

6 PRINCIPLES for

# BEFRIENDING YOURSELF



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*“I wish I could show you  
when you are lonely or in darkness  
the astonishing light  
of your own being.”*  
- Hafiz

Dear Friend,

***In our roles as psychotherapist and spiritual teacher, we have spoken with thousands of people all around the world who are struggling, overstressed, depressed, anxious or just in search of freedom, peace, and love. We want to share some of the ideas and pointers that people have found helpful over the years...***

Here's the honest truth: Sometimes, no matter how much healing, spiritual, and therapeutic work we've done on ourselves, we just feel stuck, blocked, triggered, defeated, or tired. We feel separate from life, far from where we “want to be,” or think we “should” be. Our usual default or habit is to *go to war with ourselves* in some way. We run from the present moment and life becomes a battleground. And we end up exhausted - physically, emotionally, and spiritually. How can we call off the inner war?

We want to invite you to slow down and tune into the alchemical medicine contained *within* your difficult thoughts and feelings and other “unwanted” states and experiences. To step off the battlefield with life and open to the guidance buried inside you, exactly as you are, now. This guidance is already here, not the product of some exhausting search. Life, or love, is not waiting for you to heal, awaken, or transform. What you seek is here now, unfolding and disclosing itself, and can always be found in the very core of where we have most forgotten to look.

## HOW DO WE BREAK THE CYCLE OF SUFFERING?

At times, all of us find ourselves unwillingly caught in a cascade of looping thoughts, spinning circuits of shame, self-judgement, and internal criticism, and hooked into painful feelings - anger, fear, sadness, loneliness, or uncertainty - that we just can't seem to escape or liberate ourselves from.

We long to feel free and alive again. We long for rest. We long for peace. We long to make the unwanted thoughts and feelings "go away." We want to fix ourselves, heal ourselves, or even awaken ourselves and reach some consistently or permanently blissed-out state of Spiritual Enlightenment that the gurus talk about.

**We rush to "do" something about our pain.** We distract ourselves - with the internet, TV, food, alcohol and drugs, work, relationships, *or even spiritual ideas, beliefs, and practices* - or we simply try to plaster over our negative thoughts with more "positive" ones, engaging some kind of Grand Replacement Project. We scramble to learn "secrets" and master "laws," to "manifest a better life," or to "work towards spiritual states," *anything* to get out of where we are now and into something better, purer, and higher. Into some other moment. Some other Now.

We try everything, engaging self-help techniques or positive self-talk or otherwise trying to "think" our way out of the moment. (Don't forget, obsessive and habitual *thinking* - mindlessly escaping into fantasy, future, and distraction - is one of the very most efficient ways to abandon ourselves and the vulnerable life that is surging to be met within us.)

But no matter how hard we work at it, the negative thoughts and feelings just won't "go away."

And so we end up going into fight, flight, or freeze responses, those automatic reactions hardwired into our nervous systems, either *denying* the pain that is here, *repressing or depressing* it, or just stuffing it into the shadows. Or we unconsciously *act out* our pain, scramble into the relational world to try to purge painful experience, blaming something or someone else for our troubles, or we simply become flooded by our feelings and fall apart. Some of us turn to self-medication: alcohol, drugs, food, or simply overworking, just to numb and forget the pain of being human.

# THE DISCOVERY OF THE SACRED MIDDLE

We can so easily forget about the sacred “alchemical middle,” an alternative to repression or unconscious expression, which is available in every moment; a new and creative pathway in between the primordial pathways of fight-flight-freeze: **The invitation to be present with the difficult material.** Breathe into it. Infuse it with curiosity and love. This is our true route to healing, if we are ready to let go of our suffering.

Here is a principle that has the potential to change your life, if you really take it in:

**TRUE HEALING HAS NOTHING TO DO WITH GETTING RID OF “NEGATIVE” THOUGHTS AND FEELINGS. TRUE HEALING HAPPENS WHEN WE ACTUALLY STOP “TRYING” TO HEAL ALTOGETHER, LET GO OF “HEALING” AS A DESTINATION, AND SURRENDER TO THE PRESENT MOMENT OF LIFE, HOWEVER INTENSE OR UNCOMFORTABLE IT IS. THERE IS UNEXPECTED MEDICINE HIDDEN INSIDE THIS “ALCHEMICAL MIDDLE,” THE WISDOM OF YOUR OWN HEART, RELEASED WHEN YOU TURN BACK TOWARD YOURSELF IN A MOMENT WHEN YOU NEED YOURSELF MORE THAN EVER.**

We want to help you stop struggling against life and truly “befriend” yourself, love and care for yourself - even in a moment when you really want to escape, when you have been caught in habitual and addictive ways of responding, and the trance of judgement, unworthiness, and self-abandonment has taken you over.

