

## Cultivating an Inner Garden of Love

I have noticed that a lot of people have been turning to gardening during this prolonged lockdown. Gloria has weeded and watered our garden plants much more frequently than in normal times and a dear friend of mine has spent a lot more time on her allotment growing spinach, beans, onions, tomatoes and strawberries. I am not a gardener, but lately I have been focussing much more on cultivating an inner garden of love. Let me explain.

Whenever life seems much more challenging and uncertain than normal it is so easy to get lost in endless fearful thinking such as, 'What if I can never hug my grandchildren again?' 'What if I never get all that money back from that flight I will not now be able to use?' 'What if my tooth gets worse and I cannot see a dentist?'

There is nothing much we can do to stop these fearful 'What if?' thoughts popping up uninvited in our mind. Worrying about the future is a core biological function of our brain. Our brains have evolved into incredibly powerful thinking machines in order to keep us as safe as possible from all kinds of external threats. Our mind is not going to stop doing this core task for us just because worrying about the future stresses us out so much.

Whenever we get lost in our fearful thoughts about the future, we not only feel bad, we also block out the joy of this present moment in which we are perfectly safe. As Robert Nairn has pointed out, as long as we are breathing at this moment, there is more right with us than there is wrong with us.

So, if we can find some way to keep pulling our mind back to the present moment, we can definitely begin to de-stress ourselves and reduce our overall level of anxiety. This is why mindfulness training has become so popular in our stressed out society. But shouldn't there be more to life than just being OK? All human beings want to be happy, but what makes us supremely happy? From my own experience of life, I have noticed that I am only supremely happy when I am in love. Now when I was a young woman, I thought that there had to be a really attractive man in my life for me to experience being in love, but I now know that is not true.

After spending over 30 years practising meditation and going on loads of meditation retreats, I have slowly realised that I can be in love with anyone or anything once my consciousness is high enough and my heart has broken open enough. For example, on one retreat, as some of you already know, I fell in love with an Albino donkey. On another retreat, it was a whole field of little violet flowers and on yet another, I will admit that I fell momentarily in love with a super-charming younger man. The point here is that it is not the object of my love that is significant. It is that once I meet the right conditions, I just fall in love with the whole world unconditionally.

Now, when I am not on retreat, I do find it much harder to raise my consciousness and open my heart to love. However, I now know without a doubt that this love energy is at the heart

of all living creatures, including all human beings -although of course, in some human beings that core of love is incredibly well covered up by layers of anger, greed, hatred, aggression etc.

When I am not on retreat, I have to make an extra effort to open up to the love energy but it is so worth it! How can we all spend much more of our time dwelling in love? We just need an effective way to cultivate the power of unconditional love within our own heart and mind.

One meditation on loving kindness which I particularly like goes something like this: Imagine that you are sitting in an enchanted garden or breathtakingly beautiful green space. This 'garden' could be somewhere that you have visited and absolutely loved, or it could be a wholly imaginary garden. If you like to visualise, you could spend a few minutes filling in the details of your garden with your mind's eye. But if you are not much of a visual person, you might just get a felt sense of the breath-taking beauty and peace of your garden.

Once you have firmly established the feel of sitting in the midst of an enchanted garden or beautiful green space, you can now do one of two equally wonderful practices.

#### Practice One

As you sit in your inner garden, gently bring to mind all your loved ones and close friends or anyone else you would love to share your garden with – maybe a spiritual master such as Jesus or Buddha or even a celebrity who for you represents pure beauty, strength, loving kindness or compassion. You can either simply invite these dear friends and loved ones to sit peacefully and harmoniously in your garden for a few minutes, or you might like to let your imagination run wild and hold a tea party in the garden for all your invited guests.

Sometimes when I do this meditation, I like to include one person in the world who still really annoys me – who often turns out to be a politician of some kind – and then I imagine that this person is transformed before my very eyes by all the love and beauty that surrounds them in my garden.

After you have joined in unconditional love with all your garden guests for as long as feels right to you, you can let this vision fade away and come back to being in your own body and grounding yourself on the earth for a moment or two before coming out of the meditation.

#### Practice Two

A variation on this inner garden of love meditation is to bring into your garden any feelings or thoughts that you notice popping up in your system that are negative or uncomfortable. For example, when I first sit to meditate, I sometimes notice an anxious thought or feeling swilling around inside of me, or I feel a real tension in my jaw that is related to my underlying anxiety. So then I take myself into my inner garden of love and invite my anxiety or irritation or frustration to join me there for a while. I then imagine that the love energy

that floods through my inner garden gently dissolves my anxiety or irritation until everything within me is love and nothing but love.

Now I can hear one or two of you objecting that this all sounds unrealistic and rather too sweet - like too much sugar spoiling a cup of really good coffee. If the image of an enchanted garden does not appeal to you – that's absolutely fine. You can simply imagine extending a wave of loving kindness from the centre of your heart out to all your loved ones and then even further out to bathe the whole world in a wave of loving kindness. As you do this, know that this loving kindness will boomerang right back to you and then benefit you in quite miraculous ways.

Some of you may also find the idea of extending love to your enemies annoying or far-fetched and I fully respect your view on this. But the love energy that I am talking about here really has nothing to do with the type of cloying, personal love found on Valentine's Day cards. Universal, unconditional love energy has very little in common with romantic love which is an intense type of egoic desire closely linked to our instinct to procreate.

Love energy is hard to describe, but I would say that it is an incredibly powerful universal life force that we can tap into once we know how to still our mind and open our heart. But if you are not too keen on the words 'love energy' you might use the term 'Divine Energy' instead, as Marshall Rosenberg does when teaching the spiritual art of nonviolent communication. Divine Energy is the energy that connects each of us to the divine at the core of all of us. When we finally learn to dwell in the midst of this Divine Energy, it is as though our whole experience of life is miraculously transformed as we feel a deep, powerful connection with the whole world and to absolutely everything and everyone within it.

Peggy Foster June 2020