On the Freedom That Must Come Home

A Meditation for November Ninth

In remembrance of World Freedom Day and Eleven09 Day

There are days upon which history has placed more than one memory.

November ninth is such a day.

On November 9, 1938, organized violence against Jewish communities spread across Germany and Austria. Synagogues burned. Homes and businesses were destroyed. People were beaten, arrested, and killed. A government that had already deprived people of their rights permitted and organized further persecution.

On November 9, 1989, the Berlin Wall opened.

Families who had been separated for decades crossed a boundary that had divided their lives. People embraced. Some wept. Others laughed. For many, the simple act of walking through an open passage became an extraordinary experience of freedom.

And on November 9, 2007, six American soldiers and three Afghan soldiers were killed in an ambush near Aranas, Afghanistan.

For their families and those who served beside them, this date became a day of remembrance.

These events are not the same.

We do not need to make them the same in order to recognize the human lives within them.

One date may hold grief and joy, remembrance and liberation, the consequences of hatred and the possibility of something different.

We can make room for each without asking one to explain away another.

Perhaps we may begin here.

If it is comfortable, we may allow our bodies to settle.

We may become aware of our breathing.

Breathing in, we know that we are here.

Breathing out, we allow ourselves to arrive.

There is nothing we must accomplish in this moment.

We do not have to understand the whole of history.

We do not have to resolve every question about war, freedom, or the responsibilities of nations.

For a little while, we may simply practice being present.

And from this place, we may consider what it means to wish another person well.

In the Buddhist tradition, the Four Immeasurables offer us four ways of cultivating an open heart.

Loving-kindness.

Compassion.

Appreciative joy.

Equanimity.

These are not achievements reserved for those who have become especially wise.

They are qualities we may practice in ordinary life.

We can begin with one breath.

One person.

One small moment of understanding.

And gently allow our concern to grow.

I. Loving-Kindness

May You Be Safe

Mettā is loving-kindness.

It is the wish that living beings may experience happiness, safety, and peace.

We may begin by offering this wish to ourselves.

May I be safe.

May I be peaceful.

May I know the conditions of happiness.

Sometimes these wishes feel natural.

At other times, they may be difficult to receive.

That is all right.

We do not need to force a feeling.

We can simply offer the words, as we might place a small flower upon a table.

Then, when we are ready, we may extend the same wish to someone we love.

May you be safe.

May you be peaceful.

May you know the conditions of happiness.

Perhaps we can imagine this person sitting comfortably.

Perhaps they are enjoying a meal, reading a book, or resting after a long day.

We do not need to imagine anything extraordinary.

There is already something beautiful in the possibility of an ordinary, peaceful life.

Now we might consider the families divided by the Berlin Wall.

For decades, people lived with restrictions upon where they could travel, whom they could visit, and where they might make their homes.

When the Wall opened in November 1989, the world witnessed an extraordinary moment.

But much of what people celebrated was wonderfully simple.

The freedom to visit a parent.

To embrace a friend.

To walk along a familiar street.

To return home.

The freedom to make choices about the ordinary course of a life.

We might pause here and notice something.

Freedom does not always announce itself through grand events.

Sometimes freedom is the ability to open a door without fear.

Sometimes it is knowing that someone we love may safely come through it.

We can rejoice in these freedoms, even when they belong to people we have never met.

And we can wish them for others.

May you be free to visit those you love.

May you live without unnecessary fear.

May your home be a place of rest.

May your life contain room for joy.

Yet the same date reminds us that such safety has not always been respected.

In November 1938, Jewish communities were subjected to organized violence and persecution.

People who had lived ordinary lives among their neighbors were treated as though their humanity no longer entitled them to the protection of law.

Their humanity had not changed.

Their need for safety had not changed.

Their capacity to love, to grieve, to hope, and to suffer had not changed.

What changed was the conduct of the society and government around them.

This is something we may remember when practicing loving-kindness.

The dignity of another person does not depend upon our recognizing it.

But our willingness to recognize that dignity may influence how we treat them.

We do not need to agree with everyone.

We do not need to approve of harmful conduct.

We may still protect those who are vulnerable, oppose cruelty, and hold people accountable for their actions.

Loving-kindness asks something simpler, and perhaps more difficult.

Can we remember that the person before us is human?

Can we recognize that this person, too, wishes to live without suffering?

Can we extend our concern beyond the people who are familiar to us?

We may not always succeed.

There may be people toward whom loving-kindness feels very difficult.

We can begin with those for whom it comes more easily.

A friend.

A neighbor.

A child.

Someone we pass on the street.