We want to show you that even your deepest shame, longings, sorrows, and loneliness are not mistakes, and not “blocks” to freedom and peace at all, but actually forgotten and misunderstood doorways or portals into the life that you long to live.

As Joseph Campbell said, “... **in the cave you fear to enter, lies the treasure you seek.**” Sometimes we have to allow ourselves to feel worse, to bravely touch into the darkness and “negativity” of the moment, in order to find the light, in order to remember our true strength, and get “better.” This is the law of “paradoxical intention,” a concept introduced by psychiatrist Viktor Frankl. The great alchemists and tantric practitioners of

the past also discovered potent medicine buried in the very core of our most difficult emotional states. In order to tap into this wisdom and bring it into our lives and the world, we have to **turn towards the uncomfortable place, however counterintuitive that sounds** - surround and infuse it with our curiosity, attention, love, interest and care, and allow it to disclose its mysteries.

In the following pages are some effective pathways into befriending...

# THE SIX PRINCIPLES

## 1

### STOP TRYING TO BE HAPPY

#### (happiness is not something you can “do”)

There is so much pressure on us these days from society - our friends, family members, social media, and even self-help authors and spiritual teachers - to be “happy,” to be “up,” to be joyful, to be at peace and to have everything “together.” It can be so exhausting, this journey of “becoming”... and especially “becoming happy.”

Happiness is one state among many, one band or flavor of the spectrum of our humanness, a lovely experience, but if we become *entranced* with it, if we become *addicted* to it, we lose touch with the other shades of the spectrum, where profound creativity, realization, and insights may also dwell. If our journey to happiness entails a subtle denial of these other shades, we send parts and pieces of ourselves into the shadow where they will inevitably return (especially in our relationships) in less-than-conscious ways, generating unnecessary suffering for ourselves and others.

We unconsciously seek this kind of one-sided “happiness,” that sense that everything is “up” all the time, clear, free of doubt, certain, sure, positive. But it’s a concept that hurts us in the end, **an impossible ideal** that actually takes us away from ourselves and makes us distrust our “authentic unhappiness.” We forget the wisdom in our “shadow,” that which is hidden in the core of our wounds, in those places we’d least expect to find it. But to learn to trust our deepest experience will go against the grain of a culture and society that have lost contact with the wisdom in the unwanted. It requires a reorganization of our perception and nervous system, and training ourselves to rest and explore and open to the unknown, into unstructured states of being, which is always going to feel a bit risky, shaky, and yet also full of life.

The truth is that we simply aren't *meant* to feel happy, inspired, joyful, and full of energy all of the time. We aren't meant to be "up" all the time, or even most of the time! It's so exhausting trying to stay in any particular state. It's a relief to be allowed to be "down." Imagine how a dear and trusted friend - a partner, a teacher, a therapist, or even a pet or some friend in the natural world - would just *allow* you to be down if you felt down, and not fix or judge you or try to make you "up" again, but simply hold you and allow you to cry if you needed to cry. Held in that kind of unconditional love, great healing could emerge. *Through* the darkness, to the light. This is the power of love.

**We are actually built to contain *all of life*** - the sorrow and loneliness and doubt and exhaustion as well as the joy and excitement, just as the sky is "built" to contain all kinds of weather, and just as a movie screen is "built" to allow all kinds of life scenes to pass through it. There is nothing wrong with you if feelings of sorrow and fear and even despair move through you, just as there is nothing wrong with the sky during even the biggest storm. The sky simply *allows* all of its weather. That is its nature. It doesn't have to do anything except be what it is. Open, loving and vast.

We are actually *meant* to feel down - lost, disconnected, sad, and lonely - sometimes! It's good and healthy to make room in ourselves for this "negative" weather, too - the rain, the snow, the fog, and the thunderstorms as well as the pleasant sunny days. These are *also* sacred and healthy and even life-giving experiences, and we need to take some time in our day to really allow ourselves to feel whatever it is that what we are feeling, even if everyone around us is calling us "negative" or "broken" and trying to fix us and give us advice... or even "enlighten" us. There are gifts that are important for our journey - experiences, feelings, realizations, insights, and discoveries - that are available in states of doubt, confusion, despair, and grief that are simply *not* available in higher, brighter, and more certain states. You are vast, a majestic holding field that contains all of life, all of love's art and creativity. It takes courage to turn from the advice of others, and the advice of our own minds (which is in large part only an expression of past conditioning), and surrender to our genuine present-moment experience. It takes bravery to be authentically as we are, in a world that wants us to be different. Here, in our authenticity, we will find our true happiness - a happiness that is not the opposite of sorrow, a joy that is not at war with darkness.

