

Spirit Rock Meditation Center  
Wednesday morning meditation class

September 8, 2010  
Linda Graham

### The Personal Self and its Relationship to True Nature

I'll try to be organic and flowing here this morning. I will offer some wisdom and then ask you to try an experiential exercise to evoke an experience of that wisdom. Then we'll have a discussion flowing in the larger group, ending on time.

I want to explore the nature of our personal self and its relationship to our True Nature – our Buddha Nature – and offer some very sound, heart-opening practices that can help us inhabit our personal self in ways that are wholesome, skillful, and deeply aligned with our true Buddha Nature. There doesn't have to be a contradiction.

Three of the practices come from modern relational psychology – resonance, attunement, and empathy. And two of the practices are the first two Brahma Viharas – loving kindness and compassion.

There are sound reasons from the spiritual practice point of view for this sequencing of practice – resonance, attunement, empathy, loving kindness, and compassion. As Buddhism comes to the West, there is an exciting and deepening integration of wisdom from the two paradigms of Western psychology and Eastern contemplative practice. Many teachers in our own vipassana tradition from Spirit Rock, Jack, Sylvia, Howie, Eugene, Debra, are practicing psychotherapists, as I am. There are deep bows to the wisdom that it's helpful – wise effort – to get a healthy sense of personal self before you let go of it. Further, it's wise effort to love and accept that personal sense of self before you let go of it.

I'm suggesting this morning there can be a natural effortless letting go of self, not being caught in identifying with a personal construct of self at any moment as who we truly are, a letting go of that ever-changing self into our self-less, not personal, True Nature, that that can happen skillfully, organically, rather than letting go and dropping into a void, a black hole of emptiness, we drop into a vast, open spaciousness of no-thing-ness, no-self-ness when we evolve our sense of self into claiming or re-claiming the fullness and richness of our Buddha Nature. The sequence of practices I'm suggesting – resonance, attunement, empathy, loving kindness, compassion, create the arc of the evolution.

There are sound neurobiological reasons for this sequencing of practice, too. A sound neuro-psychological reason to train the heart as much as we train the mind.

Researchers in neuroscience and clinicians in developmental psychology, especially in the last 10-20 years, have developed a pretty clear map of what experiences in our earliest relationships – inescapable human conditioning - develop the brain structures that platform a developing mind that can emerge and get a healthy personal sense of self – meaning a sense of personal self that can remain aligned with, and radiantly reflective of our innate true nature. Dan Siegel coined the acronym FACES to describe this healthy

sense of personal self - meaning flexible, adaptive, coherent, energized, and stable. Dan, who is a mindfulness-based and attachment-based psychiatrist at UCLA, will be teaching a two-day workshop with Jack Kornfield in San Francisco October 1 and 2 on Healing and Transformation: Buddhist Wisdom and Neuroscientific Insight, based on Jack's book *Wise Heart* and Dan's book *Mindful Brain*, and then teaching a daylong here at Spirit Rock Sunday October 3 on *The Neuroscience of Family Life and Parenting*.

What researchers have discovered, and what common sense would tell us, and what spiritual leaders the world over know and teach – is that the healthy *FACES* kind of personal self that allows us to remain open to our own true nature, is developed when that true nature is seen and honored and reflected and validated by those around us – parents, family, peers, friends, teachers, partners, therapists, mentors, wise guides who, being in touch with their own true nature, can guide and encourage us to experience ours, in psychological terms, who can be *True Others* to our *True Self*.

Depending on how well our parents or early caregivers were able to stay in touch with their own true Nature, were able to hold and reflect back to us our true nature in a wise, spacious, aware loving presence, in resonance-attunement-empathy, we are able to develop a sense of self that reflects our true nature; we remain naturally open and caring and playful and curious and generous.

As adults, we can reliably keep our minds and hearts open to experience and to other people, other selves, without contraction, without seeking to protect or defend a self we identify with as who we are, without distorting our perception of who others are, without losing the awareness of their True Nature or Buddha Nature in the struggle to impress or please or placate. If conditions are optimal, we develop and maintain a healthy, wholesome, balanced and integrated sense of personal self that reflects, in a unique personal flavor, the deeper Buddha Nature that is our self-less true nature.

