

Reading from True Refuge by Tara Brach, pp.144-146

More than twenty-five hundred years ago, the Buddha taught his followers a lovingkindness meditation to ward off fear. Each year, before the rainy season in India, hundreds of monks would gather around the Buddha for spiritual teachings and instructions. They would then go off to find a suitable location for a three-month “rain retreat,” a period of intensive practice. One year, as the story goes, the monks found an idyllic forest grove with majestic trees and a clean spring of cool water - the perfect place to meditate day and night. They didn’t realize, however, that the forest was inhabited by tree deities who felt dispossessed when the monks moved in. The infuriated spirits created terrifying illusions of monsters, ghosts, and demons, filled the groves with dreadful shrieks and moans, and produced a sickening stench. The monks soon became pale and shaky, unable to maintain any concentration or inner balance. Encouraged, the tree deities became even more aggressive, until the monks fled back to the Buddha’s encampment.

Much to their dismay, however, the Buddha insisted that they return to the haunted grove. But before they left, he taught them verses of universal love to recite and reflect on, and promised that this would carry them beyond fear to spiritual liberation. As the monks neared the forest, they immersed themselves in this meditation, sending currents of unconditional lovingkindness first to themselves and then outward, to all beings everywhere. The hearts of the tree spirits became so infused with goodwill that they materialized in human form, offered the monks food and water, and invited them to stay. For the remainder of the monks’ retreat, the tree spirits basked in the aura of their loving presence and in return, kept the grove free of noise and distractions. And as the story also tells us, each one of the monks attained the pinnacle of spiritual realization.

Like the monks, we suffer whenever we dispossess the energies of shame or hurt, anger or fear. When any part of our inner life is unseen, unfelt, pushed away, or rejected, we feel alone and afraid. And like the tree spirits, these dispossessed energies will haunt us and keep us fear-bound until we meet them with a caring presence. As the Buddha taught, there are two expressions of love that naturally heal and free us. The Pali word for lovingkindness, metta, means unconditional friendliness, warmth, love, or care, and the Pali word for compassion, karuna, means to “feel with,” to bear suffering with an active sympathy. In his wisdom the Buddha realized that by purposefully awakening lovingkindness and compassion, we invite the alienated hurts and fears into consciousness, and free ourselves into a wholeness of being...

When I teach meditations for the heart, I often ask my students to visualize being held by a loved one and/or to offer gentle self-touch as part of the practice. Research shows that a 20-second hug stimulates production of oxytocin, the hormone associated with feelings of love, connectedness, and safety. Yet we don’t need to receive a physical hug to enjoy this benefit: Either imagining a hug or feeling our own touch - on our cheek, on our chest - also releases oxytocin. Whether through visualization, words, or touch, meditations on love can shift brain activity in a way that arouses positive emotions and reduces traumatic reactivity.