

Caregiving serves as a deeply spiritual practice for many people around the world. From hospital and hospice workers and licensed professionals, to mothers, fathers, and assorted relatives, the work of caring for others offers untold opportunities to practice patience, forgiveness, compassion, and learning to let go. Some people consider caregiving to be the ultimate ego-dissolver. In this contribution psychologist and dharma practitioner Kathleen Dowling Singh, author of *The Grace in Dying* and *The Grace in Aging*, relates her personal experience of the spiritual nature of caregiving. From the often painful struggle to find a workable balance between one's own needs and those of another, to the power inherent in the cultivated capacity to lend our full attention as a healing gift to another, Kathleen offers us the benefit of years of hard-won wisdom.

The Gift of Attention

Kathleen Dowling Singh

In the years of being a mother, a single mother at that, I would often watch wistfully as one friend after another, unfettered and free, took off for this ashram, that monastery, the annual thirty-day retreat. There were, for me, many moments of self-pity, of frustration, even depression. At one point, I began to contemplate the possibility, at least on an intellectual level, that my spiritual practice was right in front of me. There they were: four little ones, lined up and waiting for dinner, needing baths, wanting me to wipe a nose or settle the latest squabble. They were waiting, in short, for my attention.

It has been a long sadhana—and fruitful, far beyond what I could possibly have imagined when I so hopefully mouthed the words, “caring for the children is my practice.” The last child is grown and gone now; grandchildren are growing in number and shoe size. The lessons that I was given as a parent, simply caring for my children, continue to grow in me. They grow as I allow—indeed, implore—them to touch and open my heart and as I deepen them through more formal, deliberate practice.

Like many others, I entered into the task of caregiving with a self-centered mind, without preparation, with virtually no insight, and with no guidance whatsoever in caregiving as a spiritual path. It was a rocky road that I traveled, often gracelessly, before I came to a point where the truths of the path of caregiving finally began to resonate in me. Even so, I consider myself blessed to have had even the slightest awareness that caregiving *can* be a spiritual practice. So many caregivers, especially those in the helping professions, share stories of struggling to find a balance between their recognition of the great need for their work and the burnout they feel. I cannot imagine how hard, how lonely, how depleting it must be for all of those engaged in caregiving who have no spiritual practice at all.

Nearly 75 million people in the United States are involved in the care of a loved one. Hundreds of thousands of us have chosen to be members of the helping professions. In many ways, especially as medical advances extend life, we are increasingly becoming a nation of caregivers. Most of us have engaged or will engage in this role, in one way or another—either professionally or for family—at some time in the

course of our lives. Certainly, when we begin to grow in compassion, our natural tendency will move us toward being a caregiver, in the most basic sense of the word, for all those around us. With this awareness, it seems wise to examine some of the deeper levels of this role so many of us will choose or will have chosen for us.

Caregiving, in and of itself, obviously, does not necessarily lead to spiritual awakening. If so, all parents and therapists and health professionals, for example, would already be buddhas. But, with the slightest openness to the daily lessons, and a mind predisposed to recognize those lessons, those who walk on the solitary path of caring for others can begin to discern some wisdom. With our deeper recognition and commitment to growth, increasingly obvious signs of the benefits of cherishing others begin to light our way. They illuminate a path out of the painful struggle, experienced by so many caregivers, between the needs of self and the needs of others.

In any kind of caregiving, we discover—actually, we are forced to discover—that there is little room for the self-centeredness with which we ordinarily enter a situation. This self-centeredness is the mind in which we habitually operate, no matter how good our intentions. Our self-centeredness, it quickly becomes obvious, does not lead to beneficial results for the person for whom we are “caring”—nor, ultimately, does our self-centeredness benefit us.

To speak of self-centeredness in this way is not to imply that martyrdom is the path to take. It is to isolate and illuminate self-centeredness as the cause of our stresses as we seek to balance the needs of self and other. Of course, we must always exercise adequate and loving self-respect. Of course, we need to keep ourselves healthily nourished. An empty cup doesn't “runneth over.” When we truly need nourishing, release, or respite, it is beneficial to keep our wise and compassionate attention on our own essential needs for healthy maintenance.