But if conditions were less than optimal - if, for reasons of contraction or confusion, greed-hatred-delusion in our own parents or other people around us a lot, that conditioning didn't go so well, we are vulnerable to developing a style of self-ing that is more skewed in the direction of the hindrances: greed, hatred, delusion – or grasping-clinging, aversion or dismissing, or confusion, dis-orientation, that obscure the nobility of our innate true nature.

a. Greed or grasping – where fear – or any of the later compounded emotions - shame loneliness, envy, disappointment, rage, contempt - keep us grasping, craving, wanting something to fill the hole in us, searching for our self in others because we haven't yet quite gelled a stable sense of self; we don't fully know or trust our own true nature, we've lost the sense of wholeness that comes when we rest in our true nature, or

b. aversion or hatred where fear or shame, loneliness, envy, disappointment, rage, contempt, keeps us defended or contracted, distanced – disconnected from our own true nature or from the true nature of others, , more rigid in our sense of who we are or who

others are, or should be, getting caught in rules and expectations rather than allowing and accepting and honoring,  
or

c. Delusion or confusion about who we really are, we reify the wants and needs of the small personal self and mistakenly believe that happiness and liberation lie in satisfying those egoic needs rather than in the letting go of those needs and desires.

Our personal path of practice usually begins – it's catalyzed by – the suffering we experience when we contract to protect the personal self. We can have compassion for, how much it's in the nature of the self to contract in our bodies, our psyches, our minds and hearts, when that self feels frightened, threatened, or in pain. When we contract to protect the self, when we get caught in fear or hatred or shame or criticalness or confusion or disappointment, we lose the felt sense of that loving expansive true nature of our selves; we disconnect from the awareness of our own true nature, from the awareness of the true nature of others.

The contraction and the suffering happen because we are hard-wired to feel fear – the fear body. The body-brain antidotes or regulates the fear response with experiences of safety and trust. We are also hardwired that way. Fear or startle – we are hardwired to seek safety-protection-comfort from a trustworthy caregiver who is able to resonate with our fear, attune to it, empathize with it, and help us soothe, manage, dissolve it.

Eventually as we develop and mature, as our higher brains develop and mature –we seek that safety-protection-comfort from many other selves –extended family, peers, teachers, friends, partners, eventually – when the pre-frontal cortex of our brains is fully mature at about 25 years of age, we can offer that sense of safety and protection and comfort and trust to ourselves, from our own inner wise self that is our personal embodiment of True Nature. With that maturity and with practice, we do come to experience the noble qualities of our True Nature – the kindness, the compassion, the patience, the generosity, the gratitude, the wisdom, that are the natural flow of our True Nature when we are not contracted in fear for self.

Those qualities of kindness, the compassion, etc., tap us into the energy of loving presence that underlies all of the existence arising and passing away. It is this loving presence – so open, expansive, infinite - that creates the safety and trust that antidotes the fear we experience in the contraction of the small personal self.

So, the greed, hatred, delusion we are heir to in the human condition is healed first by the resonance-attunement-empathy of True Others to our True Selves, and that can be in a wise, loving partner, therapist, spiritual teacher, then through the heart-opening Brahma Vihara practices of loving kindness and compassion, and then by the vast spacious awareness of Awareness as the container that holds it all. Again, we must not only have a self before we can let go of it, we must love that self before we can let go of it.

So, this morning, we look at the arc of practices that shift our self-ing from a) the conditioned or learned habits of contracting and defending our personal sense of self to b) more and more embodying a larger, more flexible, adaptive, coherent, energized and stable sense of self that is c) in alignment with our self-less true nature, is an embodied expression of that true nature. Then, over time d) we come to anchor our sense of self in our true nature. We identify with our true nature as who we really are. From there, we naturally radiate our own Buddha Nature and help evoke Buddha Nature in others.

That's the arc.

Resonance is simply a shared reverberation in the energy field between two people or a person and their environment. We can be conscious of a sense of resonance – perhaps you resonate with the peaceful, safe and trusting energy when you go to Spirit Rock or come to this sangha this evening. Resonance can be expressed, and often is, completely unconsciously. Resonance is a somatic or body-based picking up the cues – the vibe – of another person or a room full of people. Dan Siegel gives an example of resonance in his newest book *Mindsight*:

Notice what happens when you're at a party with friends. If you approach a group that is laughing, you'll probably find yourself smiling or chuckling even before you've heard the joke. Or perhaps you've gone to dinner with people who've suffered a recent loss. Without their saying anything, you may begin to sense a feeling of heaviness in your chest, a welling up in your throat, tears in your eyes. Scientists call this emotional contagion. The internal states of others – from joy and play to sadness and fear – directly affect our own state of mind.

