

our hidden faults.  
what you find repulsive.  
e you think you cannot help.  
you are attached to, let it go.  
ces that scare you.

—ADVICE FROM HER TEACHER  
TO THE TIBETAN YOGINI  
MACHIK LABDRÖN

# The Places That Scare You

*A Guide to Fearlessness  
in Difficult Times*

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## *Four Limitless Qualities*

May all sentient beings enjoy happiness and the root of happiness.

May we be free from suffering and the root of suffering.

May we not be separated from the great happiness devoid of suffering.

May we dwell in the great equanimity free from passion, aggression, and prejudice.

—THE FOUR LIMITLESS ONES CHANT

*I*t's up to us. We can spend our lives cultivating our resentments and cravings or we can explore the path of the warrior—nurturing open-mindedness and courage. Most of us keep strengthening our negative habits and therefore sow the seeds of our own suffering. The bodhichitta practices, however, are ways for us to sow the seeds of well-being. Particularly powerful are the aspiration practices of the four limitless qualities—loving-kindness, compassion, joy, and equanimity.

In these practices we start close to home: we express the wish that we and our loved ones enjoy happiness and be free of suffering. Then we gradually extend that aspiration to a widening circle of relationships. We start just where we are, where the aspirations feel genuine. We begin by acknowledging where we already feel love, compassion, joy, and equanimity. We locate our current experience of these four boundless qualities, however limited they may

be: in our love of music, in our empathy with children, in the joy we feel on hearing good news, or in the equanimity we experience when we are with good friends. Even though we may think that what we already experience is too meager, nevertheless we start with that and nurture it. It doesn't have to be grand.

Cultivating these four qualities gives us insight into our current experience. It gives us understanding of the state of our mind and heart right now. We get to know the experience of love and compassion, of joy and equanimity, and also of their opposites. We learn how it feels when one of the four qualities is stuck and how it feels when it is flowing freely. We never pretend that we feel anything we don't. The practice depends on embracing our whole experience. By becoming intimate with how we close down and how we open up, we awaken our unlimited potential.

Even though we start this practice with the aspiration for ourselves or our loved ones to be free of suffering, it may feel as if we're just mouthing words. Even this compassionate wish for those nearest to us may feel phony. But as long as we're not deceiving ourselves, this pretending has the power to uncover bodhi-chitta. Even though we know exactly what we feel, we make the aspirations in order to move beyond what now seems possible. After we practice for ourselves and those near us, we stretch even further: we send goodwill toward the neutral people in our lives and also to the people we don't like.

It might feel like stretching into make-believe to say, "May this person who is driving me crazy enjoy happiness and be free of suffering." Probably what we genuinely feel is anger. This practice is like a workout that stretches the heart beyond its current capabilities. We can expect to encounter resistance. We discover that we have our limits: we can stay open to some people, but we remain closed to others. We see both our clarity and our confusion. We are learning firsthand what everyone who has ever set out on this path has learned: we are all a paradoxical bundle of rich potential that consists of both neurosis and wisdom.

Aspiration practice is different from making affirmations. Affirmations are like telling yourself that you are compassionate and

brave in order to hide the practicing the four limits ourselves of anything, no We are expressing our closer to our fears. Asp increasingly difficult relat

If we acknowledge th that we feel now and nurt sion of those qualities w qualities provides the nee to emerge. They have the melt the ice-hardness of forcing ourselves to be g we can be, we aren't aski ration practices develop experience, whatever it r difference between a clo ing the self-awareness These practices unblock nimity, tapping into thei

of music, in our empathy with children, in the joy of hearing good news, or in the equanimity we experience with good friends. Even though we may think that our experience is too meager, nevertheless we start to nurture it. It doesn't have to be grand.

These four qualities gives us insight into our current state of understanding of the state of our mind and how we get to know the experience of love and compassion and equanimity, and also of their opposites. We know when one of the four qualities is stuck and how to allow it to flow freely. We never pretend that we feel anything. The practice depends on embracing our whole self and becoming intimate with how we close down and how we awaken our unlimited potential.

We start this practice with the aspiration for ourselves and others to be free of suffering, it may feel as if we are using empty words. Even this compassionate wish for others may feel phony. But as long as we're not deceiving ourselves, pretending has the power to uncover our true nature. When we know exactly what we feel, we make the effort to move beyond what now seems possible. For ourselves and those near us, we stretch even our goodwill toward the neutral people in our lives and the people we don't like.

We stretch into make-believe to say, "May this suffering cease, may I and all beings enjoy happiness and be free of suffering." What we genuinely feel is anger. This practice is what stretches the heart beyond its current capabilities to encounter resistance. We discover that we can stay open to some people, but we remain closed to others. We see both our clarity and our confusion. We are aware that everyone who has ever set out on this path carries with them all a paradoxical bundle of rich potential that requires insight, discernment, and wisdom.

This practice is different from making affirmations. Affirming yourself that you are compassionate and

brave in order to hide the fact that secretly you feel like a loser. In practicing the four limitless qualities, we aren't trying to convince ourselves of anything, nor are we trying to hide our true feelings. We are expressing our willingness to open our hearts and move closer to our fears. Aspiration practice helps us to do this in increasingly difficult relationships.

If we acknowledge the love, compassion, joy, and equanimity that we feel now and nurture it through these practices, the expansion of those qualities will happen by itself. Awakening the four qualities provides the necessary warmth for an unlimited strength to emerge. They have the power to loosen up useless habits and to melt the ice-hardness of our fixations and defenses. We are not forcing ourselves to be good. When we see how cold or aggressive we can be, we aren't asking ourselves to repent. Rather, these aspiration practices develop our ability to remain steadfast with our experience, whatever it may be. In this way we come to know the difference between a closed and an open mind, gradually developing the self-awareness and kindness we need to benefit others. These practices unblock our love and compassion, joy and equanimity, tapping into their boundless potential to expand.