

Loving Your Way to Awakening Meditation & Contemplation Homework Week 2

In these exercises and contemplations, it's important to use the words for "love" and "spirit" that feel true and real to you. If the word "love" feels too big or too freighted with baggage, you can substitute the word "acceptance" or "tenderness" or "sweetness" or "kindness." Or use the word "spirit" or "Presence" or "allowing" or "God." But also realize that sometimes it is useful to step outside your verbal comfort zone and experiment with using different words for the formless undying Presence that we are calling love.

Meditation Practice

Please begin with ten minutes of Hatha Yoga postures or light stretching to wake up your body. Then do 5 minutes of Nadi Shodhana breathing.

Offer your meditation, asking that it be of benefit to all beings or to a particular person (or animal or place).

Chant the opening mantras that we provided or the mantras of your choosing

Preparatory Grounding

For a minute or two, practice whole-body attention with the following four steps. This will help both ground you and expand your awareness of yourself as a unified physical entity.

- Inhale and exhale, feeling the air flowing in and out of your nostrils.
- Expand your awareness to include the movements that the chest and abdomen make when you breathe.
- Allow yourself to be aware of your heartbeat or pulse in your body.
- Include in your awareness the sense of your muscles holding your body in a balanced posture.

Core Practice

Begin by asking, "Let me feel the presence of love, in whatever form she appears now."

With your attention on the breath, become aware of the presence around you of a benign, loving energy, the energy of grace and love.

Have the feeling of welcoming or allowing the energy to breathe you, even to hold you.

Feel or sense that your breath is arising and subsiding on its own, drawn by the power of love, which is breathing you.

Have the sense that your heart center opens like the shutter of a camera. Have the sense that love (tenderness, acceptance) is flowing in and out through the heart.

With gentle attention, breathe in the thought, “I am loved.” If the word “love” feels uncomfortable, think, “I am accepted” or “I am welcomed” or “I am embraced” or “I am held.”

You might also prefer to practice with the thought, “I am love.” You may find that at a certain point, the thought stops being words and becomes a feeling. Or you may practice with it like a mantra, silently dropping it into your heart either with the inhalation or simply at intervals.

As thoughts arise, notice the thought with the feeling that the thought is actually made of particles of love. Love in the form of thought. And let it flow out with the breath.

Meditation on the Expanded Heart

(This is a practice that can help open you to a more expansive experience of your own heart, and that also allows you to move past energetic blocks that may be contracting your heart. The true heart center actually extends three feet or more behind the body, as well as in front of the body. As you start to feel into the expanded heart, you are also opening past the various egoic blocks that can contract the heart space.)

Inhaling, feel the breath flowing through the heart center, just beneath the breastbone, and out the back of the heart.

You might want to use words—“I am love” or “I am loved” or “May I be held in love” to help kindle the feeling. You can also use a Sanskrit mantra that you are deeply connected to, or the word “Beloved.” It’s important to find the words that have resonance for you. This is part of our creativity in meditation practice!

If thoughts come up, if emotions come up, notice them, and let them go. If the thoughts contain a story about how or why you don’t feel love or about your incapacity to love, remember that these are just thoughts (meaning that they aren’t true!) and let them go.

Begin to sense the energy of the space behind your body. Sensing energy is a kind of subtle proprioception: we “feel” into it, and by feeling its qualities, we can also help the energy to soften and open. As you do, become conscious that even if the energy feels tight and small, if you notice its “edges,” it will begin to soften and expand.

With the exhalation, draw the energy from behind the heart into the inner body. Sense it spreading through your heart and torso. Gently let the energy from behind the heart expand through the center of the torso.

As you connect the energy inside the physical body to the energy behind, there is eventually a natural sense of expansion that will eventually help you experience how much bigger and more spacious your energetic body really is. And this connection to the back of the heart helps you open to the love that is always supporting you; that is a natural expression of the heart.

(The space behind the heart is a portal to the Great Heart, the loving energy that is your connection to the experience of universal love. Letting your attention move to the back heart will begin to make you more able to feel into this space.)

Meditation: Seeing Another Person as the Beloved

Think of someone close to you. Try this with someone with whom your relationship is easy and/or with someone where there is difficulty or disruption in the relationship.

