

Spiritual Alchemy: Transmuting Negativity Into Loving Kindness

Introduction

All spiritual traditions speak of the importance of greeting negative circumstances with love. One often hears that one should love one's enemy or love the people who cause one difficulty. Despite the fact that all spiritual traditions hold this as an ideal, in point of fact, it is very, very difficult to actually do it, even to a limited degree.

People develop various strategies in their endeavor to greet negativity with love and good will. One obvious approach is to just let the negativity arise but in the background, ignoring it as best you can while focusing on what is positive. Another approach is to dissolve the negativity into flow and then use that flow to power the Loving Kindness. We might refer to this latter approach as “Spiritual Alchemy.”

In pre-modern times the alchemists attempted to transmute base materials such as lead into noble ones such as gold. The reason they failed is that in order to achieve such a transmutation, one must put the lead in a nuclear reactor and reconstruct it at the atomic level. The alchemists thought if they could properly recolor the surface of the lead it would gradually become more and more gold-like. We now know that won't work. One has to go down to the deepest level, the atomic level in order to transmute one substance into another. In the same way, you can go down to the deepest structural level of a negativity (such as fear, anger, shame and so forth) and see it as flowing energy. At that level it loses its negative “color” and becomes in a sense transparent. You can then recolor it as Loving Kindness and radiate it out.

The purpose of this article is to describe step-by-step how to do this. But let's be honest, it does require a bit of work. One has to be willing to practice at it, in the same way as one would practice at sports or music. But as with any other skill, one can get better and better at it as time passes until finally it becomes second nature. When that happens, you will find yourself protected by the ultimate armor. You will be able to cope with the whole range of interpersonal interactions with great confidence. So although the technique that I'm describing may be challenging and require consistent work, in the end it pays off tremendous dividends.

Step 1

The first step in this technique involves the ability to experience discomfort as moving energy. Let us say that some-body says an unkind word to you or someone frustrates you or you have a physical condition such as disease or fatigue. Such negative external conditions always involve the spreading of uncomfortable internal sensations. And those sensations are never permanent. They're never absolutely steady. They're always moving and changing in some way. They come and go as waves. Tune into those wave qualities--how your sensations rise, get a little stronger, and then pass away; how they move from place to place in the body; how the intensities will vary from moment to moment in time. These are all aspects of change, impermanence.

However intense, however gripping, however overwhelming a discomfort may be, in some way or other it is always changing and moving because the nature of experience is change and flow. So the first step in this technique is to focus in on the fact that the discomfort is always changing and to ignore the discomfort itself. So, if you encounter somebody who challenges you or says a harsh word, feel how that impact moves through your being as just vibration. Ignore the emotion, focus on the motion. This will reduce the suffering and create a soft energy matrix in which unconditional love can be nurtured. Once you can do this, you can move on to the second step.

Step 2

The second step involves intentionally producing positive thoughts and contacting the pleasant body sensations associated with those thoughts. Think any thought that evokes for you feelings of love and good will. You could think about friends. You could think about your own positive qualities. You could think about how blessed you've been in various ways. You could think about your higher aspirations that all people should be happy. Associated with such positive thought in the mind will be a pleasant sensation in the body. You may feel it in the heart, or chest, or over the whole body. Don't worry if it is faint and tiny; you will soon see how to expand it! Every person has within themselves the potential to feel at least a drop of natural love and good will.

In the first step, we learned how to experience the discomfort of the negative circumstance, not as discomfort, but as movement, energy. In the second step we generated a drop of the pleasant sensation of love and good will. Now we come to the third and final step--putting the two together.

Step 3

Let the movement and energy take that little drop of love and good will and spread it all throughout your whole being. Indeed, let it spread out like a cloud into the space around you. Just as one tiny drop of food coloring, put in a glass of clear water, will be spread everywhere by the movements of the water molecules, in the same way, one tiny drop of positive feeling can be spread by the energies flowing through you (the energies which themselves were generated by experiencing the original "negativity" as moving waves).

Now it may well be that you will still experience a lot of discomfort if you're having a strong negative interaction. But you may be able to experience a small percent of that discomfort as just pure movement and you may be able to produce a little drop of positive feeling. You can then use that energy to spread and magnify that little drop until it surrounds you like a cloud. You will then have an immense feeling of safety and empowerment. And you will be encouraged to practice this more and more.

Let me give you a tangible example. Let's say that somebody is being unkind to you, confronting you. With each unkind remark that person says, some discomfort arises within you. (Of course, the reason that person is saying unkind things to begin with is that they themselves have discomfort that they cannot deal with, so they are trying to throw it onto you.) You experience at least part of the discomfort they are throwing on you as just something moving through your body. With each negative thing that person says, another wave of discomfort moves through your body and that wave of discomfort is experienced

just as a wave of energy and therefore it spreads your feeling of love and good will even more. A subtle vibration of good will comes out of every pore of your being. In this way, you become like a converter. Someone dumps their pain into you and (at least to some extent) it is transformed into a feeling tone of love and good will which spreads outside of you. The more negative energy a person puts into you, the more positive energy comes out of you.

A Common Confusion

At this point I would like to digress for a moment to throw some light on an aspect of this practice about which there is much confusion. People often make the following objection: “If I go around greeting negativity with love, won't I become passive and ineffectual, a 'doormat' for the world? Aren't there times when we should confront a situation, take purposeful action, be assertive?” To answer this objection, consider the following: In all the discussion to this point, I have spoken only about converting uncomfortable sensations into loving sensations. No mention has been made, one way or another, about what kind of action should be taken with respect to the situation that produced the discomfort. Situations must be handled on a case-by-case basis.

Sometimes it is most effective to take mild action or no action. Other times one must be strong, perhaps even harsh. The point is: Actions should arise spontaneously out of the reality of the situation. But often our actions are distorted because we are caught in pain. The ability to produce loving feelings in the midst of negativity simply means that one is reducing the distorting influence of one's internal pain. Can a person be purposeful and assertive and at the same time radiate love and good will? Of course! The simplest proof of this is through direct observation. Observe how the really spiritually mature people respond to various situations. **They are internally surrendered but externally effective.** The life of Jesus presents many good examples of this.

Review

There are two main goals in the spiritual life. One is to have a sense of complete freedom and fulfillment for oneself. The other is to be a source of love and good will to others. If you can experience negativity as energy, “recolor” that energy as love and good will, and let it spread out from you, then you will be simultaneously achieving those two goals. With practice, any person can learn to do this. That means any person can experience an extraordinary empowerment in their daily life.

At first you may only be able to do this with small negativities--minor irritations. Bear in mind the steps again. The negative circumstance gives rise to strong feelings. But the feelings come in waves. Focus on the waves. Then produce a positive feeling. And let the waves that formerly were negative feelings be colored by that positive feeling so that their energy spreads and magnifies the positive feeling. Let yourself become just a mass of positive feeling, a mass of loving energy. And carry that vibration with you throughout the entire interaction and throughout your entire day.