

## I. Receiving Love: Key to Life, Key to the Spiritual Path

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### Love Pervades Our Existence

My root spiritual teacher, Nyoshul Khenpo, has said that a moment of enlightenment is a moment when we realize “the blessings that are always pouring forth.” We are, by nature, endowed with qualities of absolute goodness—purest love, compassion, wisdom, and tranquillity. Those radiant qualities are intrinsic to our being. They are some of the “blessings” to which Khenpo refers.<sup>2</sup> A moment of enlightenment is the moment that we newly notice such “blessings” as having been all around us, and within us, from the beginning. Whenever we are ready to notice, we can sense their healing, liberating energy pouring forth right here, right now.

One such radiant quality is unconditional love; the kind of love that doesn't care what someone has thought or done but simply wishes him deep well-being and joy. It's like the unconditional and unreserved love that a wise, devoted parent has for her child. That capacity of love is within each of us and has been active all around us, pervading our world from the moment we were born.

The claim that love pervades this world may not sound real to you but not because it isn't true. Rather, many of us haven't learned to pay much attention to countless moments of love, kindness, and care that surround us each day: a child at the store reaching for her mother's hand, an elderly stranger at the park who smiles upon a

young family, a grocery clerk or waitress who beams at you with kindness as she hands you the change.

The “blessings that are always pouring forth” include the pervasive power of love that has permeated our lives, peeking at us through the eyes of many persons all along. Think, for example, of someone whom you adored to be near when you were a child. A parent or grandparent, a special aunt or uncle, a family friend or teacher—someone it felt wonderful to be with. Why did you like so much to be near that person? Probably because they radiated a wish of love to you, the simple wish for your well-being and happiness, through the quality of their presence, their words, their play with you, or simply through their smiling eyes when you came near. Try to remember someone like that from your childhood right now. Hold that person in your mind for a moment. Recall how it felt to be near him or her. That’s what it is like to receive the love that just wishes for your happiness. We like to be near people like that because we have a deep need to receive their unspoken love, their wish for our happiness, to drink up its life-giving goodness.

## Rediscovering the Love in Your World

That radiant blessing of love has been coming to us from the start, not just from a few people close to us, but also from many not personally known to us or forgotten. So many have offered themselves to us quietly, unnoticed, and unremarked upon, such as those who served in our school parent-teacher groups, who coached sports for us as small children, who taught us music and clapped when we played, who watched over us with kindness and care wherever we ran and played. Countless such adults offered themselves each day from a simple, loving concern for the children of those towns, including you and me. Then there are all the adults who put loving

care into their work for us, as our teachers, doctors, nurses, social workers, craftsmen, bakers, librarians, waitresses. Yet we may never have noticed the extent of such care and consideration. No one actually verbalizes: “Out of loving concern for all the children in this neighborhood, including you, I am helping to build this playground,” or “I am now sending you the wish of love; that’s why you like to be near me.” And the child doesn’t think, “I am now receiving the wish of love.” We overlook it or just take it for granted. So we may never become conscious of how much loving care is in our world and how pervasive it has been all along.

Then as we grow older, we learn to pay attention to things that society considers more real and significant than the loving care of all those people. According to the social discourse around us, it seems much more important to identify those whom we should hate, fear, or compete with for affirmation, power, and wealth. Meanwhile, television news and magazines focus our communal attention each day on the horrible things that some people have done to others, as if that is all that happened throughout the entire world that day.

Much of our discourse is spent propping up this negative worldview: “Oh, yes, I know what you mean, my relatives are horrible too.” “I can’t stand that political leader either.” “Can you believe how stupid those people are?” As adults our attention has become so focused on the unloving aspects of our life and world, we easily overlook the love embodied in countless small daily gestures of kindness. We’ve learned to ignore that and to shut it out.

We have become so smug in our cultural cynicisms that we don’t notice how the fuller reality of everyone we talk about has routinely escaped our notice. Even the people we generally look down upon have had at least moments of integrity and kindness. Even in homes that we took to be unloving, there were some faltering gestures of kindness and support or social service workers and schoolteachers struggling to make the lives of children and families better.



The truth is that very few of us would have survived our childhood had it not been for countless, now mostly forgotten, acts of loving kindness extended to us.

