A BLESSING PRACTICE - COMMENTARY

Adapted from *Jewish Meditation Practices for Everyday Life* by Rabbi Jeff Roth (pp163-183)

Rabbi Roth’s Blessing Practice is a technique that is rooted in two traditions: Jewish Prayer and what he refers to as the Buddhist divine abode practice. (In the “Introduction to Mindfulness” course I took from Melodie Benger some years ago, I learned this as the “metta” practice.)

Rabbi Roth introduces this practice as a way of dealing with painful mind states that drain our mental resources and make it difficult, if not impossible, to stay aware and balanced in the present moment. A way of dealing with something like a flood of compulsive or aversive thoughts is to actively engage the mind in an alternative activity with a more constructive purpose. This can be understood as cultivating wholesome mind states. One way of accomplishing this is the technique of continuously repeating phrases of blessing in the mind. By cultivating positive mental states, we give ourselves much­needed breathing room in the face of our emotional challenges. Another way the blessing practice is useful is that by occupying our mind s with repeated blessings, we temporarily evict our habitual patterns of thinking, and in a sense recondition the mind to be more positive.

Rabbi Roth says that he modelled this blessing practice after a technique he learned from his teacher, Sylvia Boorstein. He derives the specific phrases from the Sim Shalom (“grant peace”) prayer that comes at the end of the Amidah. He says :“As we finish the prayer, its all-encompassing sentiment is summarized in an invocation of peace for the world and all its beings. The words of Sim Shalom begin thus: ‘Grant peace, goodness and blessing, graciousness, loving-kindness and compassion upon us and all Your people Israel.’"

Theologian Arthur Waskow translates the Hebrew name Israel as "God-wrestlers," the name given to Jacob, as previously mentioned, after he wrestled with the angel (see Gen. 32:25-29). When we awaken to the fact that we are in an interconnected web with all being, we see that our every move causes the universe to shift in response. Every other vibration that occurs in this universe also moves us. The Hebrew word for "people" or "nation " is ahm, spelled with the letters ayin and mem. The word is derived from a sense of connectedness, which underlies the idea of a nation or tribe of people. More broadly, it could also mean that all being is connected . "Your people" refers to every being that belongs to this web of God. The use of these words means to me that this prayer is invoking the six qualities it mentions for all people and for all beings.

Of these six, Rabbi Roth chose peace, loving-kindness and compassion as core positive qualities to be cultivated. He added the quality of joy, saying “Joy (or simcha in Hebrew) is cited by many Jewish Sages as an indispensable spiritual practice in the path of service. Another change he made was to move the quality of blessing to the beginning of the phrase. In Sim Shalom, we pray that the universe might feel blessed. He says: “By placing the invoking of blessing as the action or verb function of each phrase in the blessing practice, I hoped to draw focus on the possibility that people can bless themselves, and they can bless others. This is a way of making prayer an empowering function.”

As in the Buddhist metta practice, Rabbi Roth’s Blessing Practice, and the Sim Shalom prayer from which he derives it, the invocation of blessing is made not only for ourselves, but for all beings. He suggests that, as you work with this practice, you challenge yourself to focus the blessing on these seven different categories of recipients:

1. Ourselves
2. Our benefactors
3. Our closest loved ones and family
4. Our friends and acquaintances
5. Neutral people
6. Annoying/difficult people
7. All beings

The purpose of this practice is for you to develop a quality of openheartedness toward yourself and all other beings — a quality that is quite naturally present in us when the obstructions created by our grasping are removed. In this practice, results are secondary to intention. the practice is about our own state of heart/mind and the cultivation of loving-kindness. This state of mind acts as an antidote to the grasping quality of mind and allows us to see the world more clearly and with more kind ness. It also fosters in us a desire to act more compassionately from moment to moment. In the blessing practice, we hope to keep our hearts open even when what we pray for does not manifest.

During the in-breath, as you say, "May I be blessed with," visualize yourself, or whoever it is you are directing the blessing toward. The goal is to bring to mind as strong a sense of that person as possible. Try feeling their presence beside or inside you. Remembering the sound of a person's voice-or even laugh-can often connect you to that person's presence more easily than visualizing him or her. So, if visualizing is hard for you, you may try "audio-izing" them

A benefactor is someone who inspires you, who has supported and helped you, and who looks out for your best interests. Man y people pick an important teacher or a mentor. Chances are, when you think of your benefactor, your heart naturally opens.