And gradually, without forcing ourselves, we may discover that our concern has grown.

Breathing in, I recognize the wish to be safe.

Breathing out, I offer that wish to others.

May you be safe.

May you be free.

May you know peace.

II. Compassion

May Your Suffering Be Relieved

Karuṇā is compassion.

Where loving-kindness wishes happiness for others, compassion recognizes suffering and wishes for its relief.

When someone we love is in pain, we may feel a natural desire to help.

Perhaps we bring water.

Perhaps we prepare a meal.

Perhaps we sit beside them and listen.

Sometimes we cannot change what has happened.

We cannot make a loss disappear.

We cannot promise that every difficulty will be resolved.

But we can be present.

And presence, offered with care, may be a beginning.

On November 9, 2007, soldiers from the United States and Afghanistan lost their lives during an ambush.

We may remember them with respect.

We may honor the courage of those who served.

And we may also remember that each person who died had a life beyond the circumstances of that death.

There were ordinary moments.

Conversations.

Meals.

Friendships.

Plans for the future.

There were people who knew the sound of their laughter.

People who expected to see them again.

People whose lives continued after their own had ended.

We can allow ourselves to recognize this without imagining that we understand the whole of another person's grief.

We do not.

Every person experiences loss differently.

There is no single correct way to mourn.

And there is no schedule by which love must become less painful.

Compassion allows us to make room for this.

It does not require the grieving person to become cheerful for our comfort.

It does not ask them to turn their loss into a lesson.

It allows them to be human.

We may extend the same understanding to those who return from war.

Some veterans return to familiar lives with happiness and a sense of purpose.

Some experience lasting injuries or difficulties.

Some discover new interests, new relationships, and new ways of belonging.

Some carry memories they would rather not revisit.

And many experience joy and suffering together.

We should be careful not to imagine that every veteran carries the same burden.

Each person has a life that is their own.

Compassion begins by allowing that life to be understood on its own terms.

We may listen.

We may offer assistance.

We may recognize that a person who has endured extraordinary circumstances may still wish for very ordinary things.

A peaceful home.

Meaningful work.

Good medical care.

Friendship.

The opportunity to enjoy an afternoon without being asked to explain the past.

There is kindness in allowing someone to become more than the story through which we first came to know them.

And compassion may also invite us to consider the institutions that shape their lives.

If a person needs medical care, is that care accessible?

If assistance has been promised, can it be obtained?

If a record contains an error, is there a way to correct it?

If someone is struggling, do we know how to offer help without making their difficulties more burdensome?

These questions may seem administrative.

Yet they concern the ordinary circumstances through which suffering may be relieved or prolonged.

We do not need to regard every difficulty as evidence of wrongdoing.

Human institutions are imperfect because human beings are imperfect.

There will be mistakes.

There will be uncertainty.

There will be circumstances in which even careful decisions cannot prevent suffering.

But we can remain willing to learn.

We can listen when something has gone wrong.

We can examine a difficulty without immediately searching for someone to hate.

And where correction is possible, we can undertake it.

Compassion does not ask us to become helpless in the presence of suffering.

Nor does it require us to carry the suffering of the whole world.

We can begin with what is before us.

A person who needs to be heard.

A meal that can be shared.

A question that deserves an answer.

A difficulty that may be relieved.

Breathing in, I recognize suffering.

Breathing out, I offer compassion.

May those who grieve find companionship.

May those who are wounded receive care.

May those who are afraid discover safety.

May those who have returned from war find room for the lives they wish to live.

May all beings be free from suffering and the causes of suffering.

III. Appreciative Joy

May Your Happiness Continue

Muditā is appreciative joy.

It is the ability to recognize and welcome the happiness of another person.

Sometimes this is easy.

A friend shares good news, and we are delighted.

A child laughs, and we find ourselves smiling.

Someone we love achieves something they have long hoped for, and their happiness becomes a source of happiness for us.

At other times, appreciative joy requires practice.

We may be tired.

We may be grieving.

We may feel that happiness has become difficult to find in our own lives.

When this happens, we do not need to judge ourselves.

We can begin gently.

Perhaps we notice something small.

A flower opening.

A bird bathing in a puddle.

The warmth of sunlight through a window.

The sound of someone laughing nearby.

We may simply recognize that something pleasant is happening.

There is no need to possess it.

No need to explain it.

We can allow it to be enough.

Now we may return, for a moment, to November 9, 1989.

Imagine the streets of Berlin.

The crowds.

The astonishment.

People crossing a boundary they had long been forbidden to cross.

Some embracing strangers.

Some calling to friends and family.