Honest, self-honoring care for ourselves, however, can be easily distinguished from self-centeredness. Self-centeredness is self-cherishing, a mind that values my own desire for happiness and freedom from any suffering no matter how slight, far above the desire of anyone else for that same happiness and freedom. Although we were certainly not taught in our culture to recognize this to be true, the mind of self-cherishing is always a problem, and is a particularly big problem in caregiving.

Keeping our attention primarily on ourselves, on our own self-cherishing

desires and aversions, in a time of being with another who needs care, simply doesn't work. All hell breaks loose. The practical tasks that need to be done go unattended and the "to do" list just gets longer and more overwhelming. The person not receiving the needed physical and/or emotional care suffers, requiring even more care. We ourselves endure the hellish emotions of frustration, unhappiness, guilt, burnout, and resentment—all the fiery waves of an unpeaceful mind. Again and again, we are forced to recognize the truth, as the Jesuits put it, "long hidden in plain view." Keeping our attention fixed in the small world of our own self-centeredness causes problems on every level.

The control and appropriate placement of our attention is one of the keys to maintaining equanimity in caregiving. When we are with another, engaged in caregiving, it is both kind and wise to deliberately and whole-heartedly choose to take our attention off of our self. Doing this, we find that, placing our attention on another, everything else falls into place. The switch of the object of attention and of cherishing, from self to other, is the cause of greater happiness all around. Our inessential needs and wishes and problems simply dissolve for those moments of consciously choosing to place our attention on—and cherish—another.

The lessons of caregiving are straightforward and plainspoken. They are starkly simple. They may even be deceptively simple, just as Jesus of Nazareth's advice to "love one another" is often thought to be understood just by being heard. The lessons of caregiving have just that same quality of easily-overlooked obviousness. In Presence, we connect. The baby calms when we hold her, cuddle and warm her, look into her eyes. The teenager actually shares the confusion with which he's struggling when we simply sit with him, side by side, on the couch. The crankiness of the elderly man diminishes when we stop and listen to the stories he feels called to share. The person who is seriously ill, even too weak to talk, shows how meaningful our even momentary presence is in a glance, or a tiny hand squeeze, or a relaxation of breathing. These lessons stare us in the face, wide-eyed and direct, waiting only for our recognition.

As we grow into being authentic, spontaneous givers of care, a first shocking moment when we turn our view outward. we begin to recognize what is being revealed around us—in circumstances, in other people. We are forced to acknowledge that each and every "other" has the same desire for happiness and the same desire to avoid suffering, in equal measure to our own. When we respond to that fact appropriately, when we are offering another human being

the precious gift of our attention—actually being with him or her—we begin to see that the signs of meaningful appreciation, the evidence of the power of nurturing, and the sweet and quiet joy of connection are everywhere apparent.

We have all been conditioned in the West, so impoverished in our abundance, with the consumer's fearful thought that giving might diminish or take away from "I" and "me" and "mine." With the gift of attention, we find that what appears to be a gift from us to another is, in fact, a gift to both the apparent receiver and to the apparent giver. What really creates true happiness in the other also really creates true happiness in us—a simple, natural, lovely symmetry. The beauty of a virtuous action, as Buddha taught 2500 years ago, is that its benefit is universal. This profound truth is revealed, always—if we look—in the simplicity of caregiving.

The Importance of Being Understood

Every form of caregiving is a treasury of teaching. The treasure is offered whether the caregiving occurs in the form of caring for babies and children, the lonely, the elderly, the frail and infirm, the disturbed, or the dying. It is also offered simply caring for the person who next walks in through the front door or sits by our desk at the office. Each act of care brings us into the realm of the private, the intimacy of connectedness. Although often unacknowledged and rarely honored in our public culture of outward accomplishments and achievements, we do come to know that these millions of vital, private, and hidden acts of caring sustain everyday life. They allow us to recognize and respond to the precious fragility of the individual in a world of often brutal indifference. Each act of caring holds the key to understanding, quite simply, how we may live together well. Each act of caring illuminates how we may live together at a deep and meaningful level of mutual benefit.

