



**THE KINDNESS  
HANDBOOK**  
A Practical Companion

Sharon Salzberg

Hardcover  
5 1/2" x 8 1/4" / 128 Pages  
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*“Lovingkindness for those we find difficult is not about forsaking oneself, or acting as if everything is nice and everything that has ever happened is just fine — very likely, a lot of it is not fine at all. But, out of compassion for ourselves and out of real respect for what we are capable of in terms of a boundless heart, we practice.”*

- Sharon Salzberg

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### EXCERPT: Reflections on Lovingkindness for a Difficult Person

As you do the practice of lovingkindness for a difficult person, it is useful to remember the principle of starting in the easiest way possible. Don't choose the most hateful, terrible, difficult person you can call up from your life, or the world stage, or from history. See if you can start with somebody who is mildly difficult, someone with whom there is some conflict, some dis-ease, perhaps someone of whom you are a little afraid.

This practice is meant to be done with a quality of interest, an ability to investigate, to look at our reactions without feeling crushed by them. Offering lovingkindness, even with an only mildly difficult person, can feel quite difficult. We aim to do the practice as an exploration, not with a heavy heart and a lot of self-judgment, but with an ability to look gently at oneself, at all the various resistances and places of holding back and not wanting to let go that we see.

#### Anger

It is useful to recognize that there can be a lot of clarity in anger. At times anger can cut through social niceties, and denial, and collusion, and pretense, to name some truths that might be hard to name and might not be very popular when spoken. But there also can be a tremendously deluding quality in anger. When we are lost in our own anger, we are lost in a very narrow definition of who we are, who this other person is, who any of us might become.

We forget that there are possibilities inherent within the truth of change. We forget that everything is vastly conditioned, that no singular act is alone, isolated, apart from all the conditions that come together to make it so. The metaphor from Buddhist psychology that's often used to describe anger is that of a forest fire, which can burn wild, leaving us devastated and maybe leaving us very far from where we actually want to be. The Buddha said, “Anger with its poison source and fevered climax is murderously sweet.” It has both sides — the sweet relief of the energy, and the murderous side. Anger can give us a temporary feeling of strength, yet the devastation it wreaks can be immense.

Our effort must be not to suppress the feeling of anger, but to not have it be the automatic or inevitable place from which we act. Some of our effort is to feel the anger, feel the rage, feel all of it, and let it move through us without solidifying around it in terms of identifying with it, declaring it to be who we really are, who we will always be.

People often confuse letting go of anger with letting go of principle or a sense of right and wrong or a sense of one's value. It's really not so. We can use the energy and the clarity of that perspective without getting lost in the tightness and limitation and forgetting. That is the dawning of the strength of compassion rather than a kind of constricted, reflexive anger.



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*"We can know right from wrong, we can take very strong action to protect ourselves or one another, to try to rectify injustice or stop someone from harming someone, and we can do all this from a place of connection rather than a place of division and condemnation."*

- Sharon Salzberg

It is also useful to reflect that when we are lost in anger, we are the ones who are suffering. As I have heard the Dalai Lama say, "If you have an enemy, and you obsess about this enemy, then your whole life can become that obsession, that identification. And you're so limited. You can't eat well, you can't sleep well, you can't do anything else." And then he said, "Why give your enemy that satisfaction, of ruining your life?" Indeed, why not annoy your enemy by being happy?

Lovingkindness for those we find difficult is not about forsaking oneself, or acting as if everything is nice and everything that has ever happened is just fine — very likely, a lot of it is not fine at all. But, out of compassion for ourselves and out of real respect for what we are capable of in terms of a boundless heart, we practice.

It is not that we want to pretend to like everybody or pretend to approve of everybody. Rather, it is all like an experiment. We see what happens when we recognize a connection with someone instead of feeling only alienation. We see what happens when we want to be freed of our own suffering. We see what happens when we pay attention to someone else's suffering rather than just their transgression.

After a time of practicing offering lovingkindness to somewhat difficult people we might be inspired to move on to include those whose actions have hurt us more powerfully. Often we have developed enough confidence both in the power of *metta* as the opposite of fear and in our own ability to generate *metta* to do that practice with some ease of heart. We have also explored and understood to a greater degree the difference between having compassion for someone and being passive or merely giving in.

We've seen the need to balance love and compassion for someone else with love and compassion for ourselves. If at any given moment, offering lovingkindness to someone very difficult for us is just too difficult or feels coercive, we drop it, and we go back to offering lovingkindness to ourselves or to a benefactor or friend. This isn't a cop-out or a move to substandard practice; rather it is exercising the openness and creativity the meditation practice actually calls for, and flourishes with.

Over time we may be moved to include a more difficult person again. In the challenge of doing so, we see so many things: caution, frustration, an effort to be in control, rage, fear, and also the chance to be different. Even in horrible circumstances, we find that challenge and that prospect for meaningful change. I saw that after the Underground bombing in London in July 2005, when my initial response echoed most of those around me: sorrow for lives lost, distress at all those unheralded lives lost each day across the globe, some anxiety about getting on a subway in New York City.

Willa, my then seven-year-old goddaughter, had another perspective. Upon being told what had happened, Willa's eyes filled with tears and she said, "Mom, we should say a prayer." As she and her mother held hands,



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Willa asked to go first. Her mother was stunned to hear Willa begin with, "May the bad guys remember the love in their hearts."

Returning belligerence for belligerence, focusing on revenge, is familiar and easy but it tires us out. If we are willing to go to a new level of thinking, we discover that we are capable of so much more than we usually envision. No matter what our past, we can begin to be different; we can step out of cycles of reactivity, abuse or despair. Risking a new level of seeing enables us to try out new behaviors, like not shouting back or reflexively seeking revenge. Instead, we might use ways of communicating that convey our strength without damaging ourselves or those around us.

Imagine if we dropped our need to be right, our easy perpetuation of what we are used to, our need to be like other people, and actually tried to practice what the Buddha taught: "Hatred will never cease by hatred, it will only cease by love." That would mean an enormous adventure of consciousness: a readiness to step into new terrain, redefine power, see patience as strength rather than as resignation. Perhaps it would mean protesting intrusions, and working to rectify injustice, and watching out for those we are responsible for, but in a way that allows life to be as textured as it is, a way that is open to changes. A way that listens, that lets the world come alive beyond categories of us and them, self and other.

This is a process of relaxing the heart and untangling it from fear and corrosive resentment. It is a process of recapturing our energy that may be held by a situation in the past and stagnating. It is a process of expanding our capacity to care, and to trust that caring will not deplete us or weaken us. It is a profound, challenging, and liberating process, and it is okay that it takes the time it takes. As someone once asked me, "Whose timeline are we working on?"

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