**The deepest longing in your heart will only be met by discovering this true authenticity**, inside your own eccentricity and wildness, in your unwillingness to go with the status quo if the price tag of doing so is the abandonment of your one unprecedented heart. It is risky to walk your own path, but there is a very unique gift of

creativity inside of you that aches to be allowed into this world, one that is utterly unique and one only you can reveal here.

To be truly happy, you have to be prepared to allow yourself to be truly “unhappy,” however counterintuitive and paradoxical that sounds.

## 2

# TRUE MEDITATION IS NOT WHAT YOU THINK (it’s what you are)

Here is the paradox: when we allow ourselves to be authentically unhappy, to embrace the “negative” aspects of experience, we can actually touch a deeper kind of happiness. The happiness of true self-acceptance, the joy of being exactly what we are. Again, we must embrace this paradox, not try to understand it! As the alchemists remind us, we cannot skip stages, we cannot abandon the moon for the sun or replace one with the other, for the gold we long for is only found in the embrace of *both*.

Befriending ourselves means **giving ourselves a break from the exhausting Self-Improvement Project** that so many of us have become tangled up in, and slowing down, taking a few deep breaths, and allowing ourselves to experience the entirety of the present moment **without trying to fix or change it**, even if it’s uncomfortable or intense or “negative.” To discover for ourselves whether *this* moment truly needs to be improved, or is somehow already complete. Not the picture or idea of “complete” the mind thinks or has been told it needs or requires, but a completeness of the heart, a wholeness, a vastness that is always already present and will never be found by means of more and more acquisition of material things, concepts, experiences, or insights. The completeness and wholeness of the sky, *even in the midst of a storm*.

Meditation doesn’t mean working yourself into a blissful, transcendent, or even relaxed state. These (and many other) states may of course come and go as byproducts of meditation and are also welcome and embraced, but they are not the *goal*. **True meditation has no goal**, however strange that sounds to the rational mind. Meditation is not even a “practice” really; it’s more of an attitude, a way of relating to the moment, dancing and playing with it, leaning in and leaning out of it. Meditation in the true sense

of the word means **getting really curious about your present-moment experience instead of trying to alter it, distract yourself from it, or even to cure, shift, transform, or heal it.** But to truly inhabit and befriend it. And trust it to the core. To even “trust” in those moments when you cannot trust; to accept those moments you cannot accept. Even in the core of our “non-acceptance” and resistance, our



states of doubt and “not being able to trust,” if met in deep embrace, are also doorways to freedom. The goal is not to “shift” or “translate” non-acceptance to acceptance - but to open into the way psyche or soul is appearing now, as valid, workable, and worthy of our compassionate tending.

We can accept that we are in non-acceptance right now. We can trust our doubt. We can experiment with not resisting our resistance. We can allow our non-allowing, and give a big YES to the “No” within. We can allow ourselves to be exactly as we are, the way that beloved friend or pet would allow us.

You could *trust* the weather, even if you didn’t like it. You might say “this isn’t the weather I had hoped for, or wanted, but I *trust* that it’s here today, and it will pass in time. But for now, I’m going to walk out into the rain, the fog, the snow, the darkness....” We can find the rain, the fog, the snow, and darkness inside our own bodies and neural pathways, inside the cells of our hearts and nervous systems, along with their friends the sun, the springtime, the warmth, and the flowering, too. Let’s make room for all of the weather, in any given moment of our lives.

Meditation means **letting the present moment be as it is**, “kindling a light in the darkness”, as Carl Jung put it. Jung also reminded us that we’ll never discover “enlightenment” by “imagining figures of light,” but only by providing sanctuary for the darkness - allowing our repressed fear, the shame, the deep feelings of loneliness and sorrow to emerge into the light of our conscious awareness. In any moment of your life you can simply get curious about what you’re feeling now, what you’re seeing, hearing, smelling, and touching in this very unique instant of your life.

**You can “en-lighten” the moment, instead of waiting forever to become enlightened!**

Beholding the moment as a work of art, rather than something to fix or mend; this is true meditation - seeing any moment through eyes of curiosity and fascination. And you can always begin where you are. No matter how things are going in your life, you can always begin now.

