



Q&A WITH... JOHN MAKRANSKY AUTHOR OF *AWAKENING THROUGH LOVE*

What compelled you to write AWAKENING THROUGH LOVE? There are already a number of books that discuss love and compassion and offer paths to well-being and joy, Buddhist and otherwise. How is it different than others?

A number of books explain how to work with our minds to gradually develop qualities of love and compassion, but not many show how to discover those qualities as intrinsic to our being right now. *Awakening Through Love* enters us into loving compassion through practices adapted from the Tibetan tradition of greatest immediacy, Dzogchen (often translated Natural Great Perfection). The book is imbued with the Dzogchen view that our essential being is pure and perfect by nature, though obscured by momentary habits of self-centered thought. What's special about approaching love and compassion from this perspective is that these qualities already permeate our world and our being right now. Each chapter contains a guided meditation to help us discover the love and compassion that are already operative all around us and within us, rather than trying to create them or get to them.

A number of Tibetan lamas I've known embody a wise and loving naturalness, awakened through practices long adapted to Tibetan culture over the centuries. In this book, such practices are adapted yet again, so as to meet the hearts and minds of Westerners of any faith or background. It presents simple, effective ways to learn to cooperate with what is already happening — to pay new attention to the love that has been coming to us from others in our lives, and through that, to become newly conscious of our own ever-present capacity of love, compassion and presence.

Tibetan Buddhist teachings — Dzogchen, in this case — can seem somewhat dense and intimidating. And you're a professor of Buddhism with a list of scholarly books and articles. How have you made this book accessible to a non-Buddhist and non-academic audience?

The inner freedom and wisdom of Tibetan Buddhism and Dzogchen is quite present to us when we get out of our own way and let our intuitive knowing manifest naturally. The door to such wisdom is opened by love. Our deep human need is to receive love as fully as possible and to extend love as freely as possible. Everyone already knows this intuitively. The meditations in the book guide us into a profoundly comforting experience of love, so that we can let go of ourselves naturally into the mystery of our innate pure awareness; an intuitive wisdom beyond self-clinging. From there we can extend love to others with greater ease. In this way, the essence of Tibetan wisdom can be made newly accessible to contemporary people of any background or faith.

Tibetans often say that the most effective entryway into enlightened awareness is through mystical union with enlightened beings — communing with awakened beings in their qualities of love and wisdom, then merging into oneness with them in the deepest source of such qualities: innate, pure awareness. One way for both Buddhists and non-Buddhists to begin accessing the power of this type

of practice is by noticing how people all around us transmit the power of love and compassion to us, often by small gestures that go routinely unnoticed. This very world embodies enlightenment to us in the widest sense, and that is where *Awakening Through Love* begins.

Love is such an abstract concept with so many connotations and perceptions. Many people think of sex and romance. What do you mean by love?

In Buddhist texts, love is often defined as the wish for persons to have the happiness and well-being that they don't presently have. But in its more profound sense, love is the power to commune with the deep goodness and well-being of others that is already present in their inmost being, while wishing them to fully actualize and experience it. And profound compassion is the power to commune with others in their innate capacity of freedom, while wishing them to be liberated from all the suffering that obscures it. So I'm not talking about abstract reflections *about* love, but our capacity to actually sense the inmost goodness of others and to evoke it from them and for them, in a real and meaningful way. The practices in this book help us learn to do that with those around us, starting with the ones closest to us and then extending outwards, more and more expansively, towards all others.

Why should one want to learn how to love more fully?

Enduring love is indispensable for everything that matters most to us. It is what makes our children feel truly at home with us, happy to be alive. It makes our relationships with our partner and friends safe, based on mutual appreciation and joy instead of brittle reactivity and self-protectiveness. It is love, the operative wish for others to be well and happy, that makes our workplace into a zone of care and protection for co-workers and clients, rather than an arena of unspoken hostilities.

We can talk about "family values" as much as we wish, but the quality of our presence to partner, children, neighbors, colleagues, students and clients depends *entirely* on the strength of our fundamental care for them. Whatever the strategies for a successful life promulgated in self-help books — and no matter how hard someone may thump a holy book to declare a particular belief as the answer to all life's problems — none of those approaches works if the basic motive of genuine love, of actual care for persons, is lacking.

Many people in our media-saturated, cynical consumer culture may not recognize love as pervasive in their world.

Through our evening news and other media, we've all been engaged in a communal "meditation" on the world as an unloving and hostile place to the point that we have difficulty acknowledging how much love has been operative in our lives all along. The good news is that simply by learning to pay fresh attention, we can become newly conscious of how much love is all around and within us and how profoundly transformative and liberating it is to wake up to this.

In your book, you describe the role of "the benefactor" as crucial in accessing the power of love.

Why do you place so much emphasis on these benefactors?

