

THE BOOK  
OF  
ALCHEMY

A CREATIVE PRACTICE  
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# LETTERS FROM LOVE

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In 1990, the meditation teacher and author Sharon Salzberg met the Dalai Lama for the first time—in a gathering that included many other prominent philosophers, psychologists, and spiritual leaders. When Salzberg had the opportunity to ask the Dalai Lama a question, she invited him to shed some wisdom and hope upon the terrible problem of self-hatred. The Dalai Lama did not understand the question. This was not because his English was poor; it was because he literally did not understand the question. He kept having to consult with his interpreter to make sure he had heard her right. He kept asking Salzberg for further clarification: *Who is the person that you hate? Who is the enemy? Who is it that are you in conflict against?* And she kept reiterating: *Myself*. All the other Westerners in the room nodded in agreement—for they, too, struggled against demons of self-hatred.

When the Dalai Lama finally grasped what these Westerners were getting at here (that they were all at war against themselves, and that they all assumed this was a completely normal state of being), he was dismayed. He said, “I thought I had a very good acquaintance with the mind, but now I feel quite ignorant. I find this very, very strange.”

Most of us don't find it strange to hate ourselves. For many of us, it's the default setting of our consciousness. We are wracked by shame, tormented by all the ways in which we have failed, and far more likely to bully ourselves than we would ever bully another human being. We are merciless toward ourselves. And we never, never let ourselves off the hook. Worst of all, we think this is normal. It isn't. Just because merci-

lessness is what we have been taught does not make it right, sane, or normal.

I'm not smart enough to know exactly why Western civilization has created millions of souls who truly believe they are miserable wretches, but I suspect it might have something to do with centuries of religious teachings that specifically instruct us to believe that we're miserable wretches. It might also have something to do with the inherent cruelty of a capitalistic system that reduces everyone's value to what they can produce, what they possess, and how much status they hold. This is fundamentally inhumane, and it makes people sick with shame and lack.

Many of us are sick like this. Many of the most compassionate and accomplished people I know still struggle with the belief that they are fundamentally bad and wrong. They certainly have trouble believing that they are intrinsically worthy of being loved. I have struggled with this, too—to the point that it has become my life's work to dismantle the lie.

My best tool against my distorted habit of self-hatred is to write myself daily letters from love. I have done this for nearly twenty-five years. This practice has carried me through a quarter of a century of challenges—through two marriages and two divorces, through losing the love of my life to cancer, to facing my own addictions and shortcomings. I have certainly had plenty of opportunities to pick up burdens of despair and shame. Through it all, I have managed to find (if only I listen openly and carefully enough) a compassionate voice within that I can tap into when I need to hear words of love, compassion, and reassurance.

I believe there is a voice of love that is constantly available to all of us—and that it dwells within. I believe that love is our default setting. I believe that simple affection and a stance of unguarded self-friendliness is the natural state of a human being toward herself: Why would it be otherwise? We are the one person we will spend our entire lives with! Why would we be wired to hate the one we are always with, the one we are? It doesn't even make sense, as the Dalai Lama pointed out.

I invite you today to come back to your true nature of self-friendliness by writing yourself a letter from love. This is not fancy writing, so don't

overthink it. Just write what you have always wished you would say to you. Give yourself reassurance, forgive yourself. You already know how to do this, because you have spent your life with loving kindness in your life: It is no different than loving yourself. Write the words that you would say to a beloved who is having a tough time—or even a stranger. Write the words you would offer to other people you loved who were suffering. Do you not be entitled to the same grace and kindness? Are you not deserving of everyone else? Are we all not equally in need of mercy? We all want to practice universal human compassion. We all want to practice universal human compassion that does not include you is universal. So put down the knife you've been holding and pick up a pen.

#### THIS IS YOUR PROMPT:

Write a letter from love. Begin your letter with the words: "Love, What would you have me know today?"

And then let love itself write a letter to you. Trust the words of this compassion and affection. And trust—please trust—that every word of your letter is true.

overthink it. Just write what you have always wished that somebody else would say to you. Give yourself reassurance, forgiveness, affection. You already know how to do this, because you have spoken to other people with loving kindness in your life: It is no different when addressing the self. Write the words that you would say to a beloved friend who was having a tough time—or even a stranger. Write the words that you have offered to other people you loved who were suffering. Why would you not be entitled to the same grace and kindness? Are you different from everyone else? Are we all not equally in need of mercy and gentleness? We all want to practice universal human compassion, right? But universal human compassion that does not include you is not, by definition, universal. So put down the knife you've been holding to your throat, and pick up a pen.

#### THIS IS YOUR PROMPT:

Write a letter from love. Begin your letter with this question: "Dear Love, What would you have me know today?"

And then let love itself write a letter to you. Trust that you are worthy of this compassion and affection. And trust—please trust, my friend—that every word of your letter is true.