With the way your feet feel. Your hands. With a sense of pressure between the eyes. With the weight of your clothes on your body. With the rising and falling sensations of the breath. With a feeling of joy or boredom, bliss or confusion. With a sense of numbness or emptiness (yes, you can even get curious about your lack of curiosity!). All states - both sacred and profane - and experiences - both pleasant and unpleasant - are *worthy* of your curious attention. Meditation means **falling in love with where you are**, even if where you are is hot and sticky and unpleasant and a bit scary and groundless. Even if you have to begin with falling in love with the part of you that **wants to be somewhere else**. Even this “weather” is not a mistake. Remember the sky...

### 3

## **“ONE MOMENT AT A TIME” (this one idea could save your life)**

Don’t forget, befriending “what is” can only happen **one moment at a time**.

Actually, that’s all we ever have to face. A single present moment. Life is never truly bigger or more overwhelming than that. Present sounds, sensations, images, urges, impulses, fantasies, feelings, thoughts... we only ever have to process, digest or “deal with” a single instant of life.

Nothing more, nothing less.

Take some time to become *curious* about what you're experiencing in a given moment of activation or trigger or stress, instead of shaming or blaming yourself (or others). Don't abandon the moment when you need yourself more than ever.

Slow down, breathe deeply, open your senses, and acknowledge that you've become hooked, triggered, or thrown off center. You have to start by telling the truth of the moment, even if that's humbling (which it often will be!). Start with, "I'm feeling overwhelmed," or "I'm feeling really sad," or "I feel completely lost and exhausted." Know that this, too, is a holy moment, an invitation to meet yourself in a new way and to flood your experience with loving awareness. An invitation into that alchemical middle territory where the opposites (good and bad, right and wrong, sacred and profane) dance, where we discover the wisdom of *immediate experience*, and open to a new more creative response.

This "new, creative response" - choosing differently in a moment of overwhelm and activation - is what in neuroscience is referred to as **neuroplasticity**, that capacity of the brain to form new synapses, to encode new pathways, to rewire. Slowly, over time, as we familiarize ourselves more and more with this middle territory in between the extremes of denial and flooding, finding an "intimacy without fusion," we begin to make new choices, fostering the miracle of neuroplasticity and the unlimited capacity of the human person to renew itself. This process, while having a scientific foundation, is in fact sacred, the expression of an outrageous sort of grace.

**You don't need to "be present" all day. Or even for a few minutes.**

**Don't make "being present" into any kind of goal.**

**You only need to be present to a single moment.**

**Now.**

It is essential to remember that staying with yourself **for very short periods of time** is what brings lasting transformation and change. We don't need to "get in there" and *resolve or root out* our difficult experience, transcend, or purge it from our systems. This urge to "get to the root of it" (and quickly) is usually an enactment of earlier patterns of self-aggression and only reinforces in the nervous system that there is truly "something wrong." By "very short periods of time," we really do mean for a few seconds. For in that "few seconds" a revolution is born.

Over time, that “few seconds” very naturally expands, grows, and evolves on its own, organically as a byproduct of tending to ourselves in a new way, not from an urgent sense that something is wrong which must be fixed or healed very quickly. Trauma and other difficult experience can only unwind in an environment of love, of slow tending, of kindness. Yes, we can push ourselves a little, for a second or two more than might seem comfortable, for this will help us to build our tolerance and craft a scaffolding of love. But no more than that. Otherwise, we’ll just send ourselves outside our “windows of tolerance” and into overwhelm, retraumatization, all the while reinforcing the requirement that we meet future experience with fight-flight-freeze responses.

In other words, when you resist your experience, even very subtly by “trying” too hard to “be present” with it or even “accept” it, you’re still telling the body, **there’s an enemy here, something I’m trying to get rid of**. When you slow down and go baby steps, moment by moment, you’re telling the body, **it’s okay, I’m safe, this is uncomfortable and intense but I’m present with it, I’m safe**. Once this requisite safety and resourcing is built into the nervous system - which happens slowly, one second at a time - then we can more organically, effectively, and compassionately begin to open our hearts to our pain, touch it with deeper levels of warmth, presence, and love, eventually even discovering that our pain is a true friend, an ally on the journey. But we cannot skip stages! We cannot just move straight to acceptance, forgiveness, and love from a field that is unsafe. It is an act of kindness and self-compassion to remember this and to honor where we are. While the mind may tell us, “Oh, just one or two seconds, big deal, can’t you do more than that? That’s not enough, you’ll never heal, you’re going too slowly, you’re falling behind, you’ve failed yet again,” in the reality of the nervous system and the heart, one second is the fertile soil of revolution.

