

Insight Idyllwild February Newsletter:

Healing, Growth and Loving Awareness

Korean monk Haemin Sunim founded the *School of Broken Hearts* in 2015. “I wanted to transcend religion,” said Haemin Sunim about the school in the Fall issue of *Tricycle Magazine*. Despite his innovative approaches, Haemin Sunim feels that his work is squarely in line with the Buddhism he has been taught, which emphasizes healing. “What I’m doing is just natural activity, like an expansion of the prayer I’ve been doing to the Medicine Buddha,” he said. The School of Broken Hearts has three aims: healing, emotional and spiritual growth, and awakening.

In this month of Valentine’s Day, I find myself curious about love, how we seek it from others, and how we might experience it as residing innately with ourselves. The Merriam-Webster’s definition of valentine is derived from the Latin word *valens*, which means “strong and healthy”.

With the Idyllwild Community Zen group, we have been reading and discussing *One Dharma: The Emerging Western Buddhism* by Joseph Goldstein. In the section entitled, *Courage: Strength of Heart*, he writes, “the Pali word *viriyā* is usually translated as “effort” and it is considered the root of all achievement.... A less common translation of *viriyā*, but one that highlights its essence for us in another way is “courage”. Courage comes from the root word for heart as being the seat of feeling and thought. It connotes spirit, vital force and energy. It is the boldness and valor of mind that faces obstacles without shrinking from them.

In this context, I have found myself curious and motivated to investigate the phrase Loving Awareness, which I have now heard discussed by a variety of folks from Ram Dass to Shauna Shapiro, a scientific researcher with a Ph.D in Clinical Psychology who just wrote a book entitled, *Good Morning, I Love You: Mindfulness and Self-Compassion Practices to Rewire Your Brain for Calm, Clarity and Joy*.

Dr. Shapiro says the “secret sauce of mindfulness is self-compassion, learning how to treat ourselves with kindness. She notes “a lot of people associate mindfulness with just paying attention in the present moment, but if we’re paying attention in a critical, judgmental way, what we’re practicing is judgementalness and criticism”. She goes on to say that the research indicates that that can actually make people more anxious and depressed, because they are just reinforcing bad mental loops. What she’s advocating for is a certain allowing and warm welcoming of our experience within an attitude of kindness. Dr. Shapiro shares that five words from a Thai monk with whom she was practicing have really stayed with her: Whatever you practice gets stronger.” So if we can practice paying attention with kindness then we’re starting to cultivate those pathways. And the burgeoning science on neuroplasticity has proven that brains can rewire.

“Neurons that fire together, wire together”, as Dr. Dan Siegel says, and this paves the way for optimism in re-routing our tendencies of mind in positive directions.

Which brings us back to Loving Awareness as a practice that goes beyond personal identity and pulls us to a place of universality from which, according to Ram Dass, we feel and perceive our own loving heart as loving awareness itself.

Trudy Goodman, founder of InsightLA, shared the following soon after Ram Dass’s passing on (he died on the 2019 Winter Solstice).....

He said, “We have to get out of our minds, our thinking minds – I’ll tell you how I do it: by using a mantra, a phrase: ‘I am loving awareness.’ Loving awareness is a name for what you really are. Doing this leads you to love everything you are aware of – the sky, the room, your body, other people. I ride the mantra into my heart. And in my heart I see a doorway to the next plane so that I am loving awareness everywhere. I am loving awareness. I am loving awareness....” Ram Dass’s instructions included starting by focusing on our breathing, perhaps at the tip of the nose, and then once one’s attention is pretty well established there, let it shift down to the heart center, and begin working with the mantra, “I am Loving Awareness.” Dr. Shapiro reported what I have heard from others that combining this with placing one or both hands on our hearts releases oxytocin, a powerful hormone that acts as a neurotransmitter in the brain known as “the love chemical.”

I have just started working with this mantra myself, and am finding it powerful. Combining modern science, innovations in Buddhist practice and the great capacities for freedom and insight that can be cultivated through our developing understanding of the depth and breadth of mindfulness practice is rich ground. A valentine to us all in appreciating our precious lives and our capacity to embody love, wisdom and compassion.

Resources mentioned here:

Shauna Shapiro, Good Morning I Love You, free podcast on Sounds True.

https://www.soundstrue.com/store/weeklywisdom?category=IATE&episode=14147&p9a ge=single&_ke=eyJrbF9lbWFpbCI6ICJreW9zaGludmVsZXpAZ21haWwuY29tIiwgImtsX2NvbXBhbnlfaWQiOiAiSk1EZ2FxIn0%3D#

Ram Dass sharing Loving Awareness practice: free videos on You Tube; also talks on

<https://www.ramdass.org/>