

Benefactor Meditation

I am deeply grateful to John MacKransky, who inspired this practice. His book, “Awakening Through Love” brilliantly describes these practices.

Benefactors are people who have benefitted you. They could be people you know or other loving people who have benefitted you indirectly. Your benefactors could include your parents, other family members, friends, teachers, coaches, mentors, spiritual teachers, authors of books that have helped you, a kind person at a sales counter, a supportive boss or coworker, or people who inspire you. It might be great loving figures like Jesus, the Buddha, Gandhi, or Mother Theresa. The third category of benefactors might be divine beings; for some this might be a personal experience of God. Another source of love you can visualize if you want is a divine loving ideal mother and father who hold you lovingly in their arms. You might also want to experiment with just feeling bathed in a universal loving energy force. Or, you can imagine and visualize some combination of the above.

We are surrounded by love, but we often don't recognize or appreciate it, especially if we have been wounded. Then our minds seem to filter out the good, leaving the negative. This is painful and cripples our capacity to love. This practice helps you to realize that love is always available to you, even if it's just love generated in this stillness visualization practice.

We all need love. The more we are able to open to and receive the love of others, the more abundantly we can love—both ourselves and others.

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When we realize our deepest goodness, we can then meet the deepest needs of others. What is needed is to wake up to the abundance and reality of love both within and without. You can start by seeing that, despite whatever harm and hardship you have suffered, you would not be reading these words were it not for tens of thousands of acts of love, both large and small, over the course of your lifetime.

This practice helps us to awaken to and absorb the love of the world. The practice enhances the experience of our goodness and helps us to then reflect this love back outward to others.

Before you begin this practice, make a “benefactor list” of all who have loved you and love you now. Refer to the above examples as you make your list. You will be amazed at how many people come to mind when you think about this, and your list will expand over time as you continue to reflect on the many people who have either directly or indirectly benefitted you. As you reflect on your benefactors, think about what they see in you. What goodness do they see?

Your benefactors need not be perfect. People aren't perfect. People who have disappointed you and perhaps even inadvertently harmed you may still have loved you and greatly benefitted you as well, far more than any harm they caused you. The point is, as you consider your benefactors, did they care for you and benefit you in some way? Did they value you? Did they have an authentic wish for your happiness and well-being? I recommend you do not include people who were significantly abusive to you.

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The Benefactor Practice

1. Get into a comfortable, relaxed, alert position.
2. Using your presence practice, get comfortable, still, and present. Take some slow, deep, relaxing breaths. Use your breath to anchor your attention.
3. Close your eyes.
4. Now imagine your benefactors surrounding you and beaming their love at you. See them smiling at you. Or, imagine yourself receiving a beam of radiant loving energy from a divine or universal source, or imagine yourself being held in the loving arms of your ideal, divine loving parents.
5. Open to their love for you. Imagine a gentle radiance, a shower of love upon you. Open to and take in their wish for your wellbeing and happiness.
6. When you get distracted (and you will get distracted!) gently return attention to visualizing and filling your heart with the love of your benefactors.
7. After a while, join with your benefactors in wishing yourself well, in radiating love for yourself to yourself. Be one with your benefactors. See if you can let go and merge into oneness in your mind with this loving radiance. See if you can tap into the universality and inclusiveness of this force of love.
8. As you and your benefactors shower you with love, imagine a glowing ball of love growing in your heart. Sense it now radiating out love to your benefactors. Imagine a resonance of loving and being loved with you and your benefactors.

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9. With time, as the strength of the experience of radiant love in your heart grows, gradually extend your love to all people, including—as you are ready—those you dislike and those who have hurt you.
10. When you are ready, open your eyes and return to presence with your surroundings. As you go about the rest of your day, see if you can continue to have a feeling of the glowing ball of love in your heart, radiating out love to all you meet.

As you engage in this practice, you will cultivate your capacity for universal, unconditional love, including and especially for yourself. If you have been wounded, the crippling pain of hatred (for yourself and others) will gradually ease. This practice changes the brain such that the experience of self-hatred and unworthiness give way to an abiding unconditional reverence for yourself and others. You will then give yourself over to be a channel for the force of love to act through you. This force will gradually replace your normal, human, egocentric habits of mind in guiding your actions. With practice, you will become a force of love.

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