Imagine them sitting in front of you.

Realize that they are whispering to you, “Beloved, Beloved, Beloved.”

Let yourself receive love from them.

Contemplation and Writing Practice

Set aside at least half an hour this week to sit with a notebook or journal and contemplate these questions. You might find that you have a lot to say about some of them and not as much about others, but try to answer them all, if only in a line or two. You might want to re-visit or re-read your answers later in the week and add to them.

These questions can also be the basis of a partner discussion.

Walking Around Practices

Whether it’s the people you live with or the people you see on the street, make an intention that you will spend a period of time today during which you make a point to look at all of them with the eye of love. Or do this as a closed-eyed contemplation where you bring to mind people you know or remember and do these contemplations imaginatively. Below are a couple of ways to think about this:

- Ask yourself, “In what way is this person vulnerable? In what way is this person great? What can I appreciate in this person right now?”
- How would I relate to this person if I were to really see the divine in them?
- How would I relate to myself if I really saw the divine in myself?

Some hints: For some of us, looking into the other person’s eyes and seeing the “sparkle” might be the clue. For others, connecting to the awareness that the other person’s heart is connected to yours. For people you already know, reminding yourself of that person’s great qualities can help. But you want to both remember their stellar human qualities and ALSO recognize that their lovability does not depend on any quality in them, but that they are an expression of divinity. Perhaps you can imagine them filled with light. Perhaps you can imagine their heart quivering with tenderness or fear or hope and recognize that all of us have those feelings. Notice what words or attitudes are particularly helpful in letting you see the divine in them.

Please feel free to continue the practices from last week.

Begin and end your day by offering your day to love, spirit, God, Presence. Notice the effect this has on your experience. This is one of the simplest of devotional practices, but it can be radical in shifting your experience, especially in times of stress. (Try using different words for that Presence and notice whether the experience of it differs according to the words you use.)

From time to time, in the course of the day, ask yourself, “Am I in touch with the presence of love?” If the answer is “No,” ask yourself, “What can I do (or think) now to be aware of the presence of love?”

Suggestions:

Ask: Is there any love present?

Have the thought, “I am loved” or “No matter how I feel or what I think, love is inside and around me.” Or have the thought, “I accept this situation and myself.”

Breathe with the thought that you are breathing in particles of love.

Don’t forget that the feeling of not being in touch with love might mean that you are hungry, thirsty, sleepy, or need to meditate!

Sutras for Week 2

Here are sutras 4-7, with commentary and questions. Spend a few minutes reading them, and if you are working with one of the commentaries, such as *Narada's Way of Divine Love* by Swami Prabhavananda or *The Yoga of Spiritual Devotion* by Prem Prakash, read through the commentary on each sutra from that book and include its insights in your contemplation.

As you read through these, repeat the Sanskrit three times out loud. (This helps you feel the energy in the sutras, which is considerable.) You can also sing it, draw it, or take it into a Hatha Yoga asana.

Here is a contemplation process to use:

- Say the English to yourself (or sing it!)
- Close your eyes, breathe into the heart, and hold the sutra in awareness for a minute or two.
- Open your eyes and write down any insights, experiences, questions, or conclusions about the meaning of the sutra and your relationship to it.

You can also do this process as a partner discussion. Feel free to be as creative with this as you are inspired to be.

Partner Practice:

If you are new to the partner practices of this community, please read the instructions on the handout about Partner Practice on the course page.

Some of you might want to make the entire discussion about your experience of love personal, spiritual, and universal, perhaps using the questions above as prompts. Others might want to do this in the context of analysis of the sutras. If you are using the commentaries in *Narada's Way of Divine Love* or another text, read these as well when you consider the sutras.

Sutra 4

Sutra 4 was included in last week's homework, and we also discussed it in Class II, where I spoke about my own Guru and other beings who had become fully accomplished (Siddha) yogis of love, able to kindle love in others.

The Sanskrit for this sutra is in last week's homework, so here I give the translation as a reference for some further questions.

Obtaining that (bhakti) a person becomes a Siddha, a perfected one, beyond death and fully satisfied.

Commentary: Often, when we first read a description like this or the descriptions of the state of great beings, we automatically count ourselves out. Here's what my teacher said about this state of intense self-realization:

"No one knows how the Siddhas attain their exalted state. They just follow the path, and as the sun rises in the east, that state arises on its own."

