

Teaching Spiritual Practice: One Contemporary Buddhist Approach

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***Abstract:** This essay discusses Buddhist meditations of love, compassion and wisdom that have been adapted from Tibetan tradition so as to make them newly accessible to Westerners. The meditations are adapted both to inform contemporary Buddhist practice and to enable people of other faiths to explore Buddhist modes of awareness for light on their own lives. The fundamental perspective that informs these meditations, from Tibetan Nyingma tradition, is that all people possesses tremendous innate capacities of love, compassion and wisdom that are severely restricted by long conditioned habits of self-centered thought and feeling. Meditation practices are intended both to interrupt self-centered modes of conditioned thought and to evoke the underlying human capacity to be more fully present to others in spontaneous loving communion.*

The members of my panel were asked to address the following three questions, focusing mainly on the second: 1. What spiritual practices are central to your faith community and how do they shape daily life? 2. Choosing one such spiritual practice for special focus, how is this practice taught? 3. How does this practice affect religious identity formation and openness to religious others?

Speaking from the perspective of my Buddhist tradition, the Tibetan Nyingma school, and within my American context, I will briefly summarize Buddhist teachings about personal suffering and the potential for inner freedom. Then I will focus on a few meditation practices adapted from Tibetan Buddhism for the Western Buddhist communities in which I teach. In workshops for pastoral counselors, social workers and therapists, I have also taught these contemplative practices to many Christians, Jews and others who wish to explore Buddhist modes of meditation and awareness for the light they may shed on their own spiritual lives and their work with clients.

Ordinarily, the Buddha taught, people find themselves imprisoned in suffering patterns of thought and reaction that center upon a false sense of self that is misconceived as substantial, separate and isolated over against others. Our minds, fearing the impermanent and totally insubstantial nature of our experience, generate ego-centered patterns of thought in the attempt

to create the impression of a substantial, unchanging, and unassailable self that can stand over against the tide of change. From within this fearful and largely sub-conscious stance, our minds tend to interpret whatever we experience so as to make our merely thought-created sense of self feel more real and substantial—grasping tightly to whatever seems to support this false sense of self while fearing and hating whatever seems to undercut it, from which come a host of self-centered emotions such as greed, hatred and prejudice that drive individual and social suffering.

Although, it is taught, this ingrained habit of self-centered thought is an inner cause of suffering, it is not intrinsic to our fundamental being—it does *not* comprise all that we are. Our minds also possess tremendous inborn capacities of wisdom, love, reverence, tranquility, and joy that are ready to manifest as soon as our self-grasping habits of thought and emotion recede. We have an inborn ability to be present to others beyond self-centered thinking and to compassionately commune with their fundamental dignity and goodness. These capacities are part of our innate enlightened potential, our primordial goodness—our buddha nature, the nirvanic essence of our fundamental awareness.

To restate these Buddhist principles another way, we commonly mistake our self-centered thoughts of self and others for the actual persons and react to our thoughts as if they *were* the persons, without even noticing the difference. In this way, our usual thinking process hides our buddha nature, our great inner potential for wisdom, compassion, reverence, and joy, qualities always available in the very nature of our minds.

I find these ideas well illustrated in the story of a veteran hospital nurse named Lucy that appeared in a magazine. A true story, Lucy tells of her encounter with a younger nurse who had been newly assigned to her hospital unit:

“I thought I was having a pretty good day at work. I knew what to do for my patients, and they seemed appreciative. My hair was behaving. I wasn’t eating too much chocolate, and I was treating everyone with kindness—everyone except the new nurse. She just rubbed me the wrong way, with her sad, insecure smile. She was a little too eager, too needy.

That evening I overheard the new nurse talking about her struggle to become pregnant. She’d finally had a child at the age of thirty-nine, she told the listener, but the little girl had needed heart surgery, and they’d lost her to an infection. By that time, premature menopause had ended the nurse’s hope for another child.