Caregivers access deep and direct insight into what's valuable, virtuous, and skillful, in terms of fostering human growth. What's valuable, virtuous, and skillful is the gift of our attention. Our simple attention, offered to another person, is the most underused of human resources, the least costly, the most freely available, and—without doubt—one of the most powerfully beneficial.

The gift of our complete and focused attention is one of the kindest gifts we can give each other. It confers on both parties, apparent

giver and apparent receiver, a sense of meaning, of value, of mattering. Why? Because, in the moment of the gift of attention, we are actually *present*. Present, our attention is deliberately and single-pointedly placed. Present, our very existence in that moment is meaningful. Whenever we ingather or re-collect our attention, the vividness, the depth and breadth, and the subtlety of our awareness automatically increases. So accustomed to our own self-centeredness, we find that when we focus our attention on another, that "other" becomes more real for us, more meaningful, and we become naturally more compassionate. The sense of the solidity of our "I," obscuring our heart of compassion, begins to thin.

If we take a moment to think about it, among the most precious moments in our life are those moments when we have felt ourselves to be most deeply understood by another human being. If we recall just one of those moments, we can see that, in it, our feeling of being understood occurred when another person kindly and deliberately bestowed upon us the gift of his or her attention.

With attention, we feel heard, seen, understood. The power of that experience cannot be overestimated. So often, we are held back in an inner way by perceived obstacles, "stuck" until a felt need can find expression. When we are given the space to express ourselves, knowing that what we express will be received, there is a new freedom of movement from the ultimately inessential to the ultimately essential.

I have come to think that "being understood" is sometimes even more of a fundamental human need than "being loved." We are nurtured in the gift of another's attention. It provides the safest of places in which to share our vulnerabilities, fears, doubts, and triumphs. We are known in our utterly unique, endearing, earnest, and creative attempts toward peace, both inner and outer. To feel understood in any and all of these private facets of human experience—sadly, so rarely shared—is to feel validated in our own being. We feel reconnected to our common humanity in the moment of being present with each other.

Deepening the Lessons of Caregiving

Caregiving provides homespun Dharma, the gradually developing insight arising from living everyday life with and in caring. Slow learners that we are, fumbling often (I remember, with regret, the many times my children called to me: "Earth to Mom"), we still do eventually catch a glimpse of wisdom out of the corner of our eye. In each and every moment of caregiving, we have the

opportunity to prolong our glimpses of insight into genuine understanding. Our caring attention, voluntarily offered, nourishes others—and nourishes us, too, in the process.

Caregiving both applies and elicits teachings. There is a jewel shining through our experience of the pressures and strains of caregiving's demands, a quintessentially pivotal and transforming Dharma teaching. It is this: in learning to cherish others, we diminish our own self-cherishing—the cause of all of our own suffering and of all our unskillful, unhelpful, or insensitive actions relating to others, with which we so often bruise them in our wake.

The lessons we begin to learn in the chaos of caregiving, where we are often tossed about and toss ourselves about, unprepared and unguided, are haphazard. Our grasp on them is not always so sure. The lessons are glimpsed amidst the messiness of laughter, diapers, medicine, paperwork, tears, fears, other pressing commitments, and crisis.

How to deepen these lessons we glimpse in caregiving? That becomes the question. How do we directly apprehend these insights with crystalline clarity? How do we make them our own? Human suffering in seven billion individual aspects calls for compassion and wisdom and skill. How do we develop these qualities in ourselves? And how do we express or offer them in ways that do not leave us depleted?

The sophisticated, deliberate teachings of Mahayana Buddhism hold authentic answers to such fundamental questions. They offer a veritable treasure house of insights and practices for all of us who are engaged in caregiving, occupied with the struggle to balance what we so often perceive as conflict between the needs of self and others.