On the path of bhakti, attainment comes through grace. Our practices are crucial, but one reason why we can just do the practices and not worry about the outcome is because the outcome is inevitable. That's what he was saying: just do your practice with deep interest, find the practices that tend to open you, do them with a relaxed yet attentive focus, keep asking for grace, and notice what takes you closer to the heart and what takes you away from it. In time, it arises. It is a natural process, requiring effort, for sure, but when effort is there, drawing you closer and closer to the realization of truly awakened love.

Question: What beliefs and assumptions do you have about perfection on the spiritual path? Are there judgments involved about what is "true" attainment and what isn't?

Question: Ask inwardly, "What does it mean to be a Siddha?" and notice what insight comes up.

Question: Then ask, "What would I, with my unique personality, concerns, karmic circumstances, be like as a fully accomplished (Siddha) being?" Ask the question inwardly and notice what arises within you. What you are asking is for your unique nature as an awakened being to reveal itself to you.

Practice: Imagine yourself as an awakened being. How would you look? How would you move, eat, talk to people? See if you can spend half an hour acting as if you were awake. Notice that there is intuitive wisdom within you that gives you clues about how to do this!

If you are working with a partner, this is a great practice to start with. Each of you can take a couple of minutes to create this bhava (attitude) within. Then have your conversation AS awakened beings. How does this affect the interaction?

Sutra 5

यत् प्राप्य न किञ्चिद् वाञ्छति न शोचति
न द्वेष्टि न रमते नोत्साही भवति ॥

yat prāpya na kiñcid vāñchati na śocati na dveṣṭi na ramate notsāhī bhavati

yat: that (bhakti)
prāpya: achieving
na: not
kiñcid: anything
vāñchati: desires
na; not
śocati: grieves
na; not
dveṣṭi: hates
na: not
ramate: rejoice in fleeting happiness
notsāhī: without passion for personal concerns
bhavati: becomes

Achieving bhakti, one becomes completely desireless—grieving not, not rejoicing in fleeting happiness, without passion for personal concerns.

Question: Why would the experience of bhakti make you desireless? Have you ever had the experience of wanting nothing from someone you love? From God? Was this feeling arising out of love?

Question: in your experience, what is the difference between yogic desirelessness and apathy?

Question: Why do the sages tell us that desireless state must arise on its own? How has trying to practice renunciation before it arises spontaneously been a source of contraction in your life? On the other hand, how has the discipline of letting go of distracting desires helped your progress?

Question: The sages say that our passion for personal concerns arises from feeling separate from God. How does the practice of offering your actions to the divine help cure that feeling of separation?

Practicing Desirelessness: When you feel intensely desirous of anything or afraid that you will lose something you want or that a situation won't work out for you, offer your desire to the Beloved. Notice the emotional effect. Does it create more ease and freedom within you? (We'll discuss this practice more next week.)

Sutra 6

यज्ज्ञात्वा मत्तो भवति स्तब्धो भवत्यात्मारामो भवति ॥

yaj-jñātvā matto bhavati stabdho bhavati ātmārāmo bhavati

yaj: with that (bhakti)

jñātvā: knowing or realizing

matto: intoxicated

bhavati: becomes

stabdho: stunned or overwhelmed

bhavati: becomes

ātmārāmo: rejoice in the self

bhavati: comes to

With a realization of bhakti, one becomes spiritually intoxicated; one becomes overwhelmed; one comes to rejoice in the Self.

Commentary: All the bhakti saints say the same thing: divine love is intoxicating. The moments when this love arises carry intense Shakti (remember, Shakti is bhakti!) and a profound infusion of energy, that if strong enough, will sometimes “slay” thought or overwhelm you with unusual energy. In such a state, if you keep following the movement of energy inward (rather than projecting it outward or letting your mind get mixed up in it), you can experience a kind of inner reveling that comes from the fact that your shakti-filled feeling of love or joy or warmth activates the inner heart.

The more you can let yourself feel this when it arises, the more natural it becomes, and the more you realize that this is indeed the state that satisfies desires! It’s a good idea to remember to say. Thank you to the Shakti when such experiences occur.

