

Essential Spirituality by Roger Walsh
Practice #2: Cultivate Emotional Wisdom: Heal Your Heart and Learn to Love
Chapters 10, 11, 12, 13, 14

OVERVIEW

[2] Cultivate emotional wisdom: Heal your heart and learn to love

Keywords: emotional wisdom, healing, "love"

Acquiring "emotional wisdom" refers to: knowing how to deal with difficult emotions (fear, anxiety, etc.), processing shadows and hurts (through acceptance and forgiveness) and, more positively, acquiring good emotional virtues such as compassion and gratitude.

Sample Exercises: Heal an emotional hurt; Give a gift to someone you don't like; Say grace; Spend a day of thankfulness

1. The Gift of Love (Chapter 10, Page 71)

Summary:

Emotions rule our lives, so transforming our emotions is an essential practice. The three major approaches to transforming emotions according to the great religions are: *reducing* painful feelings such as fear and anger; *fostering* helpful attitudes such as gratitude and generosity; *cultivating* positive emotions such as love and compassion.

Key Points from Chapter 10:

1.1 Nature of love (Page 71)

- Love is the emotion that is considered as 'the supreme value'
- To experience and express love has been one of humankind's greatest quests.
- The search for love is met with the same errors found in all cravings: it is sometimes driven by an unexamined sense of inadequacy, deficiency, and fear.
- Mature love is based more on sufficiency and wholeness rather than on deficiency and fear.
- The love that the great religions offer--Christianity's *agape*, Buddhism's *metta*, and Hinduism's *bhakti*--is far more than a fleeting infatuation. Instead, it is rooted in the will.
- Boundless love is already within us.

2. The Challenge of Difficult Emotions (Chapter 11, Page 76)

Summary:

Challenging emotions such as fear, anger, jealousy, and despair are among the most difficult, sometimes most destructive, of all experiences. None of us escape them. But some people learn how to live with them, learn from them, and grow through them, while other people inflame them. It is crucial to learn how to respond to painful emotions.

Key points from Chapter 11:

2.1 Unskillful responses (**Page 77**)

- When you respond 'unskillfully', difficult emotions can torment and devastate.
- There are three major errors
 - judging or condemning difficult emotions as bad or evil
 - ignoring or defensively pushing painful emotions out of awareness
 - indulging or inflaming them, for example, by nursing feelings of resentment toward someone who hurt us and gleefully plotting revenge
- You cannot ignore, condemn, or repress difficult emotions
- The challenge is to neither suppress nor indulge, but rather to explore and learn. In this way we come to understand our emotions.
- The most powerful and difficult emotions are fear and anger.

2.2 The fantasy of fear (**Page 78**)

- We fear our thoughts and fantasies about what may happen in the future. Fear is always about the future.
- Recognizing the falsity of so many of our daily fears and worries can be a crucial first step in freeing ourselves from them.

2.3 The agony of anger (**Page 79**)

- Anger is an emotion of power and therefore is the hardest to master
- When anger becomes a way of life, it can devastate not only the mind but also the body.
- Anger can prevent enlightenment
- There are three approaches based on the great religions to free ourselves from fear and anger:
 - mastering and reducing difficult emotions, especially fear and anger
 - cultivating attitudes such as gratitude and generosity that foster love.
 - cultivating love itself

3. Exercises to Reduce Fear and Anger (**Chapter 12, Page 82**)

Summary:

Fear and anger are responses to threat, one is a passive contraction and the other is an active explosion. They are closely linked, reducing one reduces the other. There are exercises to help with this.

Key Points from Chapter 12

3.1 Exercise 1: Move from victim to creator (**Page 82**)

- People live believing they are helpless in controlling their emotions
- To transform emotions, you must recognize our role in creating them

- Take a moment to be aware of how you feel. Notice the emotions you are experiencing.
- Next, think of or visualize someone you like.
- Then notice any emotions that arise.
- Now think of or visualize someone you dislike and watch the play of corresponding emotions.
- Next, simply draw the corners of your mouth up and put a smile on your face. Observe that a gentle wave of happiness follows immediately.

3.2 Healing painful emotions **(Page 83)**

- Over time with practice, it is possible to gradually transform our emotional responses into more life- and love-affirming ways.
- The spiritual traditions suggest understanding and undermining difficult emotions by carefully experiencing and exploring them-or/and by counteracting them with kindness and generosity.

