

## **IN THE SHELTER OF EACH OTHER**

**-Elizabeth Lesser**

### **A PRACTICE FOR THE WORK AHEAD....**

Sometimes the most powerful way to work on self-love, self-respect, self-acceptance, is to extend that work outward toward “the other.” Whether that “other” is in your own home, at your workplace, or someone with whom you disagree or feel animosity toward in the culture or community, there is a way to heal your own self-negation through extending understanding, love and sympathy toward the very one you want to exile from your heart. Lo and behold, both self and other can come in from the cold by moving closer to each other. And there is a way to do this that will not compromise your own integrity, safety, and truth.

This practice is helpful for all divisive situations in our life, but especially today with the great division in our society here in America and elsewhere around the world. The following meditation practice helps me stay grounded and open, hopeful and strong. I call the practice “In the Shelter of Each Other” because it teaches us to take care of ourselves and to take care of each other—both, in balance. At the bottom of the document you can find the two images I refer to. The first image is of the goddess, Quan Yin, who is the Buddhist goddess of compassion; the other is a statue of the Buddha.

### **In the Shelter of Each Other Practice**

Stand tall, or sit up in a chair or cross-legged on the ground, and close your eyes and feel your breath slowing a little, deepening. Fill your lungs and your belly. Keep your back straight, your shoulders relaxed, your chest open and your belly soft. You can sigh a few times, to release any tension. The posture of a strong, straight backbone and an open, soft chest tells your mind to be alert and awake, and your body to be relaxed and calm.

Now....

1. Hold one hand up in a “stop” position as in the statues shown below. (It doesn’t matter if it is the right or left hand.) In Buddhist tradition, this gesture is called the **Abhaya Mudra**, the gesture of protection and fearlessness. You could say that it is the gesture of NO. No, I will not take this energy in; I will not participate in behavior and beliefs that harm; I will be a protector of life; I will know my worth, my rights, my direction; I will stand with and for those who need shelter and voice. As you hold your hand in this mudra, let it give you a feeling of strength and determination and courage.
2. Put that hand down and rest your other hand cupped on your thigh if you are sitting, or out in front up you, palm up, as in the statue below. This is called the **Varada Mudra** and it symbolizes a heart that can hold the world, a heart that has vast compassion and the ability to stay open and tender even in the midst of injustice and suffering. It is the mudra you see in Hindu and Buddhist goddesses—those devoted to human salvation. Feel yourself opening and expanding your heart, knowing you can forgive and transform the negativities of the world through your love and wisdom. You can BE the change. In the Christian tradition, this is the agape gesture—not reacting to aggression with more aggression. Not being defensive, but instead, being open, calm, loving. It’s the gesture of YES. Of inclusion, listening, widening the circle of family to include even the “other,” even the “enemy.” It is the gesture of what’s possible.
3. Now, do both gestures at the same time. Feel the combined power of strength and tenderness. Of NO with YES. Of convictions with humility. Of outrage with empathy. Hold this posture until your body knows what it feels like to “marry the opposites” as Carl Jung said.

This is an exercise you can do wherever you are—at home or work (perhaps if you work in a corporate setting you may want to hide your hands under the

desk, or go into the bathroom stall!) Sometimes you may need a strong hit of strength—perhaps you feel too sensitive, defeated by grief and loss. Hold up your hand in the Abhaya Mudra and call forth the strength you need. Or if you feel yourself reacting too strongly, being too ego-driven or defensive, too quick to judge, impatient, harsh, you might want to make the Varada Mudra. Hold out your hand and cup your palm, and welcome in an open-hearted perspective. But most of the time, we need both strength and tenderness. So, take some time each day to sit or stand quietly for a few minutes and hold the two mudras simultaneously. Hold them as a prayer for yourself, for our world, for all its people, for the earth itself, to be in balance. And refresh the exercise all day long, whenever you need to make a decision or lead a meeting or go about your work and home life in a more awakened, effective, and wise manner. (scroll down for images)