In addition, there are people in the world and throughout history who have benefited many persons beyond their personal life, people whose way of being embodies such powerful concern for others and for the world that they epitomize our greatest human potential, such as Shakyamuni Buddha and Jesus, St. Francis, Martin Luther King, Gandhi, Mother Teresa, and the Dalai Lama. Such potent spiritual beings have radiated their love to all of us without discrimination. But within modern, secular worldviews, many of us have forgotten how to acknowledge and to receive the liberating power of such love. Instead, we've learned to ignore it.

Our society provides no curriculum or schooling on how to notice so much love or to recognize the many people who have transmitted its life-giving power. Most of us haven't been taught that to receive love deeply and transmit it wholeheartedly is a real human possibility, that it can be learned, and that to do so is the key to our deepest well-being, our spiritual life, and our capacity to bring more goodness into this world.

So, as adults, we need to become newly aware of the love that has infused our life all along, to turn our attention to it afresh with the eyes of a child. To do so is to become conscious of the tremendous capacity of love that even now permeates our being—to open to it, heal in its life-giving energy, and participate in its power to renew our world. We can awaken to the deepest goodness in ourselves and others. We can learn to recognize and commune with “the blessings that have always been pouring forth.”

The first step is to learn to pay new attention to what has been ignored.

## Reawaken to Love First by Noticing It

*At the Corner Store*

A poem by Alison Luterman

It was a new old man behind the counter,  
skinny, brown and eager.  
He greeted me like a long lost daughter,  
as if we both came from the same world,  
someplace warmer and more gracious than this cold city.

I was thirsty and alone. Sick at heart, grief-soiled  
and his face lit up as if I were his prodigal daughter

returning,  
coming back to the freezer bins in front of the register  
which were still and always filled  
with the same old Cable Car ice-cream sandwiches and  
cheap frozen greens.

Back to the knobs of beef and packages of hotdogs,  
these familiar shelves strung with potato chips and corn chips,  
stacked-up beer boxes and immortal Jim Beam.

I lumbered to the case and bought my precious bottled water  
and he returned my change, beaming  
as if I were the bright new buds on the just-bursting-open  
cherry trees,  
as if I were everything beautiful struggling to grow,  
and he was blessing me as he handed me my dime

over the dirty counter and the plastic tub of red licorice  
whips.

This old man who didn't speak English  
 beamed out love to me in the iron week after my mother's  
 death  
 so that when I emerged from his store

my whole cockeyed life—  
 what a beautiful failure!—  
 glowed gold like a sunset after rain.

Frustrated city dogs were yelping in their yards,  
 mad with passion behind their chain-linked fences,  
 and in the driveway of a peeling-paint house  
 a woman and a girl danced to contagious reggae.

Praise Allah! Jah! The Buddha! Kwan Yin,  
 Jesus, Mary and even jealous old Jehovah!

For eyes, hands  
 of the divine, everywhere.<sup>3</sup>

What is remarkable about this poem is not that the old man extended such love. Many people are extending such love, the simple wish for another's happiness—and have been since the day we were born. What is remarkable to me is that the poet, Alison Luteran, was willing to *notice* it. Even during the "iron week" after her mother's death, she noticed the love that a little stranger radiated to her from behind a store counter. It was natural to think of the clerk as a foreigner, someone who didn't even speak the same language. But moved by his simple love, which asked nothing in return, Alison found herself participating in a more subtle level of communication with him, a silent language of grace and blessing, "...as if we

both came from...someplace warmer and more gracious than this cold city."

Even more remarkable than her willingness to notice such love was her willingness to *receive* it. The simple act of accepting this stranger's wish for her happiness empowered her to experience the world in a completely different way. To accept that wish of love evoked a natural awe toward her own "cock-eyed" life, which now "glowed gold like a sunset after rain." To accept that wish of love brought out her capacity to appreciate and revere all that was arrayed around her: the yelping dogs, the paint-peeling house, the mother and daughter dancing, and the reggae music.

To receive such a simple wish of love quietly opens our minds to an innate wisdom that recognizes the essential goodness of being, the intrinsic goodness of experience itself, the joy of being alive. It brings out the natural wisdom that was hidden in our minds—a purer vision that knows the beings and things all around us to be utterly holy, as if they were all messengers of the Buddha, of God. That is why Alison's poem ends with such appreciation, gratitude, and reverence for "eyes, hands of the divine, everywhere."