Buddha taught that our very thinking about this perceived conflict is mistaken. Self-cherishing will never bring happiness. Our own happiness and the happiness of others are not in conflict. Happiness is not, all worldly thought to the contrary, a commodity that decreases for us as it increases for others, nor does it reside in the manipulation of external circumstances. Happiness is, rather, a state of mind. Even if such an inner peace seems unattainable in many of the chaotic moments of caregiving, even if we feel at our lowest ebb, countless thousands who have followed the path of Dharma bear testimony to the truth that inner peace is most assuredly within the capacity of all of us to cultivate. It is, after all, a facet of our essential Buddha nature—our birthright as living beings.

Unlike the glimpses and brief tastes of insight afforded to us in the chaos of caregiving, the Mahayana teachings are dazzling in their

clarity. Deepening the lessons of caregiving, these teachings are even more piercing in their insistence on the absolute necessity of developing a mind of compassion. The teachings offer deliberate methods: a precise, ordered, progressive, and brilliantly insightful path. Well-followed, the path of Dharma ripens the insights of caregiving to their realized perfection. The teachings of Buddha lead us, in short, with great wisdom and efficiency, to a mind that has exchanged its object of cherishing from self to others and, then, to the precious mind of universal compassion.

The practice of Dharma allows us, simply, to transform our minds into pure minds, our hearts into loving hearts, our very being into benefit for all beings—our self and others. It leads us to exactly what we've been struggling to find: genuine and growing happiness, all around.

Buddhist wisdom suggests that, if we are in the midst of the chaos and stresses of caregiving, we actually stop for a moment. Neither martyrdom nor resentment are viable paths to the happiness we seek. Instead, we set aside any time we can manage to set aside—an hour, twenty minutes, even five minutes—to meditate, to simply and single-pointedly mix our mind with the noble qualities of awakened presence, qualities such as love and wisdom and compassion. Our meditations, repeatedly practiced with sincerity and faith, familiarize our mind increasingly with virtue, leaving it far more peaceful as a consequence. Our meditations begin to transform us. Our practice more beneficially and more joyfully reorganizes our mind and being at very subtle levels.

We grow steadily and gradually—as Buddha suggests, “drip” by “drip,” one drop at a time filling a bucket. So, rejoicing with each drop of progress, we extend great patience and compassion to all beings, including our self. Judgment does not help here, just continuously renewed commitment. At first, as we try this new way, this deliberate attempt to reduce self-cherishing and to exchange the object of our cherishing from self to other, it may feel difficult, unnatural, forced. Whenever discouragement raises its head—in whatever form—it helps to think not so much how hard this new practice is but how hard it is *not* to have this new practice. This is a path out of burnout and into happiness. It is helpful to remember that we are doing the practice precisely because we have a larger goal. We are not just trying to make it until the end of our workday or last until respite help comes or the kids grow up. We are working toward a mind that is indestructibly peaceful, a being that is a genuine benefit both for our self and for

others.

Sometimes slowly, sometimes dramatically, the transformations effected by our practice begin to illuminate even our most ordinary mind and actions. Meditation practice allows the breathtakingly beautiful and blissful qualities of our own Buddha nature to gradually emerge in our hearts and in our lives. This is where life is meaningful. This is where it is more than worth the effort.

Buddhist wisdom also suggests that we continue our practice during our "meditation breaks"—i.e., the rest of our lives, the millions upon millions of moments, ordinarily so squandered. The practice of giving—one of the six perfections: giving, patience, moral discipline, effort, concentration, and wisdom—is an easy practice to undertake as we live our daily lives, as we engage in caregiving. It is a sustained and deliberate effort to gradually live more and more of the precious moments of each day in such a way that the insights, transformations, and growing happiness of our meditation permeate and are applied in all that we do, all that we say, all that we think.

So many caregivers are concerned with decreasing stress. Dharma is a path that will decrease stress; more significantly, Dharma is a path that will increase joy.

