

Benefactor Practice *for Natural Meditation Series*

Benefactor Practice is shorthand for a kind of meditation developed by Lama John Makransky, who adapted it from traditional Buddhist practices. It is a key element in a series of meditations that has been more formally called *Innate Compassion & Wisdom* (or *Innate Love & Wisdom*) as well as *Sustainable Compassion Training*.

The Margha Program *Bodhicitta Series* year, which focuses on compassion practice, explores the Benefactor Practice in-depth and step-by-step over the course of months. However, this is not the primary focus of the *Natural Meditation* year, so we are not teaching these practices in depth at this time, nor is it a required practice during this year.

However, many find some version of Benefactor Practice to be an important element in a full spiritual life, as well as supportive and empowering as they access Natural Meditation.

Background

Benefactor Practice is based on traditional Buddhist devotional practices. These practices include *Taking Refuge*, *Guru Yoga* and *Deity Yoga*.

In the traditional practices, the practitioner visualizes a caring spiritual figure – or a field of such figures – in whom one can place one’s trust and from whom one can receive inspiration and unconditional love and guidance. This could be the historical Buddha, or another teacher in our lineage – or a whole field or “tree” of lineage masters. The field of Refuge could also include your own teachers, as well as Sangha, the community of practitioners (and ultimately all beings) on the path of awakening with you. It could also be a deity, such as Chenrezig or Tara.

You are encouraged during this Natural Meditation year, if you feel comfortable, to formally recite the *Prayer of Refuge and Universal Love* to begin your meditation sessions. (And to recite the *Dedication* prayer or prayers at the end.)

Benefactors

Benefactor Practice was skillfully adapted by Lama John Makransky to enable modern practitioners, in our own time and culture, to more easily access the same principles of these traditional devotional practices – without necessarily, at least initially, using the Asian cultural forms.

The key is finding a benefactor, or caring figure, in whose presence you feel deeply accepted, seen in your basic goodness, loved in your very being. Someone you can sense wishing you well-being, happiness and freedom from suffering. Someone who makes you feel joyful and at ease when you bring him or her to mind.

A benefactor can be someone from your life, living or otherwise. You can start with remembering a particularly memorable moment of love, affirmation, acceptance, connection, comfort or care. It can be someone with whom you had this momentary connection. Or it could be someone who seemed to be an enduringly stable caring figure (even if not always perfect; we aren't looking for saints.)

If it's a person from your life, let it be someone who naturally warms your heart and brings joy to recall. For some of us that can certainly include our parents or partners, who see and uphold and nurture the good in us. For others of us – at least when initially exploring this practice, or at certain times in our lives, or if our history with them is complicated – certain family or intimate figures, even if we care for them, may raise up challenging feelings. If so, it might be best then to think of someone who seems to be a simpler and more direct source of care and acceptance – like a grandparent, or elementary school teacher, or nurse or caregiver who comforted you in time of need. Or perhaps a dear friend who has always been there or who made a difference when it mattered. Over time, more benefactors from our past may come to mind. We may also come to connect more with the caring quality even in those who may seem problematic at first. Pets, whether still alive or remembered from earlier in life, can also be wonderful benefactors. Their unconditional and nonjudgmental love for us can be deeply nourishing and affirming. Or even animals in the wild with whom you feel a natural affiliation and inspiration.

Places, too, can serve as benefactors, especially if we find it difficult initially to find a suitable being, human or otherwise. Places in nature for example, where you feel safe, at ease, uplifted, inspired or more fully alive with the simple joy of being. Or other places that feel special – a church or temple if you felt genuinely held in sacredness or acceptance, or even a quiet sunlit room or corner where you played happily as a child. It is the quality of being held, seen, accepted and loved that matters most – not whether the place is supposed to be special or sacred.

If so drawn, you can also connect with spiritual benefactors. These are figures who have become so transparent to their deepest nature that their qualities of love and wisdom flow forth unconditionally and unwaveringly to all. That means that you too are included in their wish of love. Not only do they wish us well – our deepest happiness and freedom from suffering – but they also know, from their own experience, and from discerning our full potential, that such complete awakening is possible. So we can sense from a spiritual benefactor not only love, but also deep confidence in our true nature in all its depth.

