

By now you have reached the halfway mark – twenty days into the Winter Feast. How is it going? Have you been able to sustain a daily practice?

If not, how are you treating yourself about it? Are you beating yourself up because you have missed a day or two – or nineteen? So easy for most of us to get into the mode of making ourselves wrong. There seems to be something in our culture that teaches us from a very early age, and very thoroughly, that we are flawed, and the only way to fix ourselves is through flogging ourselves into being better human beings.

As I look around me it seems this hasn't been a very successful way of helping ourselves and each other to make changes in our behavior. I have noticed that when I "screw up" by say, missing a day or a week of meditation, the feeling that comes up for me is shame – I feel so ashamed I don't want to tell anyone – in fact, if anyone asks me, I am very tempted to lie about it – after all, they'll never know the difference, right?

Then it becomes all about keeping up the image I want people to have of me – someone who is so good that I always do the "right" thing. And holding that "secret" has me pull away from people, terrified they will discover I am not who I speak myself to be. And of course, it doesn't work, because whether the other person ever finds out or not, I know – and that is one person I can never escape from.

Recently, two very good friends have been helping me to see myself as I look to the outside world, and I can tell you it isn't pretty – I am finally seeing how I push people away, even as I speak how much I want to live in harmony with people. How nasty and mean I can be, and how confusing it is for people around me to have me speak loving words one minute, then turn around and do something so hurtful the next.

This morning I did a meditation on self-compassion. Wow! It opened my eyes to a lot of things that have eluded me all these years. Mostly I saw how unloving I am towards myself. Then, in order to make myself feel better, I project that out onto others – I tell myself (and them too) that they are so inconsiderate, so unconscious, so *needy*.

Oh yes, neediness – I have really come face to face with that one lately. All my life, I have felt so much disgust when I am around a needy person. I, after all, am not needy – I am competent, self-sufficient, and I need no one in order to be happy. And then my new friend, who strikes me as being needy, told me that a teacher of non-violent communication once said to him, "Isn't it wonderful how in touch you are with your needs?"

(Just a little background on non-violent communication: one of their main premises is that we all have needs, and let me tell you, they have a long list of them. And they say that we are all just trying to get our needs met. So even when people act in ways that are harmful to another – maybe by striking out in anger, maybe by yelling at someone, maybe by calling someone a name, maybe by putting someone in prison, maybe by lying – they are just trying to get their needs met. So in the NVC training, they tell us to look beyond someone's behavior to find the need they are trying to get met. In that way, we can bring ourselves into relationship with them and have a harmonious relationship. Of course, it is much more complex than this, but this gives you an idea of why it is so vital to be aware of our basic human needs – needs we all share, by the way.)

Since my friend told me that, I have really been looking at my reaction to "neediness." I wonder if my competence and self-reliance are a cover-up for my unwillingness to acknowledge my needs? Maybe I am being short with people or impatient, or critical as a way to get my needs met. The needs, after all, are there, whether or not I choose to acknowledge them. Maybe my reaction to someone who is in touch with their needs is a mirror that is trying to show me what my own needs are.

So this brings me back to where I started this letter. What need am I trying to meet when I miss a day or more of meditation, when I have said over and over again, for years, that I want to have a daily meditation practice? Maybe it is my need for spontaneity – when I try to establish a discipline of any kind, I feel trapped. Now I can't sleep in in the morning. You mean, every day, no matter what, I have to sit and be still? No! I need to move, to have choice in my life. And I feel my little child inside rebelling.

And what makes me want to lie about it when I miss a day? Maybe it's my need for respect. If I say this time I am going to meditate daily, no matter what, and once again, I fail to keep that promise, and then I tell someone else that I failed AGAIN, I decide (of course without checking it out) that they will not have respect for me. I find myself "shoulding" myself – I should be consistent, I should never make a mistake, I should always do what I say I will do – and this is only the beginning of the "should" list.

So that brings me back to feeling ashamed and then I want to hide out. In this way, I isolate myself from the people in my life, because what if, horror of horrors, they should find out that I am a flawed human, not such a conscious being as I would like everyone to believe I am.

So this shame-based way of trying to make myself into the kind of person I long to be only leads to more shame, more isolation, more likelihood that I will continue to mess up. After all, it helps keep in place my belief that I cannot trust myself to keep my agreements, especially around things having to do with taking care of myself.

As I have been working with these self-compassion meditations, I am getting more in touch with what I have always believed – that the most effective way we have of helping ourselves and others to make lasting change in our behaviors is to love ourselves into them, not to beat ourselves into submission.

So let me end by asking the question I started with – How is the Winter Feast going? Have you been able to sustain a daily practice? Please answer that question on the enclosed contemplation sheet.

I notice that my tendency in answering this question is to lie, "Oh yes, of course I have meditated every day – after all, I am supporting others to have a daily practice and I must live the example." And when I get around to telling the truth, it feels so difficult. I want to state how I have messed up – "I have missed 4 days out of the last 20." I wonder what would shift if I instead said, "I celebrate the fact that I have meditated for 16 out of the last 20 days." Wow! Just in the writing of that, I notice a shift in my body – more openness, more spaciousness.

What if, instead of viewing myself as flawed, I held myself as basically good? What if we human beings are a lovely expression of whatever that creative life force is, and that we are all just "needy" people who are trying to find ways to thrive in this world that presents so many challenges for all of us? Could I really hold myself as a beautiful soul who makes lots of mistakes, has caused hurt to others, who continues to search for a way to be loving and kind – could that possibly be the job of the human? I wonder what would open up for me if I viewed myself as intrinsically good?

I invite you to answer that question truthfully, lovingly, compassionately. It is so challenging to establish a daily practice of any sort under the best of circumstances. You are living a particularly challenging life, so when you have difficulty staying with the practice, can you give yourself credit for the hard work you are doing and the success you are having? And can you love yourself into a deeper practice?

I, for one, intend to give it a go. Will you join me?

Thank you so much for playing with me in this arena of getting to know ourselves on a deeper level. I am grateful for the opportunity you provide me to share myself and to continue growing.

Much metta,
Maya