You start to discover your true identity in the eyes of someone who loves you unconditionally, someone who communes with your essential goodness no matter what you think of yourself. Benefactors are those who have embodied such love for us throughout our lives, often in little moments and small ways that we may have overlooked or forgotten. Also included would be spiritual benefactors; people or figures whom you feel embody unconditional love in a stable, impartial and inspiring way, through their words, writings or the quality of their presence.

When others love us unconditionally, they are communicating with our essential goodness that never changes. By learning to accept their love we become familiar with that unchanging goodness; we come to know it well. Then we can sense the same goodness in others, and it becomes natural to love them as our benefactors loved us. It's a chain reaction.

The book mentions the Dalai Lama, Gandhi, Martin Luther King, and other admirable figures as spiritual benefactors with special qualities that seem unattainable. Can we really be like them?

It's not a matter of trying to live up to some kind of ideal. It's just a matter of catching on to the innate power of love and care in ourselves that others before us have caught onto, and learning to cooperate with it like they did. Indeed, it's the essential goodness in us that recognizes the same goodness in such exemplary figures; they mirror our own essential integrity, helping us to sense it in ourselves.

You write about how those involved in social or public service often suffer from burnout. How can those that help others avoid burning out?

Burnout occurs when we are overwhelmed by our own egos reacting to feelings of frustration, disappointment or over-identification with others' miseries. It takes the form of an internal monologue of anger, blame or exhaustion. Burnout is ego reaction run amok. To avoid it or to heal from it, we need to find a place of profound inner refuge, a level of awareness prior to the turmoil of self-centered reactions where we find deep rest and renewal. As we receive love deeply from our benefactors, we feel safe enough to relax and let go of ourselves into that level of awareness, where we can experience our deeper capacity for inner well-being and peace. From that place we can better relate to the hidden capacity for well-being in others and assist them in discovering it.

In your book the meditation on compassion begins first by receiving compassion from our benefactors into our own layers of suffering. How does this lead to compassion for others and to freedom from suffering for ourselves?

Profound compassion is the power to commune with the inmost freedom of others while wishing them to be free of all the suffering that obscures it. It's not enough to empathize with others from a superficial or theoretical perspective. We have to understand what they are going through, and that understanding arises from becoming intimately aware within ourselves of the suffering we all share. But unless it feels both safe and meaningful to do so, we won't allow ourselves to become conscious of many aspects of our own suffering.

This is where the benefactor practice is helpful. When we receive the loving compassion of our benefactors into our own layers of suffering, we feel safe enough to give our minds permission to become newly conscious of further, previously unconscious layers of suffering. As this occurs, we awaken to ever more subtle levels of anxiety that others also experience, such as fears of loss and death. We know from the inside what they are going through, and naturally feel empathy for them. Our own sufferings become profoundly meaningful, for they are rediscovered as the very basis of empathy for many others.

Through the process, as we learn to receive the healing energy of compassion into every part of our minds and bodies, it helps relax our grip on ourselves so we can release into the deepest and most tranquil aspect of our awareness, the place of inmost freedom from suffering.

Isn't loving everyone unconditionally unrealistic? Isn't that being blind to how things work in the real world?

If our customary ways of relating to others worked well there wouldn't be any need to take a fresh look at where we're coming from. But we find ourselves as individuals and communities reacting unrealistically to narrow concepts of others that are routinely fabricated by our own minds. Look around you when you find yourself surrounded by people whom you haven't met — are they really just the “strangers” that your thoughts reduce them to, nothing more? By routinely mistaking our limiting thoughts of others for their full reality, and reacting to these thoughts instead of to the persons, we get ourselves into trouble again and again. Unless we learn to view others from the perspective of unconditional concern, we are out of touch, lost in our unreal, ego-centered images.

On the other hand, I hear from many caregivers and social activists who have come to my workshops and retreats — social workers, therapists, counselors, nurses, teachers and others — that daily meditations of love and wisdom have greatly empowered their work with people: the sick, mentally ill, troubled youth, battered women, traumatized veterans, homeless people, prisoners, the depressed, the lonely, the poor. Caregivers tell me that to commune with their clients' essential goodness and inner strength while assisting them in their difficulties works much better than reacting to familiar, reductive thoughts of their clients. Social activists who work for change tell me that they can do so with more equanimity and joy when they are in touch with their own fundamental integrity, and through that with the corresponding integrity of all the people whom they engage.

It's one thing to find peace by yourself, sitting in meditation. How are we to take the meditative experience of love and wisdom into our everyday world?

Actually, as daily practice unfolds, the seeming boundary between the meditation period and the rest of the day breaks down. From morning meditation, you learn to bring the context of love, presence and pure perception right into the world of your relationships and interactions. In your morning practice, you can extend the wish and energy of loving compassion to people that you will see throughout your day, then rest in simple presence. As you actually encounter those people in your day, the very same wish and energy is triggered, and the same capacity to be present to them. In this way, quite naturally, the power of love and wisdom is increasingly heard from as you learn better how to serve your family, community, and world. There's a lot of joy in that, because you find yourself becoming the kind of person you had really intended to be.

