

MY MIND FILLS WITH ANGER each time I hear him speak,” one of my students reports of his response to a political leader. “I find myself wishing ill will toward them all,” another says with a pained voice, ashamed of her own reactions to politicians. “I simply can’t practice lovingkindness for these people,” says a third. In the past few years many meditation practitioners have been coping with such emotions as they struggle to find peace of mind in relation to the national events and elected officials they view as harmful. Students coping with a difficult co-worker, a friend’s betrayal, a painful breakup, or an unjust family situation report similar feelings of outrage, anger, or disgust.

Often meditation students will ask me what they should do when their hostility and sense of separation persist despite hours of loving-kindness practice and repeated attempts at forgiveness. Even well-trained students, who understand that their feelings are causing them to suffer and that anger often gets in the way of wise action, sometimes find that feelings of frustration and rage continue.

It’s a spiritual conundrum: How do you not succumb to outrage and alienation, yet keep your passion and motivation to fight for justice and social good? Likewise, when your marriage is dissolving, how do you let go of anger, bitterness, and blame while at the same time standing up for what you believe to be right, particularly when children are involved?



Make Peace

When you feel at odds with the world, practice this meditation to regain harmony.

One student told me she didn’t trust herself to meditate. She found herself seething when she got off the cushion, as it so increased her fixation on how poorly her ex-husband had treated her. A man on retreat—flooded with hopelessness after his wife left him for another man, taking their two children with her—asked if he should just go home. “Maybe I need antidepressants, not meditation,” he ruefully proclaimed.

One possibility for meditators looking to process experiences of hostility and alienation

may we all experience reconciliation

Find a quiet place and sit comfortably. Have the words (in the next column) in front of you the first few times you do this practice; eventually, they will be etched in your memory.

Some people do only the first half of this reconciliation practice, which has to do with family and relationships, and others only do the second half, which has to do with being in the greater community.

Say each phrase three times as you go through the practice. When you face a difficult situation that relates to a specific phrase here, it may be useful to simply repeat that phrase over and over.

Sometimes strong emotions arise and what you feel is anything but acceptance and reconciliation. Don't be discouraged: This is an ideal time to incline your heart to your deepest values.

is a reconciliation practice. Often, people who do this practice report a dramatic reduction in their emotional turmoil. Particularly in difficult marriage and family circumstances, they have found that consistently working with reconciliation meditation has enabled them to finally move forward with their lives.

RESTORE THE SACRED

Reconciliation means to restore to compatibility or harmony and to restore the sacred. It is also defined as “to make consistent or congruent”—for example, to reconcile your ideals with reality. When you practice reconciliation, you are reconciling yourself to the truth that in this moment there are painful differences or polarities between you and another, and rather than allowing your heart to become closed to the other, you are seeking to align the mind/heart to include them *just as they are*.

There is a tremendous cost to your well-being when you shut your heart to others. On the most practical level, being shut down by anger or hate is not an effective position for working toward change. It breeds a feeling of despair, of victimhood, and what is called “learned helplessness.” Refusing to reconcile to the way things are also means you are draining your energy in a hopeless demand that what has already happened not be true. One teacher put it

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May all fathers and daughters be reconciled.
 May all mothers and sons be reconciled.
 May all mothers and daughters be reconciled.
 May all fathers and sons be reconciled.
 May all brothers and sisters, sisters and sisters, and brothers and brothers be reconciled.
 May all mothers and fathers be reconciled.
 May all husbands and wives, lovers, and partners be reconciled.
 May all friends and enemies be reconciled.
 May all teachers and students be reconciled.
 May all communities and their members be reconciled.
 May all countries and their citizens be reconciled.
 May all warring nations be reconciled.
 May all races and religions be reconciled.
 May all people everywhere be reconciled.
 May all people and this earth be reconciled.
 May the merit of this practice be to the liberation of all beings.

this way: “Do not hope for a better past.” Finally, closing your heart to others—in an attempt to keep from having to admit to yourself that you, like all other humans, are capable of unskillful behavior—prevents you from feeling your own emotions.