Healing is not a competition. Remember, there is never any goal. *There is no urgency on the path of love.*

In the field of trauma, “**titration**” refers to tending to our difficult thoughts, feelings, and raw bodily sensations **for a few seconds at a time**, then stopping and shifting into a moment of self-nourishment and self-care, and then returning later, when we are ready. Pushing ourselves just a little, nudging ourselves gently into the dark and scary places, but not so much that we fall into overwhelm and flooding or dissociation.

Baby steps are courageous in this work and the material of revolution.

**Moment by moment, even our dark and scary experience is bearable.**

We cannot tend to the *next* moment's pain and intensity, for that is truly overwhelming! We cannot "bear" a future moment of grief or loneliness. Just as we cannot experience or surrender to tomorrow's sunrise, we cannot tolerate tomorrow's - or even the next moment's - fear or sorrow or pain. But we *can* come to see that *this* moment's experience is workable. We can come out of tomorrow's sadness, the next moment's depression, and next week's heartbreak into what is truly here now, which may be a lot more workable and tolerable than you think, not as devastating as you imagine, and in reality **only a part of you that longs for a moment of your loving awareness.**

A great inner confidence and trust and even joy can build from this. The joy of being alive and knowing we can meet anything life throws at us with courage and breath, slowness and presence. The joy of knowing that the Now is our true home and refuge. The joy of knowing that there is no such thing as a truly "unbearable" moment.

## 4

# SUFFERING IS OPTIONAL

## (but sometimes pain and grief are inevitable)

What is worse, our pain... or our attempts to escape it (thereby making the pain into an internal *enemy, mistake, or error*)?

What is worse, our loneliness, fear, or sorrow... or our longing to be free from them, to get rid of them, to purge them from our being?

What is more painful, our pain, or our resistance to it, our refusal to experience it, the ways in which we hurt ourselves (and others) trying to numb ourselves from it? Abandoning ourselves in a moment when we long for true care?

What is worse, our difficult feelings, or the conclusions we've come to about what these experiences *mean*, the voices in the head about what these feelings *say about us* as a person ("I'm weak, I'm broken, I'm flawed, I'm damaged, I'm not whole, there's

something wrong with me...”) - the ways in which we judge ourselves for being the way we are?

### **What is worse, the rain as it falls, or our refusal to get wet?**

We have come to believe that very ordinary human emotions, thoughts, and urges are in and of themselves the *cause* of our suffering and struggle. But is it the mere appearance of anger, sadness, disappointment, jealousy, uncertainty, or confusion that is really the *problem*? Or is it the *abandonment* of ourselves in the moment when these experiences arise? The shaming and judging of our authentic experience? The habitual conclusions we've come to - from our families, cultures, even our spiritualities - about what these very ordinary human experiences mean about us, our value, our worth, our progress along the path?

To take some time in our lives - in our inquiry, meditation, journaling, pondering - and really explore - this is a great gift we can give ourselves (and others). Just what is the source of my struggle and suffering? Is it true that I must convert my sadness to joy, doubt to clarity, rage to happiness, disappointment to gratitude, etc. in order to know true freedom, or is it a more radical invitation I am being called to? To not take anyone's word for it - including our own! - but to become an alchemist or archaeologist of our own inner world and see.

It can be incredibly liberating and life-giving to discover that the freedom we are longing for is not found *from* these difficult experiences, but actually *in* them, at their very core. We continue to be amazed, astonished, and surprised as we witness those we work with as they go into their experience and illuminate this territory - and can be awed at the transformation that many are discovering in this inquiry. As Rumi reminds us, “The cure for the pain is in the pain” - this is a very profound alchemical truth that the ultimate medicine we are seeking is found *inside the very wound itself*. No, we cannot



understand or make sense of this with the mind. But the body knows. The heart knows.

We need not “get rid of,” cure, transform, shift, or “heal” our immediate painful experience in order to be fully alive, connected, and free. When we come to see that it is not the thoughts and feelings, but the

process of **self-abandonment (turning from ourselves in a moment of activation, stress, or overwhelm and falling into the extremes of denial, repression, dissociation, or engaging in habitual or addictive behavior to cover over our pain)** that generates so much of our unnecessary suffering, a new world opens.

