

## Noah Levine, Excavating the Heart Through Buddhist Mindfulness Meditation

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When I first heard the Buddhist teachings on loving kindness, compassion and forgiveness, I was incredibly skeptical. Coming from a background of drugs and violence, I saw those heart qualities as undesirable and perhaps unsafe. In the circles I ran in, compassion was seen as equivalent to weakness and would make you vulnerable to harm and abuse. I learned early on that this world was full of pain and seemed to lack much kindness. In reaction to the pain in my life I began to close my heart and to harden myself against all forms of love. So it was with great hesitance that I experimented with Buddhist practices of kindness and compassion. In the beginning I don't think forgiveness was even in my vocabulary. The only reason I opened myself to these meditation practices, often called heart practices, at all was because I had tremendous faith in the practices of mindfulness (paying attention to the present moment), the Buddha and my teachers, who assured me that it was safe to love again.

I heard things like "love is your true nature" or "the heart has a natural tendency toward compassion." Now, I had already been meditating for some time, examining my inner-world through mindfulness, and I didn't see any of the love and compassion of which these teachers spoke. When I looked into my heart and mind I only saw fear, anger, hatred, judgment, more fear and a lot of lustful cravings. When I sat quietly, paying attention to my breath, my attention was repeatedly drawn into fantasies of vengeful destruction or pornographic sex. One moment I was bashing in my step-father's head with a Louisville slugger, the next I was in a threesome with Madonna and Traci Lords. I was pretty sure that was all that was in there. Mindfulness helped me deal with my inner confusion, it allowed me to ignore my mind at times or not take it so personally at others, but it didn't seem to be magically creating a loving heart out of my inner-critic/terrorist/pervert/tough guy.

In the early days of my meditation practice I was only interested in mindfulness. I was introduced to breath awareness meditations and as a result I experienced the direct benefits of concentration and mindfulness. I immediately found temporary relief from fear of the future and shame about the past. Learning to train my mind to pay close attention to the present moment was difficult, but fruitful. I experienced the immediate, if only momentary, relief from the suffering I created with my mind's tendency to be lost in the future and past. Before I began my meditation practice, when my mind started to worry about what would happen in the future I would get completely sucked into the fears and often become convinced that the worst-case scenario would play out. Mindfulness gave me the tools to let go of those thoughts and to bring my attention into the body's experience of the breath. Mindfulness made sense to me and it wasn't difficult to gain a verified faith in that aspect of Buddhism. For me, mindfulness proved to be the doorway to the rest of the Buddha's dharma, or teachings. I came to believe that it was going to be possible to train my mind, but I still had no hope for my heart.

When I did practice lovingkindness meditations, my mind was so critical and resistant, it seemed to make my mind louder and my heart harder, not softer. But I continued to practice it anyway. Again, I had seen that mindfulness worked, so it gave me some confidence to try the rest of the Buddha's teachings. Besides, what did I have to lose? I was already unhappy. My heart was already hard. And I began to see that some of what was underneath my fears and lusts was a genuine desire to be free from suffering. Mindfulness gave me my first taste of freedom and I wanted more.

So without much hope, I eventually committed to including kindness, compassion and forgiveness meditations to my daily practice. It was a slow and difficult process to learn to love myself and others. Eventually I began to understand what the Buddha and my teachers were talking about; I began to get glimpses of genuine kindness, compassion and moments of forgiveness. But I have to admit that it took years.

Over my years of meditation practice, which has included regular periods of silent intensive retreats, ranging from five days to three months in length, I have gradually come to experience the compassion, forgiveness, mercy, kindness and generosity that the Buddha promised would be found. My heart has softened, my mind has quieted down. These days, I rarely want to bash anyone's head in. When I think of my step-father, I do so with compassion for how much suffering he must have been in to have been such a jerk back then. My mind focuses easily on the task at hand and I often feel warmth and kindness toward all beings. I now know that compassion is a natural quality of my heart that was laying dormant, waiting to be uncovered.