To receive love in this way is to become conscious of a fresh, holy world that was somehow obscured by our tired, socially constructed worlds of self-centered worry and cynicism. When someone awakens in a moment of receptivity, as Alison did, to the "blessings that are always pouring forth," the fresh, sacred world that was long ignored suddenly unveils itself. It is self-revealed as one's true home.

## Discover the Benefactors in Your Life

We discover love's transformative and liberating power first by receiving love more fully, then by offering it more inclusively, and



finally by becoming a reflex of it from the ground of our being. That is one way to describe the path to enlightenment. To enter into this process, we need to identify benefactors who have been emissaries of love in our lives. “Benefactor” here means someone who has sent us the wish of love, the simple wish for us to be well and happy, like the store clerk in the poem. Once we start to notice such beings, we find, actually, that there have been many that have radiated such love to us, but we had mostly overlooked or forgotten them.

A benefactor is someone you perceive as such in your own experience; not just someone you *assume* you should pick as benefactor. Your benefactors may be living or not. It makes no difference—the power of love transcends how we think of time.

*Exercise: Learning to Recognize Benefactors*

It’s important to be mindful that benefactors need not be infallible or perfect people. Just allow yourself to become newly aware of moments when someone’s unreserved love came to you—through a kind word, a gesture, a smile, or a comforting presence. It could be someone well known to you or a seeming stranger like the store clerk.

Try to recall someone like that from your childhood right now. Envision his or her smiling presence before you. Recall how good it felt to be near that person. That is what it is like to receive love. Hold that person in mind for a little while, communing with him or her in the simple goodness of their wish of love for you, their wish for your happiness and joy. Take a few minutes just to relax and receive that wish from him or her. Right now.



When you feel ready, try now to think of a few other persons you adored to be near as a child. An uncle or aunt, perhaps? A school-

teacher that you loved to be with? A friend of your parents whom you looked forward to seeing? When I began to do this exercise, my second grade teacher suddenly appeared in my mind’s eye—Mrs. Kirchner, whom I liked so much that I accidentally called her “mom” at school. So that is why I liked to be near her, I realized. She wasn’t just teaching; she was expressing her love for her students *through* her teaching. Another time, two close friends of my parents came suddenly to mind—Ted and Yvonne, with their smiling faces radiating kindness to me as a small child. Then there was my uncle Morton, who expressed his love with silly jokes and by snitching some of my french fries when I wasn’t looking—while making sure I would catch him in the act.

When you have thought of a few such benefactors in your life, imagine them before you one by one or all together. Mentally hold the smiling faces of those benefactors before you; then relax and just accept the simple goodness of their wish for your well-being and happiness, their wish of love for you. Take time for this right now, accepting, receiving, and enjoying the power of their wish. There is nothing more important to do.



If you do this exercise repeatedly over time, you will progressively recognize more benefactors not only from your early life but from other periods as well, right up to the present. Even now there are persons you have probably overlooked who make a wish for your happiness, but you hadn’t realized how important and life-giving it was to pay attention to them.

As practice progresses, you may find yourself widening your range of benefactors by spontaneously recalling instances when you were the recipient of unconditional love, even from people that you long characterized as unloving! One meditator, who had a particularly difficult relationship with his mother over the years, told me how he



found himself recalling a scene from his early childhood during a meditation session on love. He had been in a fever, foggy with delirium, when his mother came to soothe him by placing her hand on his stomach—a gentle, healing touch. Even after all these years, the memory of that simple, loving gesture suddenly reawakened. Again, we are not looking for infallible persons; just moments when genuine, unreserved care came through.

Feel free to include your pet as a benefactor. Pets often take such joy in our happiness that it's natural to include them among our benefactors.

### Importance of Spiritual Benefactors

Besides benefactors recalled from your personal life, it is important to learn to recognize a second kind of benefactor when it makes sense to you—deeply spiritual persons in your world, past or present, who function as spiritual benefactors for you. These are persons that you feel embody great goodness, a force of love and compassion that extends to all without partiality, including yourself. These may be people in your life whose fundamental goodness and way of being profoundly influenced you. If you have a mentor or teacher who inspires your spiritual practice, he or she would be included here. You could also include the teachers of your own spiritual teacher. Persons most profoundly holy to you, such as Shakyamuni Buddha or Jesus, would fall into this category. Try to identify ones *you* feel to be such sacred beings, true to your own maturing sense of that, without trying merely to conform to others' assumptions.