Remember, difficult feelings and thoughts are like quicksand. The more you struggle against them, the more they suck you in. As we all know, we can quickly fall down the “rabbit hole” of cascading and looping thoughts and feelings, linking them together and weaving a very convincing story of how we’ve failed, done it wrong, are unlovable, and how there is fundamentally something wrong with us. But slowing down, pausing, feeling our feet on the ground, breathing deeply from our lower belly, we open into a new world. Gently allowing the thoughts and feelings to be here, breathing into them, even if they are intense and uncomfortable. Yes, it may feel counterintuitive to do this, but with some practice, you may come to experience them within the context of a lot of space. Even if they do not “go away,” somehow they release you from their grip when you call off the war and allow them to come and go, as they will by their very nature. Strangely, they may actually be your path to freedom. Release through relaxation, not endlessly “working on yourself” and turning your life into one unending project of self-improvement. We can start to see how even our spiritual and therapy goals can be yet another expression or enactment of a deep and core belief in our unworthiness, where “more” work on ourselves, paradoxically, begins another way to abandon and avoid ourselves as we are.

Of course, a certain amount of pain - physical and emotional - is inevitable, as long as we are alive. But begin to investigate how much of your pain is actually unnecessary. How much of your pain is actually *resistance to your pain*, thinking about your pain, ruminating on your pain, judging your pain, and judging yourself for having pain. How much of your suffering is actually self-created? You only have to deal with a moment at a time.

# 5

## WORDS ARE MAGIC SPELLS

### (so cast them wisely!)

We can get so tangled up in concepts and words, especially heavily weighted spiritual and psychological concepts such as “awareness,” “ego,” “integration,” and even “healing.” We forget that words - no matter how subtle and profound - can never, ever capture our first-hand embodied experience. Words always come after the fact. Concepts are general and abstract, and not subtle, nuanced, specific, or concrete enough to match the sheer uniqueness of what *you* are experiencing in one here-and-now moment.

**Does the word “flower,” the idea of it, really capture the sheer inner mystery of a flower? Does the word “anxiety” really begin to capture the sheer LIFE surging through the body in a given moment?**

For example, rather than saying to yourself, “I’m anxious,” (or scared or angry or lonely or bored, etc.), as an experiment, try dropping the *word*, and attuning to the actual *lived experience* you are encountering in the moment, which will be very unique for you. In other words, come out of the mind and its thoughts and ideas and judgements and stories and negativity *about* anxiety, and come back to your body in the present moment. Be a beginner. Meet the moment as if you didn’t know anything about anxiety, but wanted to connect with it for the first time. It is this “Beginner’s Mind,” as they say in Zen, that is the wellspring of meditation.

Ask yourself, “How do I *know* I’m anxious? What is my lived experience of anxiety? Where do I feel what I call “anxiety” most strongly in my body, RIGHT NOW? What is happening in my belly, chest, throat, head, RIGHT NOW? Can I begin to bring attention to the raw sensations in my body, without judging them, without trying to get rid of them, without trying to escape them or make them go away?”

What kind of sensations do you notice? Are they fluttering, pulsating, throbbing? Are they moving fast or slow? Do they feel shallow or deep in the body? Are they warm or cold? Are they intense or gentle? Are they moving in straight lines, circles, zig-zags? Are they sharp or dull? How far under the skin are they? Do they change when you bring awareness to them? Do they become more intense? Less intense? Do they expand or contract? Do they start moving around in the body?

Can you become curious about all this *life* in your body, without trying to fix or change it? Feel or imagine your breath moving into the sensations, so you are bringing the warmth of your presence and the gentleness of your breath to this contracted, aching, sore place. **Perhaps this is just a part of your body that is starved of attention and oxygen.** Breathe into that place that feels tight, contracted, bound-up. This is an act of love.

**Say to yourself, “*These are just sensations. They are just the intelligence of the body. They are not dangerous. They are just LIFE. They are not hurting me. They are not working against me. They are not a mistake. They are not a sign that there is something wrong in this moment, or that I have failed in some way. They are just parts of me longing for love and kindness. They are the abandoned parts, the parts I need to take care of right now..*”.**

Scientific research over the last couple of decades in the area of mindfulness and self-compassion suggests that courageously bringing curious, accepting, non-judgemental present-moment attention to sensations in our body, even if they are intense and uncomfortable (and therefore “unwanted”), can soothe our nervous system’s more urgent fight-or-flight response and help us to access the slower, empathic circuitry of the prefrontal cortex. Slowly, over time, we can build tolerance for difficult experience, come to discover its ultimate workability, and eventually use our hooks, triggers, and activations as invitations into deeper holding and compassion for ourselves and others. We can come to realise that feelings and sensations in our bodies are ultimately safe, even if they *feel* unsafe.

What is happening inside you is unique, unprecedented, vast, and majestic, and will never be captured by experience-distant concept words like “unworthy,” “anxious,” or “ashamed,” which - if you think about it - are all other people’s words, given to you when you were young, or by the medical community, or by a culture who has fallen out of touch with the wisdom of raw experience. There is a world before words, before the mind itself. And in that world, you may find the peace and wholeness you seek.