Sheepishly, I asked the new nurse what her baby's name was. Her face lit up with a mother's love. "Rebecca. She would be five next month!" She pulled out a photograph of a beautiful, bright-eyed little girl. My heart ached with shame, sadness, and awe. "Thank you," I said. What I meant was: thank you for teaching me how much I have to learn."¹

Lucy's account shows how we tend to mistake our limited thoughts of self and other for the actual persons. Her thinking fabricated a narrow realm of "friends" (patients who demonstrated enough appreciation for her) and potential "enemies" like the new nurse who didn't fit well into her self-concerned world. When Lucy overhears her nemesis tell her story, she suddenly awakens to the fuller human reality of the person. Suddenly, Lucy's self-protective world comes crashing down and she feels heart-wrenching compassion for the new nurse. Then she is ashamed for having so thoroughly mistaken her own limiting labels of the person for the actual person. And she feels awe, for she recognizes much more of what the new nurse is—a human being of immeasurable worth, who deserves the greatest consideration and care. Lucy's final response is gratitude to the new nurse for showing her the sacredness of persons that lies beyond the narrow judgments of her own mind.

Notice the qualities intrinsic to Lucy's mind and heart that were ready to manifest the moment that her self-centered thinking was decisively interrupted: a wisdom that knows the profound dignity of others beyond reductive labels, deep compassion, reverence, and humility. These are aspects of our buddha-like inner nature, qualities ready to emerge when the ego-centered thinking that has hidden them is undercut. The arising of such enlightened qualities was a sign that Lucy's innate capacity to respond to the deeper reality of her world was awakening.

But such revelatory encounters are rare, unpredictable. And the greater implication of such a revelation, the possibility of waking up to one's enlightened potential much more fully over time is not accomplished just by a random encounter. The purpose of a daily spiritual *practice* is to enter into such an awakening process with commitment and regularity. Such a practice, revisited each day, can wake us up to reality more fully over time by repeatedly interrupting our surface thinking and liberating our underlying capacity to know and respond from a deeper place.

¹ Lucy Garbus, *The Sun* 342 (June 2004), p. 40.

Buddhist traditions of Tibet, including my own, employ three basic types of meditation practice in order to decisively interrupt our surface thinking and evoke our underlying enlightened potential. These are meditation practices of *wisdom*, *love*, and *devotional communion*. *Practices of wisdom* help us recognize the merely thought-made nature of our own thoughts of self and other, the emptiness of our thought-created world, so the habit of reifying our self-centered thoughts and reacting to their projections of self and others can relax its grip. *Meditation practices of all-inclusive love* help bring out our innate, underlying potential for compassion and love that transcends the self-centered habits of our surface thinking. *Practices of communion and union* with figures who embody deep love and wisdom help us relax into oneness with them in the source of those enlightened qualities, the primordial ground of unconditioned awareness in which the liberating power of enlightenment is found.²

Over the course of history, East and North Asian Buddhist cultures passed down diverse ways to accomplish these three kinds of practice, adapted repeatedly to the cultural contexts of Tibetans, Chinese, Japanese, Vietnamese so as to touch their hearts and minds through forms made accessible and effective for them. I learned these three kinds of practice in their Tibetan forms from my Tibetan Buddhist teachers and have practiced them daily for the past thirty years. Several of my teachers and my own Buddhist community, in turn, requested me to transmit the principles of these practices to others within contemporary Western society.

In order to meet the mentalities of contemporary people in the West, I teach the three kinds of practice --wisdom, love and communion—through a progressive series of meditations that I adapted from Tibetan Buddhism at workshops across the United States sponsored by the Dzogchen Center Buddhist community.³ Practitioners trained in these meditations now guide them in local Buddhist communities around the country. There are five meditations. A beginner would normally do the first meditation daily for several months before focusing on the second meditation. When the transformative power of the first meditation feels strong and stable, the practitioner proceeds to the second meditation, doing it daily for many months. And so it continues through all five meditations. The individual's

² For further discussion of these three kinds of Buddhist practice in dialogue with Christian understanding and practice, see John Makransky, "Buddha and Christ as Mediators of the Transcendent" *Buddhism and Christianity in Dialogue* ed. by Perry Schmidt-Leukel (Norwich, Norfolk, England: SCM, 2005), pp. 186-199.

³ Dzogchen Center was founded in the early 1990s in the United States by the renowned Tibetan teacher Nyoshul Khen Rinpoche and his American lineage heir Lama Surya Das.

meditation practice is supported by local spiritual communities that meet regularly to practice together, and by guidance from trained teachers at meditation retreats that meet periodically throughout the year.

