Most of us come to metta practice well-acquainted with the broken heart–our own, our loved ones’, and the world’s. Indeed, formal metta practice provides safe harbor for recognizing and touching the broken heart with kindness.

We usually think of heartache and heartbreak as a private, or at least an individual, reality. We would do well to challenge this assumption. The writer Parker J. Palmer, and others, rightly assert that heartbreak plays a prominent, though usually unrecognized, role in our public, collective life, and in particular our shared political life.

In his essay “The Politics of the Brokenhearted,” Palmer writes that one way to picture a broken heart is the conventional image of a heart broken into a thousand shards–shards, he writes, “that sometimes become shrapnel aimed at the source of our pain. Every day, untold numbers of people try to ‘pick up the pieces,’ some of them taking grim satisfaction in the way the heart’s explosion has injured their enemies. Here, the broken heart is an unresolved wound that we too often inflict on others.”

But Palmer writes that there is another way to visualize what a broken heart might mean. There’s a Hasidic tale where the disciple asks the rebbe, “Why does the Torah tell us to ‘place these words *upon* our hearts? Why does it not tell us to place these holy words *in* our hearts?’ The rebbe answers, ‘It is because, as we are, our hearts are closed, and we cannot place the holy words in our hearts. So we place them on top of our hearts. And there they stay until one day the heart breaks and the words fall in.’” This is the heart broken open into a greater capacity to hold one’s own and the world’s joy and pain. Those of us who practice Buddhism recognize this as the path of the Bodhisattva—the path of one who devotes their lives to serving all beings. Here, heartbreak becomes a source of healing, enlarging our empathy and extending our ability to reach out.

In the aftermath of George Floyd’s murder here in Minneapolis in 2020, a student angrily confronted me that metta practice was a naive response to this horrific crime. I understood where he was coming from. I feel the same way when politicians offer “thoughts and prayers” in response to gun violence. But it seemed quite clear to me that the force of the student’s anger came from deep sorrow. He had sidestepped his own heartbreak. How we take care of, or neglect to take care of, our own personal, private heartbreak matters a great deal in shaping our relationships and, by extension, our public, collective life. For some of us, the state of our political and cultural life itself is a deep heartache, making us vulnerable to shutting our hearts down, withdrawing into fearful isolation, or angrily lashing out, allowing the “shrapnel of the broken heart” to cause further damage.

Please spend a few moments generating an intention for allowing our hearts to be broken open rather than broken apart, directing the intention first toward yourself. Allow a word, or an image, or just a feeling to arise from your heart. Here are some words that came up for me:

Tender

Unafraid of pain

Joy

Confidence

When you feel you are stable in unconditional positive regard for yourself, please expand your intention outward to a person it is easy for you to appreciate, for someone with whom you have difficulty, and for all beings without exception.