The blessing practice allows you to see more clearly the state of your own heart. You can begin to really know the difference in how your heart feels when it is open as compared to when it is closed. You also can become aware of where the particular relationships in your life stand. For example, as you try sending blessings to your immediate family, you may notice resistance you might have toward those you love. This can come in the form of more distractions, or as stories of unresolved hurts that seem to pull your attention away from the phrases.

Eventually, your blessing practice will include people outside of the familiar sphere of family and friends. You can begin to send blessings to colleagues, neighbors, and casual acquaintances. This is an important step in the expansion of your openheartedness. The practice of opening the hear t is also the practice of beginning to see more clearly that we are not the center of the universe. The web of being has no Center.

When you feel ready, move on to extending blessings to difficult people. A difficult person is someone who bothers you in some way. . It may be someone you have a feud with or someone who once insulted you. Or it may be someone you just don't like. If you are holding a grudge against someone, this is the time to work with it. Remember the reason for doing the blessing practice: you are trying to cultivate an opening in your heart. It is not about fixing people or correcting their behavior. When you hold a grudge, the person who is most hurt is you. Blessing the difficult person is really the active pursuit of peace.

As you move through the different categories of people as described above, remember that the main focus of this practice is the cultivation of your own heart of compassion. You may find that you r heart opens when blessing your benefactor, but that it doses when you move on to yourself or to the annoying or difficult person. If this happens, feel free to go back to the benefactor. You don't have to force yourself to push through your closed heart by persisting with the phrases where you are blocked. This principle applies to each of the people you wish to bless. You can always go back to a set of phrases that open your heart, and when your heart feels open again, try moving on to the phrases where your heart felt blocked.

The final step in the practice is to send blessings to all beings. Since it is hard to visualize all beings at once, you can do this by imagining classes of beings. In her mindfulness course, Melodie Benger suggested gradually expanding categories of people, such as in the neighbourhood, then the city, the province, all of Canada, etc., then moving on to other types of beings, like all birds, all trees, all mammals, etc.

Rabbi Roth closes his discussion of the Blessing practice with a section called “Blessings on the Subway and at the Airport.” He says “One of the good things about the blessing practice is that you can do it any time and in any place. You can do it while d riving, or on the subway, or walking on a sidewalk… In such a setting there is no need to visualize. You can take someone in with your eyes during your in-breath, and bless him or her with joy while trying to feel joy in your body on the out-breath.”

He also describes doing the practice out of doors, and blessing whatever being he sees. On a walk, I will l bless the tree I see, and then the driver who next passes by, and then the weeds”

I’d like to finish this talk the way Rabbi Roth finishes his chapter, by offering blessings to all of you here with me this evening:

* May you be blessed with peace.
* May you be blessed with joy .
* May you be blessed with loving-kindness.
* May you be blessed with compassion

Some additional quotes from Rabbi Roth’s chapter:

“As I mentioned, I suggest you begin your blessing practice by linking the phrases .to your breath. Linking the phrases with your breath serves to keep the phrases moving without getting lost in one particular phrase or a train of thought that arises from it. I find that my mind wanders less when the next breath, joined to the next phrase, is already upon me. It also grounds the practice in the present moment of experience and in the body, since the breath is happening at this moment, in this body.”

“Don't worry if you can't immediately cultivate a sense of peacefulness. After all, at this particular moment you may not be feeling peaceful at all, and that's okay. Peace is not the predominant reality during most of the moments of our lives. Over time, in the context of living and practicing wisely, we can cultivate a feeling of peacefulness in our lives. While it is helpful not to be attached to the idea of peace becoming a permanent reality, peace can, over time, replace the feeling of anxiety as our default response to life.”

“Loving-kindness is a good composite term for the Hebrew word *chesed. Chesed* represents the quality of unbounded loving-kindness. Borrowing from. psychological language, we might say it refers to unconditional positive regard. It is the quality \_ of feeling held in a loving embrace. Acting kindly and with unbounded love is a feeling that comes not from ego or wanting anything in return.”

“If we are feeling compassionate, then recognizing suffering is not demoralizing. When compassion is present, we are able to keep paying attention to the suffering, and out of its recognition, we are motivated to act to ease it. The heart quivers but does not flinch or turn away. When we need to turn away, we have alread y entered the experience of suffering ourselves. It is our desire to avoid pain that is behind our unwillingness to face the suffering of others.”