Reconciliation practice is the aligning and softening of the heart *to be reconciled with this moment just as it is*. It doesn't involve resignation or defeat. Instead, it is a way to embrace the entirety of your experience, in which nothing is left out—not even the things you think you can't live with. When you don't separate yourself from parts of your experience, you have more access both to your wisdom and to your deepest values, and therefore your actions tend to be more skillful.

To experience reconciliation, you have to acknowledge the truth that there are substantial differences between you and another. A successful reconciliation is not contingent on the disappearance of those differences, and it certainly does not imply that you will become best friends with everyone else.

Rather, the intention to be reconciled is the wish to be connected to the sacred oneness of this moment despite any differences and to find harmony within any situation, even the painful.

This does not mean that you have to approve of what is unskillful or to forsake

passionately advocating for what you believe to be right. It simply means that you do so while treating the other as *sacred*, as the “thou” identified by the Austrian philosopher Martin Buber. It is the understanding reflected by the Dalai Lama when he refers to the Chinese as “my friends, the enemy.”

ACCEPT THE TRUTH

One of my students had been frozen in anger for many months, unable to deal with the practicalities of divorce; she was struggling to forgive her husband even while he continued a pattern of hurtful actions. She finally realized that her being stuck was due to her implicit demand that he change. Through reconciliation practice, she was able to accept him as he was and negotiate a parting that minimized the turmoil for their young child. A second student, to his own amazement, reconnected with his alienated wife once he reconciled himself to certain difficulties in her personality. Another person was able to let go of the outrage long held toward an abusive father, while yet another found that an intolerable supervisor at work could in fact be tolerated, if not respected.

In none of these instances did the student report strong feelings of compassion or lovingkindness for the other person. Instead, each experienced the release of inner tension that had been blocking an acceptance of the truth of how things were. Once the truth of the moment had been accepted, each of their situations could be worked with in a manner that brought inner peace, and at times outright resolution. They were able to be reconciled whether or not their antagonist was participating in the process, and it felt great!

Reconciliation is not an endpoint of practice. It is a beginning place for continuing to free your heart. Through reconciliation, you gain momentum toward lovingkindness—an unconditional well-wishing that flows freely from the unencumbered heart, *independent of conditions*.

The Dalai Lama emanates such a feeling. The woman who was finally able to divorce her husband is only now able to experience moments of lovingkindness toward him as another being “who just wishes

to be happy,” as the Buddha taught. Likewise, the student with the difficult boss reports that on some occasions when his boss is acting out, there arises in him the “heart’s quiver” of compassion for such a tormented soul. Reconciliation provides the *acknowledgment and alignment* that allow for such heart qualities to emerge.

One man reported success in practicing reconciliation toward political leaders he found detestable. He imagined his views and feelings as constituting one circle of existence, and the values and unskillful actions of the politicians to be a separate circle. Through reconciliation he came to realize there was a third, larger circle of existence containing both smaller circles. This understanding allowed him to find some harmony with people he’d previously held in contempt. I sometimes refer to this larger circle as the “ground of reconciliation.” By resting in this place, we can avoid “taking birth” in the small circle of a separate identity.

Reconciliation practice can also be brought into the larger community. One long-term *vipassana* practitioner in California has formed an organization of fellow lawyers who are committed to the practice of being reconciled. Two members of this group agreed to represent divorcing spouses in settlement talks, with the understanding that if the parties couldn’t reconcile their child-custody and material differences out of court, then both lawyers would resign. In North Carolina, a pastor has started a truth and reconciliation commission modeled on the one in South Africa in an effort to reconcile community differences around Ku Klux Klan actions in earlier decades.

It is worth remembering that the Buddha admonished us not to cling to our views and that hatred never conquers hatred. May you be reconciled with those with whom you have had difficulties in your life. May all beings everywhere be reconciled. ■

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