The Buddhist path is a process of discovery, recovery and a gradual uncovering of a loving heart. I see the process of awakening and healing as being like an archeological dig. In the early days, I was just on the surface. Mindfulness was a tremendous relief, and it acted like a metal detector that allowed me to know there were precious treasures beneath the ground. Mindfulness was also the shovel that began the excavation. But as I began to dig, I first found all the layers of sediment that were covering the heart. The heart practices were a further refining of the soil. I was beginning to sift through the rubble hoping to immediately find treasure. My early days of feeling more unsettled during compassion and kindness exercises was because I was simply uncovering all of the skeletons that had been buried over the years of trying to avoid the pains of my childhood and adolescence. I had become quite skilled at covering the insecurity and reactivity. But each meditative effort of forgiveness, kindness or compassion was another shovel full of dirt, each one getting me closer to the forgotten truth of my heart.

Perhaps, at times, the heart practices could be seen as even finer instruments of archeology. Like the brushes that are used to gently sweep away the remaining dust covering the treasure of our own heart. Meditations are versatile -- sometimes you need a shovel to do heavy lifting, and at other times something gentler, very subtle and refined, just to dust off the heart. But as we know, sometimes uncovering an ancient city can take a lifetime. There is no timetable that we can count on. There is no guarantee that we will reach the forgotten treasure of compassion anytime soon. What is promised is that it is there, waiting, and at times we can hear it calling to us, begging to be uncovered. The path of meditative training, if followed correctly and with persistence, will always lead to the recovery of our lost love and compassion, one scoop at a time.

I can say all of this with confidence, because I have experienced it directly, as you will as well. These days, my life is filled with a general sense of trust and friendliness. My relationship to my parents, my friends and my wife and daughter are sourced from appreciation, love, compassion and forgiveness. But perhaps more important is the attitude of lovingkindness that permeates my attitude toward strangers. I spent my early life at war with the world. The heart practices of the Buddha taught me to surrender, but not to give up the commitment to creating a positive change. What was once a rebellion fueled by hatred is now a revolution fueled by compassion.

Now, I feel that it is only fair to also offer a warning. The path to uncovering our heart's positive qualities is a radical one. It is fraught with the demons of the heart/mind that in Buddhism we call *Mara*. Mara is the aspect of heart/mind that creates road blocks, gives excuses, procrastinates and urges us to avoid all of the unplea-

sant mind states that accompany the healing of awakening. Mara is the inner experience of all forms of greed, hatred and delusion. Mara will attack with vengeance at times, for by committing to the heart's liberation we are committing to face Mara directly. The Buddha spoke of his battle with Mara, and victory over Mara was won with the weapons of Love, Compassion, Equanimity and Appreciation. After the Buddha's initial victory, Mara did not give up. Mara continued to live with the Buddha throughout his whole life. The Buddha was constantly vigilant, always meeting Mara with a loving awareness, always disarming him with the heart's wisest responses.

There is no one who is unable to love, forgive or be compassionate. Ability is our birthright. All that is required is the desire and willingness. Most people would confess the desire to be free from the hatred, anger and fear that they live with, although there are those who have been so badly injured and confused that they have lost all hope. Or have created a belief in hatred as a noble and necessary quality. It seems like this is the case in much of the western religions, when you worship a God that is judgmental, wrathful and vengeful, it makes sense that those same qualities would become acceptable and perhaps even desirable in oneself.

But before I go off on my Atheist Buddhist rant, let me also say I believe that although it seems true love and the willingness to uncover the heart qualities of forgiveness, mercy and compassion is rare, I do not believe that Buddhists are the only ones who are doing it. As a matter of fact, I think that very few Buddhists are actually applying the teachings of the Buddha to their heart/mind. The Buddha spoke of a middle path, a path that leads against the stream, between the two dead-ends. The first dead-end is that of Worldliness, or seeking or happiness from material or sensual experiences. The second dead-end is that of religion, or seeking happiness from devotion and belief in external salvation. I think that most Buddhist's have fallen into the dead-end of religion. Be careful that you do not make the same mistake.

I hope this view does not discourage you, but rather that it inspires you to make sure that you're part of the rare and precious.