When we seek to recover a felt sense of our true nature, we can begin by putting ourselves in the energy field of other wise, loving beings who are anchored in, or seeking to be anchored in, their own true nature. We can get a transmission of the energy of our true nature doing a daylong with Pema Chodron or Ming Tung Gu. Why we come to a daylong or a retreat as well as practice at home; why we go to a yoga class as well as practice at home; why we enjoy a picnic or a concert or a hike when we can be in resonant company with folks who helps us evoke our true nature sense of our self and nourish our sense of connection and belonging.

Next is attunement, which is a sense of feeling felt, and known, and understood, and cared about. Attunement builds on resonance and can be unconscious also, you sense someone's anger or sadness, or they sense yours, even before there's conscious awareness of reacting to something. But attunement is most often deliberately conscious, reading the inner emotional world of another, though it's often non-verbal.

I've told the experience before in my e-newsletter, of a profound experience of attunement I received. After my dad had a stroke, the hospital released him to a skilled nursing facility where he refused to stay. The SNF called my at 5:30 in the morning to come get him because my 80 year old father had climbed out onto a second story deck and was threatening to jump into the courtyard below if I didn't come get him. So, I went

and got him, and after I put him in the car to take him home, I sat down on the curb of the parking lot and just broke down and cried and cried. I was so overwhelmed and confused about what to do next. And so afraid for my father. The nurse who had discharged my father saw me and came out and sat with me on the curb. She didn't say anything; she just put her hand on my back and sat with me until I calmed down. I felt her presence, her being with, her acceptance, and I could pull back out of my small contracted self that had gotten so frightened at what the hell was I going to do now, and I could come back into a sense of compassion for my dad and for me, and trust in some wisdom larger than me that was going to figure this out. I could get the larger perspective again. And I took my dad home, and he lived another 9 months, rather happily, until he died one night the next spring in his sleep.

So, we find people who can be anchored in their own compassionate true nature and help us come home to our own.

Then empathy, which is one person feeling their way into what another person is feeling and having a conscious, cognitive understanding of the other person's experience – how their story makes sense.

I had a profound experience of empathy the first time I ever met with James Baraz for a spiritual counseling session. I really felt how James got how small and lonely and broken I was feeling in myself at the time. I couldn't have trusted him if he hadn't been able to see that contracted self in me and understand that that was the story I was believing about myself at the time. Smallifying myself, as my friend Daniel Ellenberg would say. At the same times, James could see my true nature, and believe in it, when I couldn't yet believe that such wholeness was possible for the likes of me. That James could see both, the small contracted self I was so sure was the "real" me, and my true nature that was waiting to be found and relaxed into, was what allowed me to see both, simultaneously, too, and to begin to reclaim my true nature as the real me. Or the real not-me, larger than me, that could love and find kindness and compassion for the smaller me. An important component of empathy, which becomes crucial later in our compassion practice, is being able to know you are you and I am me and I can know what you feel, and you can know what I feel, but we can feel who's who and who is feeling what. There's a differentiation, even while there's an empathic embracing, and that's part of how James could feel what I was feeling and still feel or believe something else himself. How I eventually, in self-empathy, could feel when I or some part of me was feeling small and contracted, be compassionate and accepting of that, and still remain anchored in a larger awareness, a larger view, a larger True Self, true nature that wasn't that smaller self. Aware, holding, and free of whatever I was holding.

So, these practices of resonance, attunement, empathy, create what Daniel Stern in his book *The Present Moment* calls "moments of meeting."

A "moment of meeting" is a moment when two people traverse a feeling-landscape together as it unfolds in real time. They achieve a "felt sense" of each other; they share a

sufficiently similar mental landscape so that a recognition of specific fittedness is achieved – they each know what the other is experiencing.

The authentic, mutual responses of this shared feeling voyage create a shared private world that re-organizes the relationship and [initiates] an irreversible shift into a new state. The two people sense an opening up. There is a newly expanded intersubjective field that allows for different possibilities of ways-of-being-with-one-another.

These shared feeling voyages are so simple and natural, yet very hard to explain or even talk about (outside of poetry). Moments of meeting are one of life's most startling yet normal events, capable of altering our world step by step or in one leap. People are changed, and they are linked differently for having changed one another.

- Daniel Stern, *The Present Moment*

So, these psychological practices of resonance, attunement, empathy, really are skillful means in a spiritual practice to come home to our true Buddha Nature, and are a wise, solid platform for our Brahma Vihara practices – the heavenly abodes where we naturally dwell when we rest in our True Nature – loving kindness, compassion, sympathetic, joy, and equanimity.