You probably have not had personal acquaintance with all your spiritual benefactors. Some may be people who inspire you from afar, whether still living or not—holy beings, prophets, and spiritual activists such as the Dalai Lama, Teresa of Avila, Martin Luther King, Mother Teresa, Martin Buber, Ramakrishna, St. Francis,

Rumi, Thich Nhat Hanh, Dorothy Day, Ramana Maharshi. Such beings may truly inspire or guide you as you read their writings, hear their stories, or gaze upon a picture of them and feel their goodness coming through. Indeed, you can keep a picture of such a person near you for that purpose. One meditator I know keeps a picture of Mr. Rogers, the fatherly television personality and minister who helped generations of American children feel at home in this world.

Because such spiritually weighty beings have communed so deeply with the very source of love and compassion, the very ground of goodness, we share in that ground when we open to their wish of love, their wish for the fullest well-being and happiness of ourselves and all others. It blesses our life. This is part of the reason that images of the Buddha, the Dalai Lama, and other revered spiritual teachers are so important to Tibetan Buddhists—such figures are sources of spiritual energy and inspiration for those who regularly commune with them in their love and compassion for all.

Try to bring to mind one or more spiritual benefactors now, whether personally known to you or admired from a distance, and imagine their smiling presence before you. Relax and gently open to receive their wish for your deep well-being and happiness, their wish of love that radiates to you and many others. Commune with them in that way for a little while, and enjoy.

### Entering into the Practice of Love

Now you are ready for the meditation below. It can be done in daily practice for about twenty minutes per session. Pause after each demarcated subsection, to give yourself time to dwell on the instruction at hand. When first beginning, if you find it helpful, reread the instruction of one subsection a few times before meditating on it for a little while. Then move on to the next subsection and do similarly.



When you have repeated the meditation a number of times, you will need to look at the written instructions much less. If you would like an mp3 file for audio transmission of the meditations in this book, please consult the ordering information at the end of the book.

## Meditation: Receiving the Healing, Transforming Power of Love

### *Part 1: Receiving Love*

Sit in a relaxed way with back comfortably straight, on cushion or chair, eyes open, gazing slightly downward. Having identified both kinds of benefactors, ones from ordinary life and spiritual benefactors from near or far, bring one or more of each type to mind and imagine their smiling faces before you. Envision them sending you the wish of love, the wish for your deepest well-being, happiness, and joy.

Sensing these wonderful people before you, gently open to their wish of love. Imagine their wish as a gentle radiance, like a soft shower of healing rays. Bathe your whole body and mind in that tender radiance, all the way down to your toes and fingertips. Bask in the loving energy of that wish. Trust it. You don't have to trust every aspect of all benefactors, just the wish of love that they radiate, the simple wish for your well-being and happiness.



Receive the gentle, healing energy of that radiance. As other thoughts or feelings arise, let them be enveloped in this loving luminosity. No matter who you think you are, what you think you deserve, all such thoughts are irrelevant now—just accept the benefactors' wish of love for your deepest

happiness. Trusting this wish more than any limiting thoughts of yourself, receive it into your whole being.

Let yourself rely upon this love, the goodness it comes from, and the goodness it meets in your heart. To rely upon this love more than on your own defensive reactions is to find profound refuge.



Be at ease, open, and accepting, like a puppy lying in the morning sun, passively soaking up its rays. Absorb the soft, healing energy of love into every cell of your body, every corner of your mind. Bathe in this, heal in this, rest in this.



After a little while, join your benefactors in their wish for you. While receiving the radiance of their love, mentally repeat the wish for yourself, using words like these: "May this one have deepest well-being, happiness, and joy." Affirm the words repeatedly in your mind. Try to mean them as you say them, just as your benefactors mean them for you. Like everyone else in this world, you most deeply need and deserve happiness and well-being. Repeat the wish for yourself while accepting your benefactors' love even more deeply into body and mind, communing with them through its radiance.