In Buddhist terminology, the first three meditations described below concern wisdom (Tibetan *shes rab*) and love (Tib. *byams pa*); the last two concern wisdom and compassion (Tib. *snying rje*). “*Wisdom*” here refers to a profound level of naturally open awareness that transcends self-grasping thought—innate pure awareness endowed with intrinsic capacities of inner freedom, tranquility, and fundamental goodness. “*Love*” here means the power to commune with others’ fundamental goodness while wishing them deep well-being and happiness. “*Compassion*” here means to empathize with others in their suffering and to wish them free from it while communing with them in their deepest capacity for such freedom.

Meditation 1): *Rediscovering the love that permeates your life and learning to receive it more fully:* Identify benefactors, persons near and far who have held you in the wish of love. Commune with your benefactors, and receive the energy of their love deeply into your whole body and mind. Finally relax the grip on yourself and your narrowly conceived world by merging into oneness with your benefactors in the ground of such love, the wisdom of natural awareness.

Meditation 2) (following upon meditation 1) *Resting in the wisdom of natural awareness beyond ego-fabrications:* Let your mind come to rest in its fundamental awareness, naturally all-pervasive and empty of anything to cling to, free from identification with self-centered thoughts or reactions.

Meditation 3) (following upon meditation 2) *Communing with others while extending love inclusively and impartially:* Let the innate power of your fundamental awareness transmit love through your mind and body to other beings in wider and wider circles until it impartially includes all.

Meditation 4) (after training in meditations 1-3) *Communing with your benefactors in the energy of compassion so as to make your own layers of suffering into a bridge of empathy with others.* Explore the inner layers of suffering and anxiety in yourself that are shared with all other human beings. Do this by receiving the loving compassion of your benefactors into all the layers of your own suffering. Finally merge into oneness with your benefactors in the ground of such compassion—the wisdom of natural awareness.

Meditation 5) (following upon meditation 4) *Communing with others while extending compassion inclusively and impartially:* Let the innate power of your fundamental awareness extend compassion through your mind and

body to other beings in wider and wider circles until it impartially includes all.

The principles behind these meditations are transmitted in Tibetan religious life through Asian cosmologies and ritualized forms that make cultural sense to Tibetans, inspire them and take them deeply into practice. For example, Tibetans envision their benefactors, those who embody the qualities of enlightenment for them, as a stylized array of buddhas, lineage gurus and other divine figures. They commune with those benefactors, receiving their blessings of love, compassion and wisdom deep into mind and body, before merging into oneness with them in the ultimate ground of such qualities.⁴ In the first meditation above, I've adapted that practice to help Western students learn to discern and commune with their own array of benefactors—figures in their lives who epitomize for them the enlightened qualities of wisdom, love and compassion. This can certainly include Asian figures, but it need not start there. To tap directly into their own life histories can help Westerners become more conscious of these enlightened qualities as powers that have permeated their lives all along. And that, in turn, can help them further appreciate the Tibetan ritual forms. In addition, by adapting the Tibetan forms of communion and union, I have also sought to make such practices more accessible to people of all faiths and backgrounds, so they can explore how such meditations might shed light on their own spiritualities.⁵

As the power of presence, love and compassion from daily meditation is increasingly heard from, the practitioner learns to let it affect all her interactions throughout the day—in family life, work, social service, etc. In morning meditation, the wish and energy of love or compassion is extended in widening circles of communion that include all the people that one will meet, see, or think of that day. To meet such people during the day, then, can evoke the gestalt of the morning meditation. So throughout the day, one explores the possibility of being more present to others in natural awareness as in morning meditation—less distracted by self-centered reactions that

⁴ For traditional Tibetan ritual forms to help persons find refuge in the powers of wisdom, love and inner freedom, and to commune and merge with exemplars of enlightenment, see for example Jane Tromge, ed. *Ngondro Commentary* (Junction City, CA: Padma Publishing, 1994), pp. 57-86, 110-117.

