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## **Divine Presence: Training the Heart to See the Goodness in Ourselves and Others**

by Tara Brach

*FOR MANY OF US, THE MOST CHALLENGING PART OF TRAINING OURSELVES TO SEE GOODNESS IS RECOGNIZING WHAT WE APPRECIATE ABOUT OURSELVES.*

When my son Narayan was little, I used to sit by his bed while he slept. Watching his sweet face and gentle breathing, I'd try to see past his physical appearance to his true nature. Each time thoughts or images of what he'd said or done that day came to mind, I'd set them aside and ask again, "Who are you, really?" The question guided me beyond all my ideas of him, and revealed his nature to me as awareness—aliveness loving life.

Like me, most parents have watched their sleeping children and felt a pure, uncomplicated upwelling of tenderness. When children are at rest, we don't have to say "no" to the tenth cookie, hurry them up for the carpool, or fend them off when we're trying to talk on the phone. While they're sleeping, we can deepen our attention and see through to the sweetness and innocence of their souls.

Thomas Merton wrote that the world is transparent and "the divine is shining through it all the time." From a Buddhist perspective, the divine—our Buddha nature—is always present. Although we may become caught and confused by the waves of fear and craving that move through us, our reactivity does not alter our intrinsically wakeful and loving awareness.

We need to train ourselves to recognize this basic goodness, because all too often we look for what is wrong. Not only do we obsess about our own imperfections, we fixate on how stubborn and rude our child is, how selfish our partner is, how grandiose or impossible our colleague is. We also focus on what others can do for us, how they can enhance our own experience of self. When we perceive someone through the filter of our desires or fears, we're unable to experience that person's Buddha nature.

But when we are able to open our hearts and glimpse the divine shining through, we invariably respond with love, in Buddhism, this quality of tenderness and goodwill is called metta, or lovingkindness. When we open to lovingkindness, it is a homecoming. We experience our own true nature, as well as that of the other person. You might experiment by bringing to mind a person who is dear to you, but who can easily provoke you. Sense what ticks you off about this person, what arouses your irritation, hurt or fear. When you judge him or her, what's going on in your mind? Your body? Your heart? What's your sense of self when you feel blame?

Now bring to mind what you appreciate about this person. Reflect on his or her goodness, humor, intelligence, honesty or generosity. As you allow yourself to sense what is good about this person, notice how you feel. What is your mind like? Your body? Your heart? What is your sense of self when you are filled with appreciation?

Appreciation takes us out of a solid, tense, confined sense of self. Our mind becomes naturally spacious, our heart tender, our body relaxed. This doesn't mean that we put aside discriminating wisdom. We still notice and take appropriate action if someone does something to hurt us. Yet, our recognition of unhealthy behavior does not obscure our basic appreciation of the person's essence.

For many of us, the most challenging part of training ourselves to see goodness is recognizing what we appreciate about ourselves. Some people find it embarrassing or self-aggrandizing to reflect on qualities we like in ourselves. Others come up empty and can't find anything in themselves worth valuing. When this happens, we can acknowledge our longing to be happy, to

awaken, to be free. We can also bring to mind someone who loves us, and look at ourselves through their eyes.

Like a clear mirror, when we recognize and reflect back goodness— our own or another's—we bestow a blessing that allows that goodness to blossom. The fruit of seeing goodness is a profound and healing love.

Thomas Merton wrote:

*Then it was as if I suddenly saw the secret beauty of their hearts, the depth of their hearts where neither sin nor know/edge could reach, the core of reality, the person that each one is in the eyes of the divine. If only they could see themselves as they really are, if only we could see each other that way all the time, there would be no more need for war; for hatred, for greed, for cruelty. I suppose the big problem would be that we would fall down and worship each other.*

When we pay attention, we see past judgment and fear into the secret beauty of who we truly are. This training of the heart is the medicine our world needs most right now. Imagine if it became commonplace to look into each other's eyes and see the light of our shared awareness. The only way we will ever move beyond the suffering of being at war—within ourselves and with one another—is by opening our hearts and learning to recognize the inherent goodness in all of us.