### *Part 2: Letting Go and Merging into Oneness with the Radiance*

Finally, let go into utter oneness with the radiance, dropping the visualization of benefactors, and releasing any attempt to hold on to any frame of reference. Deeply let be



into that gentle, luminous wholeness beyond separation of self and others. Enjoy just being thus for a little while, at ease, at rest, complete.

Good work! You have completed the meditation.

## We Have to Receive Help if We Want to Offer Help

### *Why Pay So Much Attention to Myself?*

Most participants I meet at retreats and workshops catch on quickly to the profundity of this practice of receiving unconditional love. There is much more to it than meets the eye! Indeed, it eases us experientially into what it means actually to enter the spiritual path. It does so by helping us to become newly conscious of our hidden capacities of unconditional love and wisdom (buddha nature), and to begin to rely on those capacities rather than on ego-centered habits of mind. That is the beginning of authentic refuge in the intrinsic goodness of being, which presages entry into the path of a bodhisattva, a holy one, the path to become a spiritual protector of this world.

Some people have a slightly defensive reaction when first introduced to conscious receiving of love: "I am not comfortable putting so much attention upon myself. I want to turn my attention to helping others, not to myself." Such a reaction is common here in the West, since many of us learned from childhood that to be a good person is to think first of others. Dharma teachings from Buddhism are also frequently misinterpreted to mean that the well-being of others is of a different order than the well-being of oneself. But that represents a failure to understand the deeper implications of concern for others.

If we want to be truly helpful to others, our help must express an authentic care that actually wishes others well. Otherwise, when the

chips are down, our attempts at "helping" become brittle and self-serving. If we want really to help others, we need a strong, enduring attitude of loving care. But where does such an attitude come from? Does it happen simply by turning your attention away from yourself to others? Aren't others a lot like yourself in needing, wanting, and deserving such loving care? If you don't think you ought to receive such love, do you really think that others ought to receive it? After all, they're just like you.

In order to give loving care in a stable, enduring way, we have to be able to receive loving care in a stable, enduring way. Why? Because giving and receiving are of one piece, and because "self" and "other" are not so different from one another. There is a saying: "You can't give what you don't have." People who refuse to receive love find that they have little to give.

### *The Ability to Receive Love Becomes the Ability to Give Love*

Indeed, one reason we have difficulty finding the enduring love we need to help others is that others often bother us. Many others just don't seem so good to us! On the streets, in the tussle of life, we are on our guard against strangers to a greater or lesser extent. But this is related to our brittle sense of self. What bothers us about others, what we dislike or fear in them, are aspects of ourselves that they mirror back at us, aspects we dislike seeing. Until we make deep peace with such aspects of ourselves, unwanted aspects we don't want to see, by learning to receive a love that touches in past them to the intrinsic goodness of our being, we can't open to the intrinsic goodness of others that also lies hidden from our view.

We need to receive love from those who have sent it to us just as we are, with all our flaws, in order to relax into the deeper goodness within us that always deserves such love and to heal there. Then we can offer a love in turn that embraces others with similar flaws, that touches in on their intrinsic worth, mirrors their goodness back



at them, and doesn't give up on them no matter what. Perhaps you can recall someone who mirrored your own inner goodness back at you when you felt most low. Wasn't that a profound help? That is what we are learning to become—someone who has received love so fully that she can offer love to others unconditionally. Therefore, in the practices that follow, our ability to receive love will evoke an ability to give love more enduringly and inclusively than we may have thought possible.

Many people, over many centuries, have taken up a practice like this and have already included us in it—spiritual benefactors who first learned to receive the enduring wish of love from others before them and then radiated that wish to us all. Buddhas, bodhisattvas, holy beings, spiritual teachers—many have blessed us with that radiant wish even before we had heard of them. From them, we can learn to recognize this, acknowledge it, receive it, participate in it, and pass it on. Then our benefactors, by blessing us with their love and compassion, will continue to bless many others through us.