⁵ See John Makransky, *Awakening through Love: Unveiling Your Deepest Goodness* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2007), introduction on adapting Buddhist meditation as a resource for contemporary culture and chapter 1 on learning to identify and commune with one's benefactors.

mistake others for one's thoughts of them. One explores the possibility of communing with others in the simple wish of loving compassion at the level of the heart, beyond narrow judgments of the head.

Such practice is seen as crucial to effectively serve those who are suffering: such as the lonely, the discouraged, the addicted, the abused, the sick, the dying. Unless we are connected to our deepest sources of wisdom, empathy, and care, we tend to get overly attached to our own expectations, timelines, and wish for appreciation—which is a prescription for recurrent blame, disappointment, and burnout. It takes a daily spiritual discipline to learn gradually to be more present to others, to commune with them beyond self-centered expectations and to care enough to carry on with what needs to be done under all circumstances.⁶

Such practices of daily meditation and integration with life can be challenging, especially in modern societies that see value just in external activity, not in contemplation as the ground for action. Ongoing learning from trained Buddhist teachers and the support of mature spiritual community is essential for individuals to attain maturity and confidence in their practice. Such teachers and communities, in turn, require the support of Buddhist social institutions where the relevant learning can be systematically passed down. With such institutions often comes a certain amount of pride in the unique power of Buddhist practice to deliver a level of spiritual knowledge that is generally assumed to exceed that of other religions. But the nature of the practices also tends to open the minds of Buddhist practitioners to religious others on the human level—sensing them as fundamentally the same in their layers of suffering and in their innate enlightened potential.⁷

This space does not allow for full discussion of the practices mentioned, their integration in life and the role of spiritual teachers and

⁶ On integration of the spirit of these meditations with life, service and social action, see *Awakening through Love*, chapters 5-7. The “six perfections” which comprise the bodhisattva path of enlightenment are a traditional Indian and Tibetan Buddhist way of integrating the spirit of such meditation into all aspects of action and service: generosity, altruistic activity, patience, enthusiastic perseverance, calm attention and wisdom. On the necessity of contemplative practices of love and wisdom to empower effective social action in the contemporary world, see writings of Thich Nhat Hanh and HH the Dalai Lama. Also see John Makransky, “No Real Protection without Authentic Love,” *Journal of Buddhist Ethics*, Vol. 12 (2005) and *Awakening through Love*, introduction.

⁷ For fuller discussion of Buddhist attitudes toward other religions, see John Makransky, “Buddhist Perspectives on Truth in Other Religions: Past and Present,” *Theological Studies*, Vol. 64, No. 2 (June 2003), pp. 334-361.

community in that process. Those topics are explained more fully in my recent book, *Awakening through Love: Unveiling Your Deepest Goodness* (Wisdom publications, 2007). In the space remaining here, I will briefly explain and guide the first of the five meditations listed above, the practice of receiving love, so as to give participants a chance to see what light it could shed on their own spiritual lives and pedagogies.

Recall the story of the hospital nurse Lucy's encounter with the new nurse. Her habit of self-centered thinking was interrupted and her underlying capacity of compassion and reverence was evoked when she opened to the new nurse's love for her lost child. The purpose of the first meditation is similar: to interrupt the habit of self-centered reaction and evoke our underlying capacity by paying fuller attention to the love that has permeated our lives and our world.

When others hold you in a simple wish of love, the wish for your happiness and well-being beyond judgment, they are communing with your basic goodness. When we accept the love of such benefactors, we are sensing our own intrinsic worth that always deserves such love, no matter what anyone thinks. When we know our own essential worth, our fundamental goodness, we can know the corresponding goodness of others and commune with it in them. Thus, to accept the love of our benefactors gives us the inner permission to relinquish our surface thinking and relax into a deeper level of knowing and caring that can extend out to many others.

Identifying Benefactors and Receiving Love:

This first meditation begins by recalling your benefactors. Your benefactors are those who have held you in a wish of love, the simple wish for you to have happiness and wellbeing. Those who hold you in that wish are often the ones you especially like to be near. So one way to identify your benefactors is to recall people that you liked very much to be near at any point in your life. You might recall a dear relative, a friend of your parents that you adored being with, a favorite teacher or professor, a camp counselor or coach; you might recall a friendly stranger you encountered for even a moment in the store or at the park. Benefactors are people whom you *enjoy* bringing to mind, because their wish for your happiness, their simple wish of love, makes it feel so good to be in their presence.

