

The Power of Love

by Denise Benitez

Recently, I heard a moving story about love. One of Mother Teresa's nuns had rescued an orphan during the war in the former Yugoslavia and brought him to an orphanage. This child was severely neurologically impaired, in such a way that his body was curled tightly into a fetal position. His hands were curled into fists, his face into a scowl. The nun sat by the child and began to stroke his body. She talked to the child and ran her hand down his back and arms, over his hands and across his head and face. It took quite a while, but the child's body began to relax and uncurl. His face smoothed out and he made eye contact with the nun and smiled.

I heard another story recently about the power of hate. In the 1960's a third grade teacher in the Midwest did an experiment on discrimination in her class. She told the children to divide themselves into two groups — brown-eyed children and blue-eyed children. Then she told them that the brown-eyed children were superior in every way. She told the blue-eyed children that they were not allowed to use the drinking fountain, or play on the swings. She impressed upon them that they were less smart, less well-behaved, and less attractive. Within hours, the blue-eyed children were fulfilling the prophecy and misbehaving more. They even performed significantly worse on spelling and math tests that they had found easy the previous day. They began to believe in their own lack of self-worth; they began to hate themselves.

In yoga philosophy, love is seen as a means of self liberation. One of my favorite sutras from Patanjali (II.33) states, "When harrassed by doubt, cultivate the opposite mental attitude." This sutra reminds me of a statement I once read by a psychologist. "Sometimes in order to move out of depression or self-hatred, we have to force ourselves to think thoughts we really don't want to think." In other words, we have to train our minds, which can be like wild little puppies, to follow a more harmonious path.

I've pondered often why it is that, left to its' own devices, the mind will tend to entertain fear, judgment, and even hatred. My best conclusion at this point in time is that we are biologically wired to be constantly scanning our environment for threat. We are always aware, at some level, of protecting and sustaining the physical body, and of discovering our place in the hierarchy of the pack. Who is strong, who is weak, and where do we fit in? I used to believe that we were hard-wired in this way, but no more. I believe, and have experienced, that this wiring can be re-wired. We can learn to be more loving, and this is no small practice. This is the biggest practice there is, the most important, and the most difficult, way more difficult than even the deepest backbend.

Fortunately, yoga, along with many other mystical traditions, offers us a rich and long tradition of cultivating love. There are signposts and guidelines along the way. You don't have to start from scratch.

Let's say you have just taken your seat on your yoga mat. You close your eyes for a few minutes. Your mind immediately begins to spin out stories about how you're not so very good at yoga, and you think of that woman in class who can do anything with her body. A gorgeous yoga photo you recently saw pops into your inner vision — a man with his foot behind his head. You can't even put your foot to your chest. You notice that you're feeling suddenly tired.

Whoa! "When harrassed by doubt (or lack of worth, or envy, or despair) cultivate the opposite mental attitude. How can you possibly do that, when every nerve fiber in your brain seems occupied with confirming the story of your inferiority? It seems so Pollyanna, and anyway, impossible, to just "think good thoughts." And even the yoga sutras tell us that "Fear is present even for the sage." (II.9)

In the yoga tradition, we are given, from the great spiritual text the Bhagavad-Gita, the concept of bhakti yoga. The word bhakti means devotion or love, and this path is one that cultivates love in the human being.

The next time you find yourself feeling unworthy, or full of spite, or jealous, or distracted, you might try overwhelming these narrow energy forms with the expansive energy of love. How? The Bhagavad-Gita gives us nine suggestions on how to lead the reluctant heart to love through these practices of bhakti yoga.

First, you might try listening to or reading sacred scriptures, inspiring poetry, or the words of contemporary wisdom teachers. Second, listen to the singing of devotional songs to God, in any tradition (kirtan). Third, meditate on the form of any Divine being that has meaning to you, from Jesus to Buddha, from Wily E. Coyote to Mother Teresa. It's a powerful practice to imagine gazing into the eyes of this embodiment of love, and to allow a river of loving energy to flow into you. Fourth, keep this image of the Divine in your mind throughout your day. Fifth, create an altar or sacred place in your home and have a small daily ceremony before it. You can place shells and stones, photos of your loved ones and teachers, gifts given to you in love, representations of real or mythical beings that have importance to you on this altar. Your daily ceremony may be as simple as bowing or lighting a candle, but it will ground you for the day ahead, or prepare you for peaceful sleep. Sixth, bow down to the grace of the earth, or the gifts of a teacher, or the gift of life. Touch your forehead to the floor to remind yourself to offer your life's actions to a larger purpose. Seventh, cultivate an intense yearning to become the best person you can be, to be a representation of the highest qualities of being human. Eighth, regard God or the Divine as a friend, so that your relationship with the Divine deepens in intimacy and becomes a natural part of you. Ninth, imagine yourself as a Divine and holy person, so that any separation between yourself and love at its' deepest is erased. You might try going through a day regarding each person you encounter with an infinite tenderness toward their struggles and challenges.

May these suggestions inspire you to cultivate love toward yourself, then toward your close friends and family, and then toward the larger world. This earth and all the people living here, desperately need your

balanced and generous heart.