



Biggest Love

It doesn't matter if we start small; we can find a way to hold the whole world in our heart. **JUDY LIEF** on cultivating a love that is unfettered and pure—a love that touches everyone.

PHOTOS BY DOUGLAS FOGELSON



THE HUMAN REALM is said to be the realm of passion. Passion is what holds us together; confused passion is what entraps us and transformed passion is what can liberate us. Although our passion is often tainted by the tendency to grasp or possess, in essence it is accepting of others. Passion is attraction, whereas aggression is rejection.

In the traditional Buddhist iconography of the six realms of being—the hell realm, hungry ghost realm, animal realm, human realm, jealous god realm, and god realm—each realm is associated with a particular buddha. In the human realm, the buddha carries an empty bowl, a poignant statement of the experience of emptiness, longing, and

incompleteness so many of us experience. When I think of the early monks and nuns going about their daily begging rounds, I think of the two sides of human passion: our insatiable hunger and the power of connecting with one another.

There seems to be a continuum of passion, extending from a pinched passion rooted in emptiness, desperation, and neediness, on one extreme, to an open and free-flowing passion rooted in fullness, confidence, and appreciation on the other. But there is never a moment in which passion is absent; we are swimming in it. The challenge is to figure out how to spend less of our time trapped in the constricted form of passion and more of our

time in the loving-kindness form of passion. If we can do that, then the love inside of us will extend until it embraces the world.

GROUNDWORK

It is good to start small and simple. What touches your heart right now? What do you love? Who do you love? Maybe you feel you love lots of things, or maybe you feel that you really don't love anything or anyone. It could be that your focus is more on how to make others love you, and worrying that they don't or that you will never find your "one true love." What does reflecting on such questions evoke in you? What emotions? What bodily sensations? What storylines?

Going further, it is worthwhile to explore the feeling of loneliness. Can you stay with that experience? Loneliness can feel like a big emptiness inside us that we are desperate to fill in. But can anything really suffice to make it go away? Does it come and go or is it always a part of us? What if we don't try to make it go away or to cover it up? How would that change how you view others?

Speaking of others, how do you divide them up? Which beings and things are "worthy" of your love and affection, and which are not? What are the boundaries of your affection? How limited does your supply of affection seem to be, and how do you parcel it out? When you reach into your little stash of loving-kindness, do old memories and hurts arise? Are you afraid of getting hurt?

By asking yourself these kinds of questions, you can make a kind of assessment of your heart, and lay the groundwork for cultivating the capacity to love. It is important to know where you stand, so you know what you have to work with. The idea is not to get caught up in your ideas about what you are supposed to feel about this or that, him or

her, this group or that group, this type or that type. Instead, it is to find a starting point that is not theoretical, but realistic.

If you are trying to open your heart and cultivate greater loving-kindness and compassion, it is good to look deeply at your own situation and to really try to figure out where you are with all this. As you look around, you might only find one thing that evokes a feeling of love or kindness in you right now, and that's okay. Rather than trying to develop some grand vision of universal compassion for all beings, which is tempting and sounds great, you could begin modestly with what is right in front of you, something immediate and particular. Even if what you love right now is on the more pinched end of the spectrum, you can start with that. The underlying seed of kindness may be masked by your fixation or neediness, but it is still there. Similarly, if you have slightly scary flashes of open heartedness, which are intriguing, but make you feel like scrambling to secure your boundaries and protect yourself, you could start with that.

MOTHERS AND TEACHERS

To help us move along the continuum from pinched or distorted loving-kindness to true kindness and compassion, the Buddhist tradition presents us with examples to emulate and learn from. The first example is that of a mother with her only child. This primary bond is simple and natural, powerful and true. There are many stories of the way ordinary mothers are willing to put their children's needs before their own. If there is too little food, the child gets fed first; if there is danger, the mother shields her child even at the risk of her own life. Of course, there are counter examples, but the idea of the loving mother still rings true. The bottom line is that someone took care of us when we were babies; otherwise, we would not have survived.

In contemplating the example of the loving mother, it could be helpful to reflect on what distinguishes this kind of love and why it is a good model to emulate. The example of motherly love reminds us that kindness is a natural human capacity essential to our survival as a species. It shows us that it is possible to put another person's needs ahead of our own. The example of a mother's selfless love for her children has inspired countless people throughout time. We long for love that is unfettered and pure.



JUDY LIEF is the author of *Making Friends with Death: A Buddhist Guide to Encountering Mortality* and one of the principal editors of the work of the late Chögyam Trungpa. She lives with her husband in Vermont.

PHOTO BY CHUCK LIEF

Even
after
all this time
the sun never says to the earth,

“You owe me.”
Look what happens
with a love like that—
it lights the whole
world.

—HAFIZ

Look
what happens to the scale
when love
holds
it.

It
stops
working.

—KABIR

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We long to be held in our mother’s loving arms and to be able to give love freely without hesitation or self-regard. All of this is expressed in the powerful image of a mother and child. You see it in painting and sculpture; you hear it in song.

