



**THE KINDNESS  
HANDBOOK**  
**A Practical Companion**

**Sharon Salzberg**

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## **THE KINDNESS HANDBOOK**

### **EXCERPT: Forever**

A few years ago I went to Tucson to hear the Dalai Lama teach. I arranged everything to go a day early in order to be able to give a talk in Tucson before the teachings by the Dalai Lama began.

My plans were challenged, however, when I found myself in an airplane sitting on a runway for four hours at LaGuardia airport. Looking back on it, I sometimes refer jokingly to those hours as “the breakdown of civilization.” It was hot, and it grew hotter. After a point, people started yelling, “Let me off this plane.” The pilot resorted to getting on the PA system and saying sternly, “No one is getting off this plane.”

I wasn’t feeling all that chipper myself. I couldn’t seem to get in touch with the people in Tucson who were supposed to pick me up at the airport, and I was concerned about them. I had an apartment to go to in New York City, and kept thinking, to no avail, “I can just go back there, and try again tomorrow.” I was hot. I felt pummeled by the people shouting around me.

Then I recalled an image that Bob Thurman, professor of Buddhist studies at Columbia University, often uses to describe the flow of kindness and compassion that comes from seeing the world more truthfully. He says, “Imagine you are on the New York City subway, and these Martians come and zap the subway car so that those of you in the car are going to be together . . . forever.”

What do we do? If someone is hungry we feed them. If someone is freaking out, we try to calm them down. We might not at all like everybody, or approve of them — but we are going to be together forever, and we need to respond with the wisdom of how interrelated our lives are, and will remain.

Sitting on that airplane, I was struck by the recollection of Bob’s story. I looked around the cabin, and thought, “Maybe these are my people.” It was fascinating to note that my impatience — “Couldn’t you be a little quieter?” — and distress — “How much longer is this going to last?” — changed to taking a greater interest in those with me: Who are these people? Is it really imperative that they be on time? What is awaiting them? I watched the interplay of forces in my own mind as interest opened the door to a measure of kindness, and as “How much longer?” encountered “Forever,” I saw my worldview shift from “me” and “them” to “we.”

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