The Practice of Giving Attention

The practice of giving attention, included within the practice of giving, can be done anywhere, anytime, with anyone. It is an easy way—and, quite soon, a gratifying way—to start on the path of Dharma.

Not so long ago, I had run down to our local pharmacy. In the small parking lot, I pulled in next to a shiny, immaculate, older white Cadillac—the certain sign in Florida of a senior citizen. At the counter, I stood behind a very elderly lady requesting her prescriptions, clearly the owner of the big white car. Waiting in line, I couldn't help but notice that she was impeccably dressed: a violet-print dress, leather heels with appliqued sections of lilac and purple, a lilac overcoat, even pale lilac gloves. Every silvery hair was perfectly in place. It dawned on me suddenly that this was her big outing for the week—this visit to the pharmacy—and that she had put much time and attention into her appearance for the outing. Noticing someone behind her, she turned to glance at me. And so I simply said to her, "What lovely colors you have on." She beamed. She turned back

two or three times to beam even more. The last look, filled with such sweetness and happiness, was if I were her long-lost lover, home finally from the war. Once she got her medications and made ready to leave the pharmacy, she said goodbye twice, each time with a lovely, loving smile. The warmth and joy that filled me carried me through the day.

Once we begin to open our eyes and minds and hearts, to enter deeply into the present, one of our first recognitions is of our relatedness. I and others—we do not exist quite as separately as we have been accustomed to believing. We begin to appreciate, at a very deep level, the truth of our interbeing. When we think deeply about it, absolutely everything we have and are and can be comes not from ourselves. Everything from which we benefit, including our own bodies, we receive from the kindness of others. This understanding greatly motivates us, helps us genuinely cherish others, and leaves us with the experienced recognition of our deep connection. Recognizing the reality of interbeing, it becomes very clear that the gift of attention is one of the most appropriate of responses.

It is interesting that, although so much of caregiving involves an active, thoughtful, responsive mode of being, it is often thought of as passive. The practice of giving attention is hardly a passive process. The practice of giving attention is an action; it is participatory. Arising from a full heart, the practice demands all that we have to offer of compassion, presence, and whatever wisdom and skill we have managed to acquire. In the demand for all of the virtuous qualities we have to offer another in caregiving, the practice also further develops each of these qualities in us. This is meditation with open eyes, Buddhism in action. It is the recognition that compassion is a necessary and an appropriate response simply because all living beings caught in self suffer. The gift of attention expresses that compassion.

The gift of our attention to another human being allows us to enter a state of communion, of deep listening. Deep listening is 180 degrees from our normal, mindless, ordinary way of listening. Our ordinary way of listening is ego's posture. The gift of attention and the consequent deep listening that it allows arise from a strong and deliberate inner stance, at a deep remove from our usual superficiality and frivolity. It arises from choosing to actually be here, with another, in the present moment.

When we deliberately and consciously practice the gift of attention, it is not with the ordinary mind of self-cherishing that we listen to another

or simply be with another. It is with a much more open and inclusive mindfulness, motivated by compassion. In such deep listening, we listen far more with our hearts than with our ears. It is helpful to think of this experience as "listening with the third ear." The third ear, of course, is the heart—an open heart, unobstructed and undefended by self-centeredness.

It is also helpful to remember that this "listening" can occur without a word being said. Once I sat by the side of an elderly man who was in a hospital, very close to his death. I sat with him for many hours, although he neither knew me nor seemed to know that I was there. For many hours, I simply matched my breathing with his and offered him my full attention. To my surprise, when he spoke several hours later, he thanked me for "not knitting, not reading, not talking on the phone." He thanked me for just sitting with him.

Deep listening, simply being with another, is subtle and involves much more of our being than we ordinarily invest in listening, in being together. We allow the sounds and the silences and the words and the meaning behind the words to touch our heart, such an act enabled by our intention, mindfulness, and full presence. The practice of the gift of attention is an act of commitment, of engaged loving. Recognizing the profundity of the very act of interpersonal communication, we let our whole being resonate with the other person, just as our whole being might resonate with the experience of grace.