### Establishing a Daily Practice

Try to do this practice of receiving and merging with the radiant wish of love each day for at least twenty minutes at a time. First thing in the morning is a fresh time for it. When first starting this practice, some people tell me they can't recall any benefactors. That's not uncommon, since we may never have been told to identify them. Remember, a benefactor is not an infallible person—just someone, at some time, who wished for you to be deeply happy, well, joyful. Many near or far have wished that, but we probably hadn't learned to notice. These days I pick many kind adults from my early childhood, several teachers and key mentors from school and summer camp, and many others throughout my life, but it required some excavating. In the beginning I didn't have these people in mind. I

didn't even remember most of them. Over time the practice itself began to uncover many who had quietly held me in their wish of love. These are just examples; you will need to find the actual persons who embody that wish for you.

It is also important to make prominent within your array of benefactors the spiritual figures that most powerfully inspire you, such as the Buddha or a central spiritual being of your own tradition. Within the center of the field of benefactors, you would place that weighty spiritual figure, surrounded by your own spiritual mentors or teachers, around whom are all your other benefactors. In my own daily practice, the radiant figure of the Buddha is at the center, surrounded by my spiritual teachers and their lineages, around whom are the other benefactors I recall from this life. At the heart of each is the radiant image of the Buddha, which reminds me of the source of goodness in each of them that communes with my own. If you are a Christian, it would be natural to envision Christ at the center; if a Hindu, then Krishna, Shiva, or Mahadevi. If you are a Jew or a Muslim, you might simply consider God to be the source of your benefactors' radiant love and compassion.

Despite all that's been said, some people still find it difficult in the beginning to accept love for themselves just as they are. If that is true for you, you might try envisioning yourself as you were when you were a child and receive the radiant wish of love in that way. See if that helps you to get started in this profound practice.

I would recommend that you practice the meditation of this chapter daily for some weeks before focusing much on the meditations of the following chapters. The effect of such practice unfolds in its own time. It can't be hurried. I envisage a typical reader reading through this whole book for content but then rereading this chapter and doing a daily practice of its meditation for several weeks. Then you can reread the next chapter and do its meditation daily for several weeks or months, and so on. In this way, the practice can unfold in its own



time, naturally and effectively. You can explore how it works best for you.

### Familiarizing and Progressing

As you become familiar with the meditation of receiving love, several things unfold. First, more and more benefactors occur to you—so many people you had forgotten come crowding in upon you! Aunts, uncles, cousins, grade school teachers, a counselor at camp, a special coach, a smiling stranger who waved you ahead in line, persons who quietly mentored and influenced you in positive ways that you had never consciously acknowledged. Indeed, over time, this simple practice can reintroduce you to your whole life! Many people who were essential to your thriving, long lost to your conscious mind, are rediscovered through this practice. They become a potent influence in your life once again, as if you were joyfully reunited with a host of long-lost friends and mentors.

Through daily practice, the meditation of receiving love softens the hard edges of reactivity to self and other, the hard edges of our life. It helps us to acknowledge and rely upon the deep goodness within and beyond us—to take refuge in the power of genuine love and compassion, to sense it as a real and ever-present refuge whenever we recall it. By learning through this meditation how profoundly we can let be into the simple receiving of love, we also strengthen the skill of letting be into the natural ease of deep inner knowing and peace, the wisdom beyond self-grasping whose practice is introduced in the next chapter.

## 2. Letting Be: Relaxing into Natural Wisdom

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### Reading Tips for This Chapter

This chapter introduces the perspective of the Dzogchen tradition of Tibet, drawing upon quotes from a few of its twentieth-century masters. Some readers will find this material tremendously fresh and beautiful. Others at first may find it daunting. The Dzogchen view is vast and all-encompassing. It is impossible to understand merely by thinking hard about it. Indeed, much of the language is intended to pull us beyond the narrow confines of our usual thinking process. Often the words have an aesthetic function akin to profound, evocative poetry that can transport us beyond our accustomed ways of seeing. Please read the chapter in that spirit, letting it engage not only your thinking mind but your aesthetic appreciation, intuition, and heart. As you first enter into the meditation below, don't worry if you've fully understood the material that precedes it. Rather, let the meditation instructions gently evoke your intuitive capacity to relax deeply and to enjoy the essential goodness of your being beyond self-clinging.

### The Innate Pure Nature of Mind

The fundamental nature of mind is sheer lucidity, free and unfettered by concepts such as subject and object; a profound luminosity free from partiality and fixation, a free-flowing