

Meditation Cushion

My Chosen Feeling Is Tenderness

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Not long ago I was reading a scientific article about Antonio Damasio a renowned neuroscientist and the director of Brain and Creativity Institute at the University of Southern California. In the article the journalist talked about the idea that for too long we have thought of ourselves as rational minds inhabiting insentient mechanical bodies. It's true that all living organisms own the ability to continuously maintain their functional physiological

operations in order to survive. But in human beings there is a supplementary mechanism. The key to the mechanism is "feelings".

In other words, the fundamentals behind feelings are a very integral part of the maintenance of life.

Since my very first steps into meditation practice over 42 years ago, I've been faced with the urge to instill my practice with a specific feeling (or "*bhav*") and use it as a shining torch to guide me on the path. Often my chosen feeling has been "tenderness", softening the boundaries that separate me from experiencing what the practice has in store for me and letting my inner body shine of its own accord, without forcing my way in. In this way my breath has become the physical expression of tenderness as it moves in and out of my body or the mantra has gently turned into the power of God's tenderness within me with every repetition.

Meditation is definitely a practice but is also a natural state we already own that we need to become aware of. I like to call it "the inner presence", as the Indian scriptures claim it to be the form of our innermost essence that we can flourish at any time as our birthright. This inner power is extremely vital and it manifests in us mainly in two ways: through awareness and through bliss. The more we grow our awareness in sensing its sweet and graceful touch and the more our inner presence will release its nectar into our lives. The proper use of feelings can favor this process immensely.

Please close your eyes and take a few moments to recall the feeling you get when you return home after being away for some time. You open your front door and you're enwrapped by the scent of your home. Here I'm not talking about the detergent you used to clean your home, nor the last meal you cooked before leaving. I'm referring to the unique smell of your own home. In the same way when you connect with the state of meditation you know you've reached your own inner home and can soften into its delight. So simple, yet quite challenging because in the attempt to "make it work", oftentimes in meditation we tend to put too much self-effort in shaping out our experience out of expectations. The energy of meditation is innately free and cannot be controlled at any time. Our only job is to set the mind in the right direction and let the inner power take over. My meditation teacher used to say that we should employ a very sweet effort to keep the mast steady and steer the sails into the natural winds of grace.

So, when you choose a feeling for your meditation, let it be the perfect one that can point the boat of your focus in the direction of gentleness and surrender. Because in doing so you're naturally going to soften into the benign inner presence that awaits to welcome you within.

My dad used to tell a joke about our dog who was very fond of her ball and would play with it for hours. Sometimes he would go out to the garden and throw the ball far away for her to fetch it back. And our dog would stare at the ball through the whole trajectory without ever losing sight of it. My father used to say that if we humans kept our gaze on God as much as our dog did on his ball we would be enlightened. In the same way, we should hold our focus steady on the feeling we want to evoke in meditation and allow it to permeate our practice.

Please sit quietly for meditation and gently close your eyes. Allow your gaze to be soft and relax your skin from the top of your head to your toes. Take some time to release tension from your throat by bringing your focus to the space between your jaw and the collarbones. You can also perform a few rounds of *ujjayi breath* to free your throat, if needed.

Then choose the feeling you would like to harbor in your practice and install it in every part of your body. Feel it in your head, in your shoulders, in your chest, down to your arms and hands, slowly descending to your abdomen, pelvis and legs. The whole body becomes the container of your feeling, like a lamp shining out the light from only one filament. You could whisper the name of your feeling like a sacred word to evoke its power in you, if you need a stronger focus.

Then turn to your breath and breathe in with the intention of being blessed by your feeling and breathe out releasing your own blessings into the world while expanding the feeling all around like the moon shedding its rays in all directions. Do this practice as long as it feels gentle to your heart. Then move back to your own regular meditation practice. Enjoy!