Another example of kindness is said to be the genuine teacher or spiritual guide. Genuine teachers do not use their students as foils or gather students to build up their own power and esteem. Instead, they put their students’ interests first and are willing to do whatever it takes to awaken their students and guide them on the path. Although you may be trying to get something from the teacher, the teacher is not trying to get anything from you. In our usual tit-for-tat world, when you offer something in a relationship, you expect something back. There is a bargaining component. But with the teacher–student relationship, since the teacher doesn’t need anything from the student, that teacher cannot be bribed or conned, so bargaining is out of the question. No matter how many strategies you may cook up, whatever you put out is simply reflected back, as if by a giant mirror. This is great teaching, for the contrast between love with hooks and love that just is becomes painfully apparent. It also becomes apparent that there is no limit to love once we drop our attachment. In the encounter with the teacher, we are given a glimpse of a kind of love that is present and atmospheric, possessed by no one, and completely free of agendas and strategies.

The idea of reflecting on this human realm of passion is to be realistic. In this realm we can

experience the pain of destructive or obsessive love, but we can also be inspired by examples of selfless love. By observing love with an agenda, we can begin to glimpse what love without an agenda might be. And sometimes, oddly, the strongest ground for the development of loving-kindness is to realize how often our first impulse is *not* all that kindly.

DELIBERATE AND SPONTANEOUS COMPASSION

Once we have assessed our situation and thought about examples we might emulate, how can we begin to expand our capacity for love? When we are deep into one particular relationship, it is easy to create a kind of love bubble, a little world that feeds on itself and is cut off from the world around us. But we don’t have to do that, and in fact, though nice, it can quickly become claustrophobic. Instead we could view our closest relationships as steppingstones for learning how to view larger and larger aspects of the world with the same kind of interest and delight.

This may be easier said than done, of course. What isn’t? But compassion and kindness are not foreign to our nature. They are in there somewhere, and the good news is that we can uncover them and cultivate them.

There are said to be two kinds of compassion: deliberate and spontaneous. Deliberate compassion is the practice and spontaneous compassion is the result. Learning to be more compassionate is like learning to drive a car. At first it feels scary,

unnatural, and awkward. We have to keep thinking about what we are doing and what we should do next. But as we get more experience, it is as if our body and reflexes automatically know how to go about it.

Deliberately trying to cultivate kindness and compassion can feel forced and even hypocritical. It means doing things we do not necessarily feel like doing. But that is the point. Instead of waiting to feel kind, we should go ahead and act kind anyway. We should pretend. One way to work with this practice is to try to do one kind gesture each day, whether you feel like it or not. It can be something as small as picking up a sock or putting the slightly better morsel of food on your spouse's plate rather than on your own. Mini-practices like that are great opportunities for really getting to know the pain of the habit of always looking out for No. 1.

Spontaneous gestures of love or compassion surprise us from time to time. When you experience these moments of spontaneous compassion, it is natural to want to hold onto them, but like thoughts in meditation, it is better simply to note them and let them go.

BABY STEPS TO KINDNESS

Mahayana Buddhism is all about stretching. What are we stretching out from? From our small-mindedness and self-absorption. To do so we need to engage in the world. But it is amazing how often we think we are out in the world interacting with others, while actually, we are robotically acting out our preconceived internal storyline. Our vision is clouded and we can only take in what feeds into our plot line.

*True love in every moment praises God.
Longing love brings a sorrow sweet to the pure.
Seeking love belongs to itself alone.
Understanding love gives itself equally to all.
Enlightened love is mingled with the sadness of the world.
But selfless love bears an effortless fruit,
working so quietly even the body cannot say how it comes and goes.*

—MECHTILD OF MAGDEBURG



One way to begin to soften this kind of pattern is by exploring some basic steps that can lead us in the direction of kindness. Instead of trying to will ourselves to be kind—presto! all at once—we can create an atmosphere congenial to the development of loving-kindness. The following are five small steps you can practice that may be helpful in this regard:

Settle Down

There has to be a *here* to be a *there*, and a connection between the two. So the first step is to slow down and let your mind settle enough that you are able to drop from the heights of conceptuality back into your body, a simple form in space. Can you really feel present, in your body as it is, right where you are?

Be in the Moment

Now that you are more solidly *somewhere*, you can let yourself be more clearly *sometime*. When your thoughts drift from the past or the future, from



memories and regrets to plans and dreams, you can gently bring yourself back to the present moment.

Drop Escape Routes

Stay put in this particular place and time, just the way it is.

Pay Attention to Space

Notice the quality of space within you and around you. Pay attention to the boundaries of your physical body and the space in front, behind, and on each side of you. Also pay attention to the mental-emotional space that accommodates the comings and goings of sensations, thoughts, moods, and emotional upheavals. With whatever arises in your perception, on an outer or inner level, notice the space in which both you and your perception rest.

Share the Space

Explore what it is like to share this quality of space with whatever or whoever is there with you. Notice

the power of accommodation, acceptance, and nonjudging. When you sense the arising of territoriality and fear, accommodate that, too, in greater spaciousness.

You can explore these steps singularly or in combination, it is up to you. The idea is that if you create the right atmosphere, compassion naturally arises. It is already present, just waiting for your invitation.

ALCHEMY

What ordinary people see as lead, alchemists see as gold in disguise. Like alchemists, we can learn to uncover the gold hidden within our human condition—no matter how conflicted and unpromising we humans often seem to be. Our dramas and fascinations, our obsessions, our loves gained and lost may captivate us, but they are fundamentally ephemeral. However, anything that awakens and touches our hearts even a little bit can open us to the possibility of something more. Within the fluctuating passions of the human realm, we can discover the unwavering force of selfless compassion and loving-kindness. ♦