Spiritual benefactors may include some traditional Buddhist ones – such as the Buddha, lineage masters and archetypal deities – but it also might include exemplars from other religions, or figures that have emerged from our own psyche. Spiritual benefactors emerge from feelings of genuine gratitude, inspiration and love, and should not be invited on the basis of a sense of obligation.

How to Practice

For the purposes of the Natural Meditation year practice sessions, we suggest keeping your Benefactor Practice very simple.

* Call to mind a benefactor, perhaps initially someone from your life, living or otherwise, human or otherwise. (Again, pets can be wonderful.) Even a place that feels sacred or safe. (Wonderwell, if you have been here, may be such a place for you. Perhaps in the meditation hall. Or on the back porch beholding meadow, mountain and sky. Or in the woods.)

It is possible a spiritual benefactor will show up – maybe one of the images at Wonderwell such as the beautiful golden Tara statue, or one of her thangka paintings, maybe even a small image tucked away in a corner or quietly in plain sight like the Kuan Yin above the fireplace. You could also envision – or just sense – a whole cluster or field or tree of benefactors. Or one figure can sometimes subsume them all. Or you might feel (rather than see) them as a source of radiant light.

Be open to what and who is showing up as a benefactor: it may change from day to day, or you might be drawn to one for a long period of time. Call to mind someone who is a source of love and inspiration to you.

* Imagine the benefactor before you, not as a memory, but as if present now with you. Visualize or sense them gazing upon you with acceptance and love, seeing you in your deepest goodness and true potential, wishing you deeply well, loving you in your very being. Beyond any limiting thoughts you might have about who or what you think you are or what you deserve. (You may still have such thoughts or doubts, but your benefactor keeps wishing you love all the same.)

* Then just receive your benefactor's love. This can be in the form of radiant light, pouring forth from the benefactor, bathing you from head to toe. See if you can allow this radiance to soothe and embrace any physical tension, allowing such tension to relax under the gentle healing touch. Also receive this radiance into any areas of mental or emotional tension, anxiety or worry. Not struggling with such feelings but allowing them to be permeated by this radiant wish of love. All while your benefactor gazes upon you, communing with you in the goodness of your very being. (If your benefactor is a place, just imagine steeping in the presence of being there.)

* After a few minutes of receiving this warmth and light, you can allow the visualization to dissolve. Let go of holding anything in mind, release all effort, and just relax into the afterglow, the openness and warmth of deeply letting all be.

* You are then ready to explore one of the specific Margha Year One practices. You could also, if you wish, even segue through *The Meditation of Three Letting Be's* to further and more

consciously relax and rest in open awareness before taking up *shamatha* or other practice. (Or, for some sessions, you may find *The Meditation of Three Letting Be's* alone may be the perfect entree into the practice.)

With familiarity, you may find that you can quickly “flash” on the presence of your benefactors, so it can be a very brief but still profound, nourishing and empowering moment of connection, receiving and release – before a practice session or even in “short moments, many times” during your day.

As time goes on, you may start to see more and more benefactors around you. They have always been there, but this practice can sensitize us to notice and recognize and appreciate them in all their forms. In the kindness and simple wish of love shining through people and other beings you encounter – ultimately their deep nature mirroring your own, and vice versa, even in the briefest glance, the light in their eyes reflecting your own. And you may feel the love of your benefactors – and that of your own inner benefactor, your true nature, the Buddha within – overflowing and radiating out to others. (In formal Benefactor Practice, we intentionally extend love, while continuing to receive. But for now you can allow it to be a natural outflow.)

Winter Retreat Teachings on Benefactor Practice

During the 2019 Winter Retreat, several sessions addressed the role of Benefactor Practice in some form as an empowering supportive practice for the Natural Meditation Series. You may wish to listen to the following audios from the 2019 archive:

1/03/19 session 4 – Teaching: *Power of Benefactors in Mahamudra Practice* – Bob Morrison

1/03/19 session 5 – Teaching: *Devotion as Gateway to the Natural State* – Camille Hykes

1/03/19 session 6 – Meditation: *Benefactor Practice into Three Letting Be's* – Camille Hykes

1/04/19 session 4 – Meditation: *Benefactor Refuge Tree* – Bob Morrison

1/04/19 session 5 – Teaching: *Benefactor Practice as Transmission/Devotion* – Bob Morrison

We will of course be exploring Benefactor Practice in relation to Natural Meditation at the 2021 Winter Retreat.