Techniques of the Practice

Practicing the gift of attention is simple. Through our daily sitting practice of meditation or contemplative prayer, we keep ourselves aligned in aware presence as we go through our daily lives. Centered, peaceful, with a mind as clear as possible in that moment and a heart as open, we remain prepared for the next human being to arrive, grateful that his or her presence allows us to practice once again, granting us the grace of connectedness.

With each interpersonal encounter, we simply remember the practice of presence. The face, the voice, the presence of another human being becomes the signal to us to offer the gift of our attention. We simply place our attention single-pointedly on the other as the object of our meditation, our entire being open to the other in a never-to-be-repeated moment.

If it is obvious that the other person has no real desire at that

moment to connect, we bestow our full attention while we are together, wish him or her well, and move on to the next moment and the next person. At the least, we have created the space and the opportunity for communion. We quickly become more skillful in distinguishing who wishes to enter that space with us and how he or she wishes to "dance" in it. And we certainly become more adept at "dancing" with each new partner.

Invariably, as we listen to another living being, many responses arise in our mind. Just as when we are sitting to abide in regular meditation, our ordinary mind continues with its deep, pervasive, habitual inner dialogue. It mindlessly follows its own generation of memories, associations, insights, criticisms, judgments, agreements, thoughts of what we want to say or do, thoughts relating to anything in the past prior to this precious moment of communion, thoughts relating to anything we imagine in the future after this precious moment of communion.

The point in the practice of the gift of attention and the deep listening it allows, as in the practice of meditation per se, is not to engage in these inner conversations, not to become wrapped up in them. When we notice them arise, we simply let them float on by. We can trust that they will return to dissolve back into the clear awareness from which they arose, as have the millions of thoughts before them. When we notice them arise, we simply note their floating and return our spacious attention to the speaker.

As we practice the gift of attention, we gain great clarity in our awareness. We begin to recognize the "posture of listening" anytime our attention returns to our own self-centeredness, self-importance, and self-interest. We may notice ourselves spending our time, ostensibly listening, thinking our own thoughts and chafing at the bit to give voice to them. We may notice ourselves, for our own self-cherishing needs and reasons, listening only to certain parts of what another is sharing. We miss not only the nuances but the essence of all that is integral to the interaction. We can recognize this "posture of listening," a clear reflection of our own "I" and its greed for itself, anytime we act interested when we are not. When we search for openings so that we can sneak in our own viewpoint, we begin to quickly recognize our own self-cherishing mind. It is far better to sit with the silence or to let ourselves be moved to speak by our heart alone. And when we do speak, we should always ask ourselves the three questions advised by those in the Sufi tradition. Is what I am about to say truthful? Is it necessary? Is it kind?

We may notice, as we begin to perfect this practice, that we

often place greater value on our own preconceptions, so dearly held in our self-cherishing mind, than on being receptive to the expression of another's human experience. Or we may notice that we feel a need to have "the right thing to say," the solution to the problem, the fix. When we do any of these things, motivated by self-centeredness, we do not see or hear the other. We see or hear only ourselves. And we leave the precious, never to be repeated interaction not only NOT having grown, but actually diminished. We are diminished in the missed opportunity to be present with and grow with another living being. We are diminished in the drain it takes on the self-cherishing mind to adopt the "posture of listening," to feign compassion.

Feigning compassion, we "tolerate" or offer pity or fancy ourselves as "helpers/rescuers." We may find ourselves robotically acting in ways that accord with the unexamined shoulds and oughts and musts in our mind's images of goodness and caring or of professionalism. Feigning compassion, we try either to protect ourselves or to feel good about ourselves. It is self-cherishing that is the source of burnout, of "compassion fatigue," in caregiving. Genuine compassion *doesn't* fatigue. Genuine compassion is simply an inner stance, wishing that suffering and its causes cease and standing committed to their cessation. Genuine compassion naturally enhances both beings.