3.3 Exercise 2: Exploring fear **(Page 84)**

- We spend time avoiding fear, so it is helpful to consciously explore it
- Begin by sitting comfortably. Take some time to relax. Remember to breathe slowly and deeply, relaxing more with each breath.
- Think of something that makes you afraid, but not overwhelmed
- Allow yourself to feel the fear and then begin to explore it. Notice that the actual sensations of fear seem to be located in a particular part of your body.
- Now turn your attention to other aspects of the experience.
 - Is there an image associated with the fear? If so, what is it?
 - What is your posture like, and are there particular muscles that are tense?
 - Can you relax some of these muscles as you continue to breathe slowly and deeply?
 - What thoughts run through your mind?
- Take a few really slow, deep breaths. Now explore the experience of fear again. Notice its location right now. See if the sensations have changed.
- It is often the unexamined fears that are more terrifying.
- Simply bringing conscious awareness to dark states of mind tends to heal them.

3.4 Exercise 3: Stay with fear **(Page 87)**

- This exercise involves exploring fear, as in the previous exercise.
- Instead of deliberately evoking it, wait until fear arises spontaneously during daily life.
- Then remain in the same posture exploring it until it subsides.

3.5 Exercise 4: do what you fear and fear will disappear **(Page 87)**

- As you avoid what you fear, fear tends to grow
- Start by selecting something that you would like to do but find a little scary.
- Then make a commitment to do it during a particular time period.
- Record your findings, either by writing them down or telling a friend

3.6 Exercise 5: recognize the costs of anger **(Page 89)**

- When you next find yourself bristling with anger, find a place where you won't be disturbed. Then take time to explore your experience.
- First, turn your attention to the body and observe the sensations that make up anger.
- Then turn attention to your mind. What is going on there? Is your mind racing with thoughts of vengeance? Are there violent fantasies scurrying through?
- When you observe anger carefully in this way, its costs become painfully apparent.
- The more you see, the easier it becomes to let it go.

3.7 Exercise 6: communicate about anger **(Page 89)**

- To relinquish anger, it helps to talk to someone about it
- Not to attack, but to forgive and release
- Go to Christian confession, tell a therapist, talk to a trusted friend, or write it down.
- A related technique is to write a letter to the offending person and explain how you feel. There is no need to send it.

3.8 Exercise 7: recall your own mistakes **(Page 90)**

- It is easier to recognize others' mistakes than our own
- To do this, first recall something you feel angry about.
- Next, reflect on exactly what the offending person did that hurt you
- When you are clear about the offensive action, try to recall times when you made similar mistakes.
- All of us have made mistakes.

3.9 Exercise 8: recall the good **(Page 90)**

- When you find yourself angry, stop what you are doing. Then think of the person or people who hurt you.
- Recall any good deeds they have done, especially any that may have benefited you.
- They can be simple, but it fosters gratitude and gratitude undermines anger.

3.10 Exercise 9: think of loving people **(Page 91)**

- When your temper flares, you bring to mind the image of a loving friend or a kind spiritual teacher, their love and kindness may partly replace your rage.
- You can try visualizing the person and maybe think about how they would react to the situation as well.

3.11 Exercise 10: give to forgive **(Page 91)**

- If you are having difficulty forgiving someone, give them a gift.
- It is hard to feel angry at people when you give them a gift. It is also hard for them to remain angry at you when they receive it.

3.12 Exercise 11: a forgiveness meditation **(Page 92)**

- Forgiveness is most powerful and encompassing if it extends in three directions:
 - the request for forgiveness from those you have hurt
 - forgiveness for yourself
 - forgiveness for those who have hurt you

- Sit comfortably and allow the breath to come slowly and easily. Let your body and mind relax
- Turn your attention to any memories or areas of your life where you have not forgiven or been forgiven. Become aware of the associated feelings, of any barriers to forgiveness, and any holding of past pain or resentments.
- Acknowledge the ways in which you have hurt others, don't condemn but notice and then gently and slowly repeat several times, "I ask for forgiveness, I ask for forgiveness."
- Next, allow memories of times when you hurt yourself to come into awareness, as each one arises, regard it and yourself gently and lovingly and repeat several times, "I forgive myself."
- Next, allow memories of times when you were hurt to come to awareness. Then repeat to yourself several times, "I forgive you."

