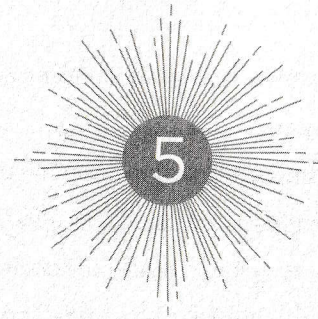


ism between the desire to be seen (when we feel good about ourselves) and the desire to disappear (when we don't). Meditation practice is about learning to see our whole selves compassionately. To do this, we need to study the self. When things are "going good" (peaceful, positive), we might enjoy "studying the self." When things are going to shit (turbulent, troubled), not so much. Often, we come to practice wanting to get rid of parts of ourselves. If we want only the "good stuff" or reject things we don't like, we can't know ourselves in full.

As Dōgen said, this knowing of the self leads to a forgetting of the self. What does it mean to "forget the self" in a selfie society, in an economic climate where everyone is a brand (hello, my name is on big letters on the cover of this book), in a world that erases or distorts your cultures? Can you see your self? Just as you are, right now? Who are you, really? It's a package deal, studying and forgetting the self. We know ourselves through our ancestors, our experiences, and through our connection to everything around us. The less wrapped up we are in our patterns—reactively avoiding them or acting out unconscious conditioning—the more available we are for whatever life presents. As we forget the self, we remember that we are part of a whole. We can't have a connection to everything if we're trying to get rid of the self that is the very vehicle to experience connection. That's why loving ourselves is so important.



Love Yourself

Every chapter in this book could have been titled "Love Yourself"—all the pages filled with one sentence, repeated over and over: Love yourself. Love yourself. Love yourself. This imperative is the motto of belonging. Our sense of freedom and joy depends on it. When we truly love ourselves, we don't need to be someone or something else. When we love ourselves, our sense of separation softens, the need to dominate dissolves. Comparison and competition clear away in the presence of self-love. Hierarchy and oppression crumble. We belong.

As we've explored, children learn how to be and not to be in order to fit in. As kids, we absorb society's dictates and prescriptions. We don't want to experience rejection so we limit being too different. We long for those physical features, personal characteristics, or material objects we *think* will bring us belonging. Especially us immigrants, misfits, and weirdos, we learn the ways of dressing and speaking, and the codes

of behavior that will gain us acceptance. Some of us see through the dominant culture's hierarchies and rebel against them in an attempt to belong. We find countercultural groups and realities, which have us judging ourselves through new rules of belonging. Part of being human is our need to belong to groups, and modernity requires grappling with the complexity of multiple identities and affiliations—which can lead to the semiotic vigilance of not belonging. We judge and police everything about ourselves. To directly challenge our tendency for near-constant self-abnegation, we must choose a fierce, uncompromising self-love rooted in the certainty of belonging.

Love yourself. This is not about simply tolerating what we don't like about ourselves, bearing our faults and challenges as if they are our deserved punishment. Loving yourself asks you to affirm and care for every part of your body, to adore all aspects of your personality, and to appreciate your experiences and current life circumstances. Cherish the things you deride: your temper, your cellulite, your depression, your physical limitations, your jealousy. You are not only *not* in contention with life, you are grateful for it all. Be grateful to everything, including past difficulties that got you to this moment: your family dysfunction, *that* relationship, your career fails. Nothing is a mistake or a problem. Do not reject any part of you. It's not that you long to perpetuate every dubious characteristic. You're not loving *envy*; you love yourself even when you *feel* envy, recognizing that it served you in some way. I can love myself even when I don't like what it is I think, feel, or do—I can love myself in every moment (not just those I approve).

Adore yourself. Imagine starting each new day filled with this devotion for your being, greeting each day with the simple invi-

tation to allow love. Allow love to flow to all the parts of your life. And as you allow love for yourself, love for everything else will follow, in time. Right now: Love yourself. Love yourself. Love yourself.

Gratitude helps.

Grateful for It *All*

Gratitude is a practice. I practice with my friend Lynn. Every morning, we text each other three things for which we are grateful: people, places, things, experiences. Each day, I discover the many parts of my life and of the world that I appreciate: the colors of sunset I see from my kitchen window, licks from my dog Suki, chatting with my neighbors in the elevator. It can be challenging to think of new things to text to Lynn and not write “matcha” every day (I wrote “matcha” today). It's even harder to appreciate myself as part of the process. Lynn and I almost always name things external to ourselves. While writing this chapter, I began to text only about aspects of myself for which I'm thankful, including “problem” parts. I didn't tell her what I was doing, I simply offered thanks, even for what I usually reject. It felt uncomfortable at first and then I hit my stride.

My hot flashes. My love of art. My middle-aged body.

My writing practice. My procrastination. My paranoia.

My awkwardness. My envy. My eye for beauty.

My cancer. My scars. My strong teeth.

My cellulite. My swollen arm. My kindness.

My self-care. My anxiety. My bravery.

My confused musings. My discipline. My distraction.