Even if the intensity of sensation does not diminish with our kind and curious attention, that intensity begins to occur in a much vaster space, in a larger context, one that is warmer, more open, and safer than we imagined. Instead of being caught up *inside* a

feeling or mood or bundle of sensations, we recognise that these energies are actually caught up in us. We are actually bigger than any thought, sensation or feeling. We can begin to hold our fear and boredom and sorrow, so they don't hold us. We are not the victims of our anger and confusion, we are the space for them, the vast open sky in which they can come and go. Some call this space Awareness, but we could also call it Love. Or Who You Really Are.

## 6

# THE SECRET OF “HOLDING, NOT HEALING”

## (“negativity” as a call for love)

Imagine or visualise a difficult thought, feeling, urge, or emotion as a **child knocking at your door**. Allow your challenging present experience to take form, imaginatively, as a young child (or other figure) that you can enter into a relationship with.

If you are feeling sad, for example, imagine a sad child arriving at your door and knocking, wanting to come in. Perhaps they are cold, confused, shaking, and exhausted from a long journey. They have not come to harm you in any way, but just to be held, to be allowed back home, into the warmth of your heart. Once inside, we can sit with them and have a conversation: Why have you come? What do you need? What do you want to show me? We can listen to the wisdom they have to share, and help them to release any burden they have had to carry on our behalf.

**How would you respond to this frightened little one when you opened the door?**

Would you slam the door in his or her face and distract yourself with TV or food (or even spiritual beliefs and practices) and try to forget them? Would you lock the door? Would you look sternly at them and state that they are welcome to come in... once they have changed? Once the sadness has been transformed to joy, the anxiety to calm, the uncertainty to clear-knowing... ah, then yes you can enter?

Or would you allow this one in to the living room of your own heart, Now, where you can listen and tend to them with curious, loving awareness? Would you open your arms wide to them, and let them come home?



It can be helpful to turn a difficult thought, feeling, memory, urge, or impulse into a figure with which you can dialogue or have a conversation. Doing so allows us to open our hearts to our pain, our emotions, and our experience rather than relate to it merely conceptually or from a distance. It's not easy or natural to cultivate a caring, interested, warm relationship with a concept, such as "grief," "shame," or "rage." But to meet a grieving child, or figure who is ashamed or enraged, we can more naturally move closer to them, listen to them, open a dialogue with them, and bring movement into our experience where maybe it had become stuck. Rather than becoming flooded or swallowed up by this energy, imaginatively allow it to form in front of you where you can ask it why it has come, what it needs to show you, what it wants. This is how you can begin to reclaim your power in the face of a scary, uncomfortable, unknown, or difficult energy.

See it as a **lost and helpless and forgotten part of you**, looking for your help, seeking love, not an enemy or a dangerous force from outside of you.

**"Befriending" is not as much about "healing" as it is "holding."** In true befriending, we do not have a heavy agenda to change, shift, fix, cure, transform, or, surprisingly, even "heal" this energy. From this perspective, we are never "unhealed" or "untransformed", really. We are not a project to be improved, but a mystery coming into form, moment by moment. We are always whole, even in moments of intensity and discomfort. We were never not whole (healed).

By "holding" our experience in any moment instead of rushing to try and fix it or run from it, we are inviting relationship with the present "visitors" - the thoughts, feelings, images, and impulses - that have come in a moment of activation, without falling into the extremes of either denying or repressing them on one hand, or becoming fused with or flooded by them on the other. We disentangle a bit from them so that we can enter into loving relationship. We can practice a certain kind of intimacy with them, but without

fusing or identifying, or drowning in thoughts, feelings, and sensations. We can dialogue with them and even have boundaries with them, letting them know of our intention to move toward them, but only in a way and at a pace that works for us. We can take back our power from the 'dark' material within.

In our own unique ways, through experimentation and curiosity, we discover a sacred middle place between repressing a thought or feeling, *or* habitually and unconsciously expressing it or acting it out. In this middle place, this third possibility, we slow down, and breathe, and infuse the visitor with curiosity and loving breath:

*"I am here to meet with you, to hold you, to listen to you, to care for you. But not to be flooded or fused with you. Let us be true friends. I trust that you are just a part of me, needing love. I want to get to know you, moment by moment. This is a beginning, not an end..."*

Remember this image of *holding* in moments of activation and overwhelm, in both its personal and transpersonal dimensions. We can hold ourselves and parts of ourselves when we are triggered and hurting, but we can also relax into a kind of Sacred Holding that is always, already happening through something greater than us. We are holding *and* we are already being held - by the Earth, by the sky and the mountains and forests and oceans, by the Universe itself, by the Loving Mystery that is every living thing.

