

Insight Meditation Community of Washington

The Field of Belonging

By Tara Brach

The longing for intimacy is a gravitational force that draws us together. We long to connect; to belong to our world. As Zen master Dogen writes, "To be enlightened is to be intimate with all of life."

While this may resonate in our hearts, on a daily basis we act in ways that *distance* us from life. We stay busy with goal-oriented activities. We judge each other and hide our insecurity. We are not quiet enough to listen well and we rarely express the depth of our love. Our underlying fear is that if we open to each other -- if we draw close and become vulnerable -- we will get hurt.

Because getting hurt is a part of this human incarnation, our fears are not unfounded. We live in a materialistic, competitive, punitive culture. We have all been disappointed, let down, rejected, neglected and misunderstood. Even those who have had conscious, loving parents have been told in many different ways that our natural being is somehow "Not OK." The greater our wounds, the more deeply we believe that something is wrong with us. The painful sense of "Not OK" is a distrust of life that prevents us from belonging to each other and this world.

Meditation practice is a form of spiritual "re-parenting". Reflect for a moment about what you would consider the ideal parent, a true Beloved. How would this person relate to you? When they look at you, what would you see in their eyes? If you were experiencing difficulty, how would they respond?

Invoking an ideal parent (lover or friend), we might imagine feeling totally understood and unconditionally loved by that being. They know our imperfections, yet they also recognize our wakefulness, our natural goodness. In their presence, there would be plenty of room for whatever within us feels "Not OK."

These interrelated qualities of clear seeing and compassion are what the Buddha described as the "two wings of the bird" that together allow us to fly and be free. They are the facets of awareness we cultivate in relating to our inner life -- to the fears, loneliness, anger and grief. And they are the gifts we offer in wakeful relating to each other and to our world.

In loving relationships and spiritual community, we discover the container or sense of larger belonging that helps us open to and heal parts of ourselves that are unseen or rejected. This is beautifully portrayed in the story of the Buddha's awakening. Through the night under the bodhi tree, the Buddha met the attacks of Mara (the energies of greed, hatred and delusion) with wisdom and compassion. Mara's arrows turned to flower blossoms and fell to his feet. By morning, the Buddha was awakened but Mara was still present. The Buddha then reached out, touched the earth and called on the Earth Goddess to bear witness. The forces of Mara finally withdrew. The Buddha had realized his belonging to the web of life and opened to full freedom.

We are not struggling alone on the spiritual path, building spiritual muscles to fend off

the adversaries of greed, hatred and delusion. Rather, like the Buddha, our path is to open to *all* of life -- to the 10,000 joys and the 10,000 sorrows -- and to realize a profound sense of belonging. It is through the experience of connectedness that we heal and are free to love fully.

We can enlarge the circle of belonging by bringing a tender presence to any part of this natural world. For many, the wildness of ocean and wind, the dignity and generosity of trees, the beautiful cheer of flowers all offer an embrace to our sense of weariness and alienation. The earth and skies are big enough for our tears. We can take refuge in the elements that compose our being.

Because we experience both loving and wounding in human relationships, we also must heal with others. Some years ago, a white student of mine chose to marry an African American woman. His family threatened to cut him off and, while not wavering on his commitment to his fiancée, he felt bound by his anger and grief. He tried to meditate and be mindful of what was arising and offer lovingkindness to the places of pain. He became aware of life-long patterns of struggling to be true to himself and never feeling accepted. The awareness was helpful but he still felt isolated and lost. His partner, concerned about his suffering, asked to be more included in the process. Together, they designed a prewedding

meditation ritual, a circle of belonging, and invited their closest friends. In the warmth and acceptance of that circle, they expressed the pain of encountering such hostility at their time of early union, and their pain was respectfully held.

While their pain did not disappear, the larger sphere of belonging allowed for opening and healing. When their wedding day arrived, both felt embraced by a genuinely extended family and were able to include the groom's family of origin in their prayers.

Just as it is necessary to intentionally and mindfully attend to our *inner* life, wise and open-hearted communing with others is our *interpersonal meditation*. We communicate to understand and be understood, to hold and be held. Our deepest longing is to belong to each other. But our conditioning to feel separate and insufficient creates habits of defensiveness, dishonesty, manipulation and blaming.

It helps at these times to pause and reflect: "How can I belong to this moment? What needs acceptance?" And, with the beings in our life, "How can we belong together? What needs acceptance?" Awakening in relationships involves seeing vulnerability as well as basic goodness, and acknowledging and releasing our armor. As we learn to listen deeply, to tell the truth and to hold each other with great mercy, we discover the sweet nectar of deep belonging. It is our most profound longing and it expresses the truth of who we are.

As Rumi writes:

*"Out beyond wrongdoing and rightdoing there is a field. I'll meet you there.
When the soul lies down in that grass, the world is too full to talk about.
Ideas, language, even the phrase 'each other'
Doesn't make any sense."*

The field Rumi describes is *always* here. We are friends, belonging together with the sounds and sensations of this very moment, belonging with this earth and all of life. Whenever we encounter our edge -- that which is frightening and difficult -- our challenge is to embrace our vulnerability with compassionate awareness.

We can infuse this embrace with a sense of our larger circle of belonging. Just as the Buddha reached out to call to Mother Earth, we can invoke the beloved-dear ones, bodhisattvas, trees and stars. Gradually, inside and outside become indistinct. We become the holder and the held. Our path is to rest in and live out of the truth of connectedness; to arrive fully in the field of belonging.

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