Metta: In practicing loving kindness we first call to mind the noble qualities of the person we are sending metta to. Our own noble qualities if we are practicing metta for ourselves, our own goodness, our own kindness, the sincerity of our intentions, or the noble qualities of the person we are sending metta to. So we are already focusing on true nature as we being our metta practice.

There is always something noble to find in ourselves or in another person. True nature is who we really are, no matter how obscured by the hindrances. Plato said, Be kind, for everyone you meet is fighting a hard battle. So we set our intention to be kind, it's our heart we are healing with this practice.

In loving kindness or metta practice, we antidote the contraction of the smaller self by sincerely wishing happiness, peace, well-being, for ourselves or for another. With practice and repetition, the phrases and the sincerity of our intention – may you be happy or may I be well or may you be safe from harm or may I be kind to myself, or may you feel my love for you tap us into the mysterious living presence, a loving presence that flows through all forms.

James give a lovely example of loving kindness practice opening his heart when he was on retreat that he tells in his book *Awakening Joy*, which I highly, highly recommend if you don't have it already.

“Sending loving kindness to our enemies is a kind of alchemy, transforming our bad feelings into good ones. One year on a loving kindness retreat, I experienced exactly how that happens. My practice had progressed to the “difficult person” category, and I knew just who I'd pick. Sheila was someone who had temporarily moved into the large

shared household where I'd lived for a number of years. Although she was impeccable in following the house guidelines, it seemed to me she was always complaining about something: Others in the household weren't pulling their weight. House meetings were too long. Someone was playing music too loud late at night, etc. Whenever we encountered each other, which was often enough living under the same roof, I imagined judgments cascading one after another from her mind. (Of course, one or two judgments arose in mine as well.) Every time I thought about her, my body would tense and I'd immediately feel a wave of dislike. There was no doubt about it. Sheila would be the perfect "difficult" person for me to send loving kindness to.

"In doing this stage of the practice, you bring to mind the positive qualities of the person – maybe he's good with children, or she's very generous with donations to good causes. This helps you soften your heart and makes you open to wishing them well. However, every time Sheila came to mind, all I could think of were those complaints and attacks. After a day or two of continually directing phrases of well-wishing toward her – May you be safe from harm, May you be happy – the negative images subsided a bit, but I felt nothing remotely close to what you would call warmth or an open heart. Then on the third day there was a breakthrough.

"While I was trying to send Sheila kind thoughts, the Dalai Lama came into my consciousness. It occurred to me that he'd probably have no trouble at all doing this task that was so challenging for me. His love and compassion are so tangible that you can't be around him without having your heart touched, and you end up feeling full of good will. I'd seen him a few times in a setting small enough to watch him interact with people personally. He always welcomed each one with complete openness and love. An image came to mind of a time when I'd seen him greeting a line of people coming for a blessing. As I watched the scene in my mind's eye, to my surprise, Sheila appeared, awaiting her turn. Compassion was emanating from the Dalai Lama toward the two people ahead of her, and then she stood before him.

"What if I were to see Sheila through the Dalai Lama's eyes? I wondered. The scene unfolded in slow motion. First I notice her openness and vulnerability. Then I became aware of all the pain and sorrow she'd gone through in her life that shaped who she was. I could see her good heart and how she so wanted to be loved. Suddenly Sheila became a radiant being, beautiful to behold.

"The wishes for the health and happiness of my difficult person now came more easily and sincerely. Something that was tight inside me began to relax, and it felt like all the energy I'd been putting into keeping my heart closed to Sheila was releasing itself into caring and joy. In the teaching of several Eastern religions, the peacock is an important symbol of the ability to transform negative feelings into positive ones. This is based on the belief that this magnificent bird can eat poison and turn it into its splendid plumage. I felt like all that poison of ill will inside me had been turned into something beautiful."

Loving kindness practice isn't always easy. Sometimes we are re-learning to offer love to our small personal self that still contracts in fear or shame, or becomes self-

aggrandizingly self-absorbed in a misguided attempt to to feel whole. Offering loving kindness to others isn't always easy either. Especially if we have experienced hurt, cruelty, betrayal, abuse at the hands of others, and out of rage and pain can't give up that story about them and their behaviors that obscure their true nature. This is why Jack Kornfield wrote his book, *The Art of Loving Kindness, Forgiveness, and Peace*. For very often a practice of forgiveness has to be included in our ongoing practice before we can truly open our hearts again to ourselves or to others.

But James Baraz calls learning to love one's self again or the other, perhaps for the first time, a "watershed" of spiritual practice. And I believe it is. There is a spacious freedom when we feel the mysterious, living presence of love flowing through us, to ourselves and to others as unique, precious, miraculous expression of the life force, the life energy, the chi of existence. We know we are part of something greater than ourselves.