**Even in the moments we feel we cannot "hold" ourselves, we are already being held by Life. Even in the moments the present moment feels "unbearable," Life is bearing us. This is the true definition of surrender. It is not something we can understand with the mind.**

**Ultimately we do not "do" healing. Healing is "done" to us in the moment where we stop struggling against life and our own thoughts and feelings and relax into the Mystery.**

**As we let go of the inner war with our experience, soften into this instant of life and open our heart and being to what's here - even if what's here is uncomfortable, raw, scary, and intense - we are no longer victims of the moment, but become the infinite and victorious Power that allows the moment to be, the Calm in the midst of life's storm.**

**Our power lies not in refusing the moment, but softening into it. There is strength in our vulnerability, power in our willingness to open our arms to whatever the moment brings.**

Thank you for reading this document on the mysterious dance of being and befriending! Our words are intended as “fingers pointing to the moon,” as they say in Zen. You will find your own way into the vastness and sheer mystery of your experience. May you honor your wildness, your individuality and eccentricity, as you take your own unique journey to the Home you never left. We hope these words have helped point you in the right direction... one that leads back to YOU.

As Rumi reminds us...

“There are hundreds of ways  
to kneel and kiss the ground.”

## **TRUE MEDICINE**

**When you sit with a friend in pain,  
when their world no longer makes sense;  
when confusion rages and  
no rest is to be found.**

**Just for a moment,  
will you resist the temptation  
to make things better,  
to reassure them,  
to provide answers,  
even to heal them?**

**Will you offer your stillness, your listening,  
your presence, and the warmth  
of your immediacy?**

**Will you hold them in your heart,  
with the same tenderness  
of a mother holding her little one?**

**Will you embrace them where they are,  
without needing them to change or transform  
according to your own needs and schedule?**

**Will you stay close,**

**holding your own impatience  
and discomfort near?**

**Will you look into their eyes  
and see yourself?**

**Will you stay in the inferno of healing  
with them, trusting in disintegration,  
knowing that you are only witnessing  
the falling away of an old dream?**

**Sometimes in doing nothing  
everything is undone,  
and love is revealed to be  
the only true medicine.**

*- Matt Licata and Jeff Foster*

**(Read the poem a second time.**

**Now imagine the “friend in pain”... is yourself.)**

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

JOIN JEFF FOSTER AND MATT LICATA EACH MONTH  
IN THEIR NEW "BEFRIENDING YOURSELF" MEMBERSHIP SITE:

[www.befriendingyourself.com](http://www.befriendingyourself.com)

### MATT LICATA

Matt Licata, PhD is a psychotherapist, writer, and independent researcher based in Boulder, Colorado. Over the last 25 years, he has been active in the ongoing dialogue between depth psychological and meditative approaches to emotional healing and spiritual transformation.

His psychotherapy and spiritual counseling practice has specialized in working with yogis, meditators, and seekers of all sorts who have come to a dead-end in their spiritual practice or therapy and are longing for a more embodied, creative, imaginative way to participate in their experience, in relationship with others, and in the sacred world.

Matt's spiritual path and exploration has been interfaith in nature and includes three decades of study and practice in Vajrayana Buddhism, Sufism, Daoism, and Contemplative Christianity. His psychological training and influences have been in the larger field of relational psychoanalysis, Jung's analytical and alchemical work, and Hillman's archetypal psychology, to name a few. He is the editor of *A Healing Space* blog and author of *The Path is Everywhere: Uncovering the Jewels Hidden Within You* (Wandering Yogi Press, 2017) and the forthcoming *A Healing Space: Befriending Yourself in Difficult Times* (Sounds True, 2020). His website is

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### JEFF FOSTER

Jeff Foster studied Astrophysics at Cambridge University. In his mid-twenties, struggling with chronic shame and suicidal depression, he became addicted to the idea of "spiritual enlightenment" and began a near-obsessive spiritual quest for the ultimate truth of existence. The search came crashing down one day, unexpectedly, with the clear recognition of the non-dual nature of everything and the discovery of the "extraordinary in the ordinary." Jeff fell in love with the simple present moment, and was given a deep understanding of the root illusion behind all human suffering and seeking.

For over a decade Jeff has been travelling the world offering meetings and retreats, inviting people into a place of radical self-acceptance and "Deep Rest." He has published several books in over fifteen languages. His latest book is *The Joy of True Meditation: Words of Encouragement for Tired Minds and Wild Hearts* (New Sarum Press, 2019). His website is

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