

SUNLIGHT ON SHADOWS: Embracing Great Compassion

Meditation 41

Recognizing All Beings as Our Mother

Having established pure motivation, imagine in front of you someone you find it difficult to develop equal regard for, someone you judge harshly. It could be a member of the 1% or a politician who's enabling the 1%. It could be somebody who's been violent toward someone we love, someone we consider an innocent victim. Reflect on the fact that everything they're doing is either motivated by a wish for happiness or trying to avoid something they don't want. It could be a conscious avoidance, trying to push away whatever they don't want, or it could be unconscious. They could be running away from hard feelings. They could be lashing out, acting out some unprocessed anger or trauma. No matter how conscious or unconscious it is, no matter whether they're running away from pain or running toward happiness, they're doing it because they think it will make things better—usually for themselves but sometimes for others.

How many times have we done the exact same thing—grasping at everything we want and running away from everything we don't want and are scared of? We could be running away from our fears, from objects of our fears, from our emotions, from a reality we don't want to face, or from events in our life that we haven't processed. This person is doing exactly the same thing. They may have different objects of desire or aversion, but the action in their mind is the same as the action in our mind—wanting what they want, not wanting what they don't want.

They could be powerless over their hopes and fears. Their attachments and aversions may be undermining their relationships, their job, or values they hold dear. Perhaps they're so consumed by the power of negative emotions that they destroy everything they value, just like we've done so many times. Under the influence of anger and in the name of peace or equality, for example, maybe we've produced more judgment and righteousness—the very opposite of what we value and are working toward.

We think, what if this person had been kind to us in some long-forgotten time? Neither we nor they can remember their kindness or any kindness we ever showed them. They're spinning in their own orbit—following attachment and running away from aversion, just like we are. If we could remember that they'd been so kind, how would we view them differently? How would we feel toward them, how would we think about them, how would we respond to them, how would our commitment to them change, and how could we repay their kindness if they'd given us life, saved our life, or made a fundamental difference in the quality of our life?

Think of others that you judge in similar ways. Each one of those beings just wants to be happy and doesn't want to suffer. Everything they do is motivated by trying to run toward something they want

or away from something they don't want, just as we've done. Their actions might seem inexplicable, because we perceive them to be running toward the edge of a cliff, but they don't see it. We, too, have been running so fast that we didn't think ahead or see what was ahead. We've been captured by our feelings in the present moment—both those we want to get away from and those we want to go toward—just like all other beings who are chasing after hopes and dreams or are terrified by their nightmares.

What if each of these beings had been inconceivably kind—given us life, put our needs before their own every minute of every day, stayed up night after night when we were sick, worked hard to put a roof over our head, nourished us, and empowered us with the skills, values, education, or training we needed? How would we respond to them differently if we knew all that about them? How would we conceive our lives in relationship to them to repay their kindness?

Next, think of those you judge harshly because of their behaviors, their habits, and the consequences of these on those around them. They may or may not be trying to hurt those around them. They could just be lashing out, running away, trying to get or find what they think will make them happy. They may be completely overpowered by attachment and aversion, just like we've been so often in our lives. At times, we've been so possessed by or have identified to such a degree with our negative emotions that we couldn't even remember to be guided by our values. What if each of these beings had been so kind that they made a profound difference in our lives—in the length or quality of our life?

Keep expanding the meditation with different kinds of people that you judge more or less harshly. Keep expanding your meditation until it embraces all living beings—each of which wants to be happy and not suffer, and all of which are working at cross-purposes to their own wishes, just like we've done.

If you try to begin with a particular person and find it's too painful and the habit to aversion toward them is too deep, start with whoever has been kind to you in this life. Then expand that to include people you feel neutral about, and then people you have harsh judgment about. Expand out from there, eventually including all living beings. When you finish, dedicate to all beings that the virtue of your practice serve as the certain cause of their temporary and ultimate happiness.