This is what is expressed in this version of namaste, which I heard attributed to Mahatma Gandhi, but I'm not completely sure of that.

I honor the place within you where  
The entire universe resides.

I honor the place within you of love and light,  
Of peace and truth.

I honor the place within you where,  
when you are in that place in you  
and I am in that place in me,  
there is only one of us.  
- Mahatma Gandhi

Theodore Rubin says: Kindness is more important than wisdom, and the recognition of that is the beginning of wisdom.

This Brahma Vihara of loving kindness naturally opens up into the second Brahma Vihara – compassion – which is how we keep our hearts open in the face of suffering. How we hold our own suffering or the suffering of others, caring, without being overwhelmed.

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow said, If we could read the secret history of our enemies, we should find in each man's life sorrow and suffering enough to disarm all hostility.

When my cat Kitka was dying of kidney failure a couple of years ago, I would hold her in my arms and send her compassion for her pain and confusion. And I found myself naturally sending compassion to my self for the grief and overwhelm that was welling up in me, that my wise self could see was welling up from some smaller, contracted part of me. Later when I told my friend Paul about my experience somewhat apologetically, because two people we both knew were dying in that same period of time when my cat

was, he simply reminded me, “Linda, love is love and loss is love.” I could feel held and healed through his genuine compassion for me.

It’s this arc of practices – resonance, attunement, empathy, loving kindness, compassion – when we both give and receive well – that allows us to move moment by moment, over a lifetime of practice, from our learned, human, contraction of self-ing to the wisdom and loving of our own true nature.

### Exercise

This will be a long exercise, about 10 minutes. We’ll do the first part talking with a partner, and second part in silence with that partner. As always, you can choose to opt out and do the exercise silently with yourself. If you can, turn to a partner.

1. For one moment each, you’ll share with each other an experience you have had of resonance. You’re not necessarily trying to have that experience with each other here tonight, though that may happen. It’s more sharing an experience you’ve had of resonance with somebody, where you could feel in sync with each other’s vibe. // Take a moment to feel what it’s like in your own body to have shared your experience and received your partner’s experience.
2. For one moment each, share with each other an experience you have had of attunement. Feeling attuned to feeling felt, or attuning to another, deeply feeling into what they were feeling. Again, you’re not necessarily trying to attune to each other here tonight, though that may happen. It’s more sharing an experience you’ve had of feeling felt, known, understood. // Take a moment to feel what it’s like in your own body to have share your experience and received your partner’s experience.
3. For one moment each, you’ll share with each other an experience you have had of empathy. You’re not necessarily trying to have that experience with each other here tonight, though that may happen. It’s more sharing an experience you’ve had of empathizing with someone else’s experience, or feeling someone truly, accurately empathizing with you. // Take a moment to feel what it’s like in your own body to have shared your experience and received your partner’s experience.
4. Now, you remain with your partner, maintain your connection through eye contact, but drop into the noble silence with each other. Simply being present with each other in safety and trust. I’ll lead you through this guided meditation of all four Brahma Viharas.

I first learned this exercise from Jack Kornfield; James Baraz says he learned it from Joanna Macy. Whatever. It’s all good. With your partner, and in silence, simply perceive the noble qualities of this person, and wish them happiness, ease, contentment, peace. Know that they are sending you wishes for your own happiness at the same time. Now imagine the trials and troubles this person might have experienced in their lifetime, the losses and suffering and grief they might have experienced in their lifetime. Hold an awareness and a care for their suffering as you send them wishes that their suffering ease,

that their suffering cease. Know that they are sending you their care and wishes for your release from suffering as well. Now imagine the joys and loves this person has had in their life. Especially moments of finding their path, healing and awakening into their own aliveness and wholeness, of learning to love themselves. Send them wishes that their joy continue, that their joy increase. Know that they are sending you wishes for your continued and increased joy at the same time. Now imagine this person facing the ups and downs of their life, the ups and downs of being human, and send them wishes for equanimity, that they meet the events of their lives with calmness, peacefulness, resilience. Know that they are wishing for you the same. As we close, allow your eyes to close and notice what's happening in your body, your psyche, your thoughts and feelings as you digest this Brahm Vihara practice.

Share your experiences of this entire exercise with your partner, then we'll return to the large group for discussion and questions.

Close with quote from Sri Nisargadatta

Love tells me I am everything;  
Wisdom tells me I am nothing.  
Between the two, my life flows.

Sit for one minute.