In addition, also try bringing to mind a few *spiritual* figures as your benefactors, people who embody for you a stable and impartial love that seems to include everyone in its scope. Spiritual benefactors are those who have inspired and blessed you, through their words, writings or the quality of

their presence to you. You might recall a mentor who has been a key touchstone in your spiritual life. You might also recall people who have inspired you from afar, like Shakyamuni Buddha, Jesus, the Dalai Lama, Mother Teresa, or Martin Luther King.

As you follow the meditation instructions below, pause after each demarcated subsection (marked with a dashed line), to give yourself time to dwell on the instruction at hand.

Meditation: Receiving the Healing, Liberating Power of Love⁸

Part 1: Receiving Love

Sit in a relaxed way with back comfortably straight, on cushion or chair, eyes open, gazing slightly downward. Having identified both kinds of benefactors, ones from ordinary life and spiritual benefactors from near or far, bring one or more of each type to mind and imagine their smiling faces before you. Envision them sending you the wish of love, the wish for your deepest well-being, happiness, and joy.

Sensing these wonderful people before you, gently open to their wish of love. Imagine their wish as a gentle energy, a soft radiance, like a tender shower of healing rays. Bathe your whole body and mind in that tender radiance, all the way down to your toes and fingertips—communing with your benefactors in their wish of love for you.

 Bask in the gentle, healing energy of that radiance. As other thoughts or feelings arise, let them be enveloped in that loving luminosity. No matter who you think you are, or what you think you deserve, all such thoughts are irrelevant now—just accept the benefactors’ wish for your deepest happiness. Trusting this wish more than any limiting thoughts of yourself, receive it into your whole being.

 Be at ease, open, and accepting, like a puppy lying in the morning sun, passively soaking up its rays. Communing with your benefactors in this way, absorb the soft, healing energy of their love into every cell of your body, every corner of your mind. Bathe in this, heal in this, rest in this.

 After a little while, join your benefactors in their wish for you. While receiving the energy of their love, mentally repeat the wish for yourself, like this: “May this one have deepest well-being, happiness, and joy.” Affirm the words repeatedly in your mind. Try to mean them as you say them, like your

⁸ Adapted from Makransky, *Awakening through Love*, chapter 1.

benefactors mean them for you, acknowledging the basic goodness of your being that always deserves such love. Repeat the wish for yourself while receiving your benefactors' love even more deeply into body and mind, communing with them through its radiance.

Part 2: Letting Go and Merging into Oneness with the Radiance

Finally, let go of yourself and merge into utter oneness with the radiance, dropping the visualization of benefactors and releasing any attempt to hold onto any sense of separation or any frame of reference. Let everything be just as it is within that gentle, luminous wholeness, beyond separation of self and others. Enjoy just being thus for a little while, at ease, at rest, complete.

Good work! You have completed the meditation.

This practice of rediscovering benefactors who have held you in their love, communing with them, and merging into oneness with them in the ground of such love provides the entryway into the rest of the five meditations noted above. How so? When we feel alone, isolated, cut off and unloved, we cling tightly to our ego-centered thoughts of self and other for protection, to make our thought-made sense of self feel real and unassailable. When we feel loved just as we are (as in meditation 1), we sense that we don't have to make ourselves more real, more acceptable. We feel safe enough to let our minds relax into their underlying wisdom beyond self-grasping—to be given over to the mystery of our deepest awareness that is already endowed with capacities of impartial love and compassion (as in meditation 2). From there, we can let our innate capacity of love extend naturally to others in wider and wider circles of communion, in meditation sessions and then throughout our day (as in meditation 3). The love and wisdom of those practices empowers our minds in the final two meditations to come newly conscious of layers of suffering we had repressed, layers that we share with all others, and of our shared capacity for deep inner freedom. This becomes a bridge of empathy and communion with others in compassion and wisdom.

I hope this brief exposition may be useful to the theologians of the Association of Practical Theology. I have been inspired and informed by Christian scholars and communities of Boston College and beyond. I hope that this brief offering from Buddhism may somehow be helpful to you in turn.