Our practice of the gift of attention is a perfect mirror for our self-cherishing mind. It reveals every intrusion of "I" with great clarity. We can watch ourselves, catching this mind of self-cherishing whenever it arises. And we transform ourselves, moving toward genuine inner peace each time we let go of a little more of that attachment to "I."

The gift of attention can be seen as the practice of simple mindfulness meditation with our eyes open—and our ears and our heartminds. With the "other" as our object of meditation, we can begin to pierce through the illusory veils of self and other. In regular meditation practice, we move from a feeling of separation between ourselves and our object of meditation to the experience of being absorbed in the object of meditation itself, with no gap between observer and observed. In the same way, with attention completely focused on the "other," we can begin to enter a state of communion with each other—a subtle and sacred moment, indeed.

We can, if we wish, maintain the perspective of "pure view" throughout this practice. That is to say, we can view each person that we meet, with whom we practice the gift of attention, as a Buddha. This pure

view, as with any virtuous action, benefits both people. The other is given cause to realize his or her own awakened essential nature. And pure view allows us to study and practice Dharma in every second of our lives. We receive enormous blessings, the blessings of a Buddha, and these blessings help increase our capacity to be of benefit to all other living beings.

During times of silence with another person, still maintaining the gift of our attention, we can also practice "taking and giving." Taking and giving—in Tibetan, *tonglen*—is a deep practice, working at a breathtaking level of profundity. In taking and giving, we can maintain our attention on the other person, even deepening it, and magnify its benefit beyond measure, in this most beautiful of meditations.

We "take" first, imagining that we are freeing the other person from suffering. This opens the space for him or her to receive the inner peace we are "giving." With practice, we can combine this meditation, its thoughts and intentions, with our breathing. Very simply, with each inbreath, we imagine our compassion growing, like a glowing ember being blown upon so that its brightness and intensity increase. We think, "May you be free from suffering. May I take all of your suffering and negativity upon myself right now. May you be free from suffering." With our compassion, our deep wish that no other living being suffer, we imagine all the suffering and negativity of the other being entering us, because we will it, in the form of dense, thick smoke. We imagine, very strongly, that we do take his or her suffering and negativity upon our self and, in so doing, our own self-cherishing is destroyed. We feel great joy about that. The object of our meditation is joy.

With each outbreath, we imagine our love growing, again like a glowing ember growing in brightness and intensity. We think, "May you be happy. May you find true and lasting happiness. May you find inner peace." With our love, our deep wish that all other living beings experience true and lasting happiness, we imagine that we send out in the form of radiant, white light everything, absolutely everything, of our own goodness and merit to the other person. We imagine that they now have whatever they want, and it gives them pure happiness, whatever it is. And, again, the actual object of meditation is joy.

We continue with each round of breath—inhalation and exhalation—to focus single-pointedly on the visualization and the intention, with a very strong faith that, on a subtle level, we are creating the causes for these wishes to be accomplished.

All of these instructions in the practice are for our intellect. In

order to approach this living meditation, our intellect needs to understand clear methods to practice correctly. The instructions for the heart are far more direct. Simply be the way a wise and caring parent would be with his or her dearest child, the way a grateful and concerned son or daughter would be with a frail, beloved parent; or the way a loving spouse would be with a precious, lifelong companion, now in need. These are the usual jumping-off places for so many of us to expand the inclusiveness of our caring and to extend that spontaneous love eventually to all beings.

The practice of giving attention is, at one and the same time, a rare and precious jewel and as everyday as holding a little one, sitting by a bedside, being with another's sorrow. Deceptive in its simplicity, it is a powerful practice. With it, we bring, with greater ease and greater spontaneity, the care our heart of hearts so wishes to offer others. We also create the conditions for our own being to enter into deeper levels of love, wisdom, and genuine happiness.

How many times have we wished that the next step on our spiritual path would be revealed to us with great clarity? Practicing Dharma in this way, moment by moment, our next step is revealed with each next person who comes along, the next person who can benefit, along with us, from the gift of our attention.