It's hard to love ourselves in moments when we can't stand how we are. I don't enjoy being awkward. I don't like seeing my domineering tendencies (which I usually do only after the fact). I don't love when my pent-up anger seeps out over the phone at an unsuspecting stranger working their exhausting customer service shift. But I've learned to pause and invite a different response to these parts: when I notice a reaction or tendency that I want to push away or banish, I try and soften around it simply by giving it some attention and space. Not rejecting these things is the first step into a deep process of self-love. Loving ourselves is about what my teacher and friend Tara Brach calls "radical acceptance." Simple acceptance can imply acquiescence or bargaining: *I will accept this flaw, defect, or bad habit in order for it to go away.* Radical acceptance invites a deep appreciation for every damn thing about ourselves. Tara offers "this too" as a mantra: *This awkwardness. This domination dynamic. This anger. This too. Love myself.*

Loving ourselves is as much an undoing as a doing. The love is available. Always. Inside and outside. And yet because we are conditioned into the delusion of separation, love is not our default operating mode. In separation, we reject parts of ourselves, other people, and experiences. We don't allow love because of all the barriers created to block it. Those barriers are our attempt to block pain, but they block the love, too. We must allow ourselves to feel it all.

Love may feel like too strong of a word for some of you (see, we even reject *love*). **Get over it.** Belonging will not happen through rejection or hatred. Because, well, that's ridiculous. Belonging inherently *is* love. To belong means to love. Love is what is needed to soothe any sense of not belonging. How can we fully belong if we reject any part of ourselves? To belong means opening to it all.

Love It All

Loving ourselves is the simplest instruction so far. It does not involve the multiple steps of a meditation practice in grounding. Loving does not require the unearthing of experiences in knowing. To love ourselves, we simply *allow love*. Simple, but not easy. There's an apocryphal story about the first time His Holiness the Dalai Lama taught in the US. Someone asked him a question about self-hatred. The story goes that it took ten minutes to even translate the question because the Dalai Lama could not understand the concept of not loving oneself. It seems that within his experience of Tibetan life, this rejection of self did not exist. It may be true of some people and of some traditional cultures—that within the matrix of close-knit families or communities, self-acceptance is easier. Maybe. I don't really know if ancient people had more self-love or what it feels like to grow up in a context where love of self is unquestioned. What I do know is that in the culturally complex context and diasporic diversity of life today (plus the onslaught of media and advertising that insists we need to be different in order to be loved) loving yourself is not so easy.

I constantly evaluate myself physically. Often, that's the easiest judgement to see—especially as a woman. Some parts of me I've learned to reject based on the hierarchies of society, like my middle-aged belly. This is obvious internalized oppression: fat phobia has me policing my body for any signs of weight gain, and that is ridiculous and insidious. Not everyone is swayed by these dominant values. You might be thinking, *Oh, I don't subscribe to fashion ideals and I reject the oppressive messages of our society.* Okay, great and... check in to make sure you're not missing the unconscious and persistent barriers to self-love that mask themselves as "love in opposition." Maybe explore the way self-love can become dependent on comparison and competition *against* the mainstream. As in, we love ourselves because we are more woke or because we reject who we used to be. True self-love will allow us to feel belonging wherever we go, with whomever we are, however we got to this moment. Loving yourself means also loving where you came from. Any time I reject parts of myself, an opportunity to allow love presents itself. This means loving the parts I don't like.

I've been trying to get rid of aspects of my personality ever since I've known me. I reject things that don't measure up to my ideals—the ways I think I *should* be. I am my fiercest critic. At times, I feel that I'm doing it all wrong: *I'm rarely as present as I think I should be, I was not as kind as I should have been, I'm being lazy because I should be productive.* I have some idealized vision of myself that is always more mindful and compassionate and wiser than the current me: *that* me isn't unkind or judgemental, she doesn't get snippy, she does not build walls between herself and others. I analyze and doubt my past experiences and my future deliberations (and miss the present). This constant self-monitoring is wrapped in the belief that I'm not doing

enough nor being enough (in reality, I'm often doing too much and I am *always* enough). The self-evaluation is relentless—there's barely room for self-love.

So, how *do* we open up to loving ourselves at all times? We don't. That would be utterly exhausting. And probably impossible—we're not trained for that. It would be like me trying to run a marathon tomorrow. But I can open to loving myself bit by bit, over and over—training for the marathon in stages (and then continuing the training once it's over lest I get out of shape again). This involves letting in love whenever possible—against the tide of unabating messages of being unlovable. It's impossible to truly love ourselves if we never measure up to the impossible standards of beauty, wealth, and accomplishment. If we believe there is a lack, that something is wrong with us, loving ourselves will be impeded. We start loving ourselves by first filtering out demands of fashion and mass media, the pressure for new objects pushed on us by advertising, and the punishing pace of the on-all-the-time work culture.

Anything I do not love about myself plays into the delusion of separation. Why would I not adore every single thing that got me to this moment typing this sentence, breathing this breath, including the ignorance and mistakes of my past? Not belonging is perpetuated when I cannot love this very moment and all the moments to come (my aching back *and* my healthy body). I learn to love rather than reject myself. And, most importantly, I love myself even when rejecting myself. This type of all-encompassing loving takes practice and patience. We are so used to judging ourselves and wanting to excommunicate anything we don't like even though it keeps us in not belonging. Allow love, over and over.