3.13 Value of patience and the higher reaches of forgiveness **(Page 94)**

- Sometimes it may take years before the full benefits of forgiveness become obvious.
- Forgiveness is a relinquishment of one's resentment, not a relinquishment of one's ethics.

4. Cultivate Love and Gratitude (Chapter 13, Page 99)

Summary:

Love must be nourished by supportive attitudes such as generosity and gratitude. This chapter focuses on gratitude.

Key Points from Chapter 13

4.1 Gratitude: the doorway to love **(Page 99)**

- Gratitude bestows many benefits. It dissolves negative feelings: anger and jealousy melt in its embrace, fear and defensiveness shrink.
- Gratitude also evokes happiness, which is itself a powerfully healing and beneficial emotion.
- Gratitude can be cultivated.
- We can develop gratitude by reflecting on the gifts that are already ours.

4.2 Exercise 12: say Grace **(Page 100)**

- Offer thanks before a meal
- It must be done mindfully to have benefit
- Grace allows one to reflect on the gifts that have been given. It can, moreover, foster thankfulness very effectively.
- It can also help with the relationship with other people

4.3 Exercise 13: recall helpful people **(Page 100)**

- Recalling the help we have received from others-especially from our parents-is a common practice in many religions

- Think of two or three people who have been particularly helpful to you. Recall some of the ways they helped.
- Take a few minutes to remember their kindness and to allow feelings of gratitude to arise.

4.4 Exercise 14: a day of thankfulness **(Page 101)**

- Commit a time of day to work on this.
- Think of the people you will meet during this time and find a reason to feel grateful for each person you meet.
- Continue this recollection of gratitude throughout the day.
- At the completion of the exercise period, take time to reflect on the people you met and your feelings about them.

4.5 Exercise 15: Recall loving people **(Page 102)**

- Bring to mind people you know or know of who are exceptionally loving.
 - They might include family members, friends, wise people you have met, or saints and sages you have heard of.
- Take a moment to think of each person. As you do so, bring to mind the gifts they give. What makes them loving?
- Notice your state of mind as you reflect on these people.
- If you offer love to someone, that love first fills and heals your mind.

4.6 Exercise 16: I will receive what I offer now **(Page 103)**

- Relax and then say to yourself, “As I give, so shall I receive. I will receive what I offer now.”
- Now think of those experiences and qualities of mind that you would like to give to others and thereby enjoy for yourself, such as, love, happiness, healing, etc.
- Offer these qualities to people, keeping in mind that you should also offer these to yourself.
- Visualize the qualities if it is helpful

4.7 Exercise 17: All-encompassing love **(Page 104)**

- Think of someone you love dearly. If you can, visualize this person clearly in your mind's eye. Be aware of any feelings of warmth and love that arise as you see this person.
- When you are aware of warm feelings, expand your awareness to include people around you.
- If at any stage you notice the feelings of love begin to disappear, return attention to the person you love deeply whom you began with.
- Now extend your awareness throughout your neighborhood and city. Accept all these people as worthy of your love and include them in the scope of your care.
- Now expand the scope of your love still further to encompass the entire country. Then, when you feel ready, expand your awareness to include the entire world
- Finally, include all creatures within the boundless circle of your love.

4.8 Exercise 18: Lovingkindness Meditation (Page 106)

- The Buddha taught a meditation on loving-kindness
- Begin by cultivating loving feelings towards yourself
- The meditation includes phrases, they traditionally include four desired qualities such as "May I be happy, kind, loving, and peaceful" or "May I be joyful, gentle, calm, and loving."
- As the meditation progresses, these phrases will be modified, for example, "May *you* be happy, kind, loving, and peaceful"; then "May *all people* be happy, kind, loving, and peaceful."
- Finally, when the meditation becomes all-encompassing, the sentence becomes, "May all beings be happy, kind, loving, and peaceful."

5. The Higher Reaches of Love (Chapter 14, Page 111)

Summary:

A person who radiates love becomes a force and inspiration of extraordinary power.

Key Points from Chapter 14

5.1 Love, Personal and Transpersonal (Page 112) (relate to Maslow's "Self-Transcendence")

- Spiritual practices can expand and deepen love
- This mature/deeper love can transform love *from a peak experience to a plateau experience (longer lasting)*
- Love is not personal but transpersonal, not only part of us but also part of the cosmos, not limited to our individual minds but part of the universal Mind, Spirit, or God.
- Different traditions have different approaches to this idea of love
- Ethical living both expresses love and further refines it.