In the early stages of spiritual intoxication, it might feel hard to function, so you might tend to shut it off. Generally, our early experiences of intense bhakti are temporary, but the more you can cultivate the feelings when they arise, the more they will assimilate into your inner fabric.

Question: Notice your reaction to this sutra. Does this state of intoxication feel familiar? Unfamiliar? Is it something you long for? Is there a part of you that feels that it isn’t possible?

Question: If you have experienced this intoxication, what were the circumstances? What triggered it?

Practice: (this is a direct suggestion from Ramakrishna!) Ask the divine mother, Shakti, to open your heart to bhakti. When you feel an inkling of desire for devotional love, turn that into a prayer, like “Please help me to realize love in my own unique way, and to keep turning that love towards the Beloved in the heart and in others I know!”

Sutra 7

सा न कामयमाना निरोधरूपत्वात् ॥

sā na kāmaya mānā nirodharūpatvāt

sā: that (bhakti)

na: not

kāmaya mānā: arising from desire

nirodharūpatvāt: the nature of inner stillness

Spiritual devotion does not arise from desire because it is of the nature of inner stillness.

Commentary: Here, Narada stakes out the recognition that bhakti is a yogic state, connected to Sutra 2 of the Yoga Sutra (yogas chittavritti nirodhaha—yoga is the cessation of thoughts in the mind)

In my experience, devotional feelings do not necessarily need your mind to be still. The feeling of bhakti can be present even when the mind is racing! The thing is that spiritual love can be accompanied by the desire to immerse yourself in the Beloved, whether inwardly or in the form of another person (such as a friend, lover, or child), or in the form of a sage or teacher (who is also, of course, another person), or in the form of a deity.

That said, longing for devotion is a form of desire, and because desire itself is a creative force, your longing for devotion or longing for the Beloved, or longing for Truth are in themselves psychoactive and draw you closer to the experience you are looking for. Ordinary desire also bears fruit, though not always immediately. But when ordinary desires are fulfilled, they bring karmic baggage, creating situations that entangle us and which we then have to deal with. Desire for the Beloved doesn't create karma in the ordinary sense, but what it does do is create an alchemy that gradually turns you into a receptive vessel for love.

Question: Contemplate the difference between “worldly” or “ordinary” desires and desire for the Beloved, desire for love, desire for truth. As you do, really try to feel into how you experience the energy of both types of desire.

Practice: The next time you feel a desire—even something small like the desire for a piece of pizza or a cup of coffee—imagine yourself offering the thing you want to the Beloved. Then, indulge the desire if that feels right—but notice whether there is a difference in your enjoyment of it once you have offered.

Other Texts to Contemplate:

The Rumi Poem from Class, May 19:

If you are drawn to it, consider using this poem as a text. Take each line and contemplate how you understand it, what insights it arouses, how his teachings compare to other yogic teachings.

This is love: to fly heavenward.
To rend, every instant, a hundred veils.
The first moment, to renounce life.
The last step, to fare without feet.
To regard the world as invisible,
Not to see what appears to oneself.
“Oh heart,” I said, “May it bless thee
To have entered the circle of lovers,
To look beyond the range of the eye,
To penetrate the windings of the bosom.”

What are some of the veils that you are aware of in yourself? Remember, we talked about two kinds of veils or disguises that the Beloved assumes. One is the disguise of form, the belief that an individual form is the source of love. So here, to rend the veil might mean to look past the appearance or form of this world. Another type of veil is our internal blocks and barriers. What are some others?

Question: regarding the 6th line, “Not to see what appears to oneself,”: consider how a situation you’re involved in that feels difficult or obstructive might be an appearance. What happens when you consider the situation to be an appearance, not necessarily real? Can you see through the appearance, and does it ease your heart?

Question: What does it mean in your practice to you to “penetrate the windings of the bosom?” especially if you take “bosom” to mean your internal emotional, and intellectual complexities? How should they be penetrated, and why is this practice so essential to discovering the Beloved?

Question: Next time you feel a block arising that is keeping you from opening to love, notice what it’s made of. Is it a thought, a belief, an energy? How does it change your relationship to it if you see it as a veil? How would you rend the veil without aggressively trying to push it away?

We’ll discuss this more next week.