

Uplifted Heart of Practice | Eight

The Natural Warmth of the Heart

- PEMA CHÖDRÖN

Before we can know what natural warmth really is, often we must experience loss. We go along for years moving through our days, propelled by habit, taking life pretty much for granted. Then we or someone dear to us has an accident or gets seriously ill, and it's as if blinders have been removed from our eyes. We see the meaninglessness of so much of what we do and the emptiness of so much we cling to.

When my mother died and I was asked to go through her personal belongings, this awareness hit me hard. She had kept boxes of papers and trinkets that she treasured, things that she held on to through her many moves to smaller and smaller accommodations. They had represented security and comfort for her, and she had been unable to let them go. Now they were just boxes of stuff, things that held no meaning and represented no comfort or security to anyone. For me these were just empty objects, yet she had clung to them. Seeing this made me sad, and also thoughtful. After that I could never look at my own treasured objects in the same way. I had seen that things themselves are just what they are, neither precious nor worthless, and that all the labels, all our views and opinions about them, are arbitrary.

This was an experience of uncovering basic warmth. The loss of my mother and the pain of seeing so clearly how we impose judgments and values, prejudices, likes and dislikes, onto the world, made me feel great compassion for our shared human predicament. I remember explaining to myself that the whole world consisted of people just like me who were making much ado about nothing and suffering from it tremendously.

When my heart broke, the qualities of natural warmth, qualities like kindness and empathy and appreciation, just spontaneously emerged.

When my second marriage fell apart, I tasted the rawness of grief, the utter groundlessness of sorrow, and all the protective shields I had always managed to keep in place fell to pieces. To my surprise, along

with the pain, I also felt an uncontrived tenderness for other people. I remember the complete openness and gentleness I felt for those I met briefly in the post office or at the grocery store. I found myself approaching the people I encountered as just like me—fully alive, fully capable of meanness and kindness, of stumbling and falling down and of standing up again. I'd never before experienced that much intimacy with unknown people. I could look into the eyes of store clerks and car mechanics, beggars and children, and feel our sameness. Somehow when my heart broke, the qualities of natural warmth, qualities like kindness and empathy and appreciation, just spontaneously emerged.

People say it was like that in New York City for a few weeks after September 11. When the world as they'd known it fell apart, a whole city full of people reached out to one another, took care of one another, and had no trouble looking into one another's eyes.

It is fairly common for crisis and pain to connect people with their capacity to love and care about one another. It is also common that this openness and compassion fades rather quickly, and that people then become afraid and far more guarded and closed than they ever were before. The question, then, is not only how to uncover our fundamental tenderness and warmth but also how to abide there with the fragile, often bittersweet vulnerability. How can we relax and open to the uncertainty of it?

The first time I met Dzigar Kongtrül, who is now my teacher, he spoke to me about the importance of pain. He had been living and teaching in North America for more than ten years and had come to realize that his students took the teachings and practices he gave them at a superficial level until they experienced pain in a way they couldn't shake. The Buddhist teachings were just a pastime, something to dabble in or use for relaxation, but when their lives fell apart, the teachings and practices became as essential as food or medicine.

The natural warmth that emerges when we experience pain includes all the heart qualities: love, compassion, gratitude, tenderness in any form. It also includes loneliness, sorrow, and the shakiness of fear. Before these vulnerable feelings harden, before the

storylines kick in, these generally unwanted feelings are pregnant with kindness, with openness and caring. These feelings that we've become so accomplished at avoiding can soften us, can transform us. The openheartedness of natural warmth is sometimes pleasant, sometimes unpleasant—as “I want, I like,” and as the opposite. The practice is to train in not automatically fleeing from uncomfortable tenderness when it arises. With time we can embrace it just as we would the comfortable tenderness of loving-kindness and genuine appreciation.

A person does something that brings up unwanted feelings, and what happens? Do we open or close? Usually we involuntarily shut down, yet without a storyline to escalate our discomfort we still have easy access to our genuine heart. Right at this point we can recognize that we are closing, allow a gap, and leave room for change to happen. In Jill Bolte Taylor's book *My Stroke of Insight*, she points to scientific evidence showing that the life span of any particular emotion is only one-and-a-half minutes. After that we have to revive the emotion and get it going again.

Our usual process is that we automatically do revive it by feeding it with an internal conversation about how another person is the source of our discomfort. Maybe we strike out at them or at someone else—all because we don't want to go near the unpleasantness of what we're feeling. This is a very ancient habit. It allows our natural warmth to be so obscured that people like you and me, who have the capacity for empathy and understanding, get so clouded that we can harm each other. When we hate those who activate our fears or insecurities, those who bring up unwanted feelings, and see them as the sole cause of our discomfort, then we can dehumanize them, belittle them, and abuse them.

Suppose we spent some time every day bringing the unknown people that we see into focus, and actually taking an interest in them?

Understanding this, I've been highly motivated to make a practice of doing the opposite. I don't always succeed, but year by year I become more familiar and at home with dropping the storyline and trusting that I have the capacity to stay present and receptive to other beings. Suppose you and I spent the rest of our lives doing this? Suppose we spent some time every day bringing the unknown people that we see into focus, and actually taking an interest in them? We could look at their faces, notice their clothes, look at their hands. There are so many chances to do this, particularly if we live in a large town or in a city. There are panhandlers that we rush by because their predicament makes us uncomfortable; there are the

multitudes of people we pass on streets and sit next to on buses and in waiting rooms. The relationship becomes more intimate when someone packs up our groceries or takes our blood pressure or comes to our house to fix a leaking pipe. Then there are the people who sit next to us on airplanes. Suppose you had been on one of the planes that went down on September 11. Your fellow passengers would have been very important people in your life.

It can become a daily practice to humanize the people that we pass on the street. When I do this, unknown people become very real for me. They come into focus as living beings who have joys and sorrows just like mine, as people who have parents and neighbors and friends and enemies, just like me. I also begin to have a heightened awareness of my own fears and judgments and prejudices that pop up out of nowhere about these ordinary people that I've never even met. I've gained insight into my sameness with all these people, as well as insight into what obscures this understanding and causes me to feel separate. By increasing our awareness of our strength as well as our confusion, this practice uncovers natural warmth of the heart and brings us closer to the world around us.

Let us be at peace with our bodies and our minds.

Let us return to ourselves and become wholly ourselves. Let us be aware of the source of being, common to us all and to all living things.

Evoking the presence of the Great Compassion, let us fill our hearts with our own compassion—towards ourselves and towards all living beings.

Let us live so that we ourselves cease to be the cause of suffering to each other.

With humility, with awareness of the existence of life, and of the suffering that happens around us, let us practice the establishment of peace in our warm hearts and on earth.

— Thich Nhat Hanh
