of the teaching that I was given, rather than my only being taught something abstract. Here, in this volume, I have tried to present what reflects this understanding of the personal nature of practice. I hope that you will have a similar experience in your own practice of meditation.

which comes along with gentleness. You have always possessed this, but you may never have recognized it before. You don't have to be an egomaniac to appreciate yourself. In fact, you appreciate yourself more when you are free of the ugliness of that egotism, which is actually based on self-hatred.

Look in the mirror. Appreciate yourself. You look beautiful in a simple, humble way. When you choose your clothes, when you comb your hair, when you take a shower, you are expressing an element of complete and fundamental goodness, wakefulness, and decency. There is an alternative to feeling condemned. You actually can make friends with yourself.

This friendship with yourself is the basis, and the goal, of the practice of meditation. Meditation helps us to develop mindfulness and awareness, which allow us to gain another dimension of understanding ourselves. This makes us better friends to ourselves and to our world. Even before meditating, however, we can cultivate basic kindness toward ourselves. Without it, we have no way to move forward.

When I was first studying in Tibet, I sometimes thought that my tutors were trying to make me into a charlatan, a fake wise man, because what I was studying seemed divorced from my experience. However, when I received meditation instruction from my teacher and started to practice meditation myself, things began to make sense. I began to realize that there was something real that I could connect with. My experience and I myself were part of the teaching that I was receiving, rather than my only being taught something abstract from a book. Here, in this volume, I have tried to present an approach that reflects this understanding of the personal nature of meditation practice. I hope that you will have a similar experience in your own practice of meditation.