Some simply walking, perhaps hardly believing that they were permitted to continue.

We may imagine a person laughing.

Not because the history of division had been erased.

Not because every difficulty had been resolved.

But because, in that moment, something good had become possible.

We can allow ourselves to rejoice with that person.

Their happiness does not diminish our own.

Their freedom does not make ours less valuable.

We need not have been present to appreciate what was happening.

We can simply be glad.

This is one of the beautiful qualities of appreciative joy.

It allows another person's happiness to become an occasion for generosity rather than comparison.

And it reminds us that our concern for suffering need not exclude our appreciation of happiness.

We may remember persecution.

We may mourn those who died in war.

We may recognize the difficulties of those who survive.

And we may still rejoice when someone finds peace.

Indeed, our capacity for joy may help sustain our compassion.

If we attend only to suffering, we may begin to imagine that suffering is all the world contains.

But the world also contains tenderness.

Friendship.

Beauty.

Laughter.

The quiet pleasure of work well done.

The happiness of a family reunited.

The relief of receiving needed care.

A person beginning a new life.

A child discovering something wonderful.

These experiences do not erase suffering.

They remind us why its relief matters.

Perhaps we may ask ourselves a gentle question.

What is freedom for?

We may speak of freedom as something to defend, preserve, or recover.

These are important responsibilities.

But what becomes possible when a person is free?

They may choose where to live.

They may learn.

They may love.

They may create.

They may rest.

They may visit someone dear to them.

They may simply enjoy being alive.

We should not underestimate these possibilities because they are ordinary.

An ordinary happiness is not an insignificant happiness.

There is no requirement that a life become extraordinary in order to be worthy of protection.

Breathing in, I recognize a moment of joy.

Breathing out, I welcome it.

May your happiness continue.

May your freedom flourish.

May you discover beauty in ordinary things.

May you know that joy remains possible, even when life has been difficult.

And may we learn to rejoice in one another's happiness without needing to possess it.

IV. Equanimity

May We Remain Steady and Open

Upekkhā is equanimity.

It is the practice of meeting life with a spacious and steady heart.

Equanimity is sometimes mistaken for indifference.

We may imagine that to remain calm, we must care less.

But the practice invites us to discover something different.

We can care deeply without allowing fear or anger to determine every response.

We can recognize suffering without becoming overwhelmed by the belief that we must immediately resolve it.

We can acknowledge uncertainty without turning away from responsibility.

And we can remain open to learning, even when what we discover is uncomfortable.

Consider the histories remembered on November ninth.

In 1938, people were persecuted.

In 1989, people celebrated liberation.

In 2007, soldiers died in war.

These events are not interchangeable.

They do not offer a single simple lesson.

We need not force them into one.

Equanimity allows us to hold their differences with care.

We can grieve without refusing joy.

We can rejoice without forgetting grief.

We can honor military service while continuing to examine the decisions that make war.

We can recognize the importance of protecting vulnerable people while remaining committed to preventing unnecessary violence.

We can remember those who have died without turning their memory into a demand for hatred.

This does not mean that all actions are equally acceptable.

They are not.

Persecution is not made less cruel by understanding the circumstances in which it occurred.

Violence is not made harmless by the sincerity of those who justify it.

And a person who has been injured should never be required to offer forgiveness before receiving protection.

Equanimity does not ask this of us.

It asks us to remain clear enough to recognize what is happening.

Sometimes clarity requires us to say no.

No to cruelty.

No to persecution.

No to the abandonment of people who need protection.

At other times, clarity may ask us to recognize that we do not yet know enough.

We may need to listen.

To examine evidence.

To reconsider an assumption.

To acknowledge that a decision we once believed correct has caused harm.

There is strength in this willingness.

We do not lose our dignity by discovering that we were mistaken.

We create the possibility of learning.

And when we learn, we may be able to act with greater care.

The teachings of Thích Nhất Hạnh remind us that peace cannot be cultivated through hatred alone.

This does not make the world simple.

There may be circumstances in which people must defend themselves or others from immediate harm.

There may be terrible choices for which no available outcome is free of suffering.

We can recognize these difficulties without abandoning the practice of compassion.

We may protect without delighting in injury.

We may resist injustice without denying another person's humanity.

We may seek accountability without becoming consumed by vengeance.

And we may continue to wish for a world in which fewer people are placed before such choices.

Equanimity also reminds us of our limits.

We cannot control every event.

We cannot protect everyone from every sorrow.

We cannot change what has already happened.

But we can influence how we meet the present moment.

We can choose to listen.

We can choose to examine.

We can choose to correct what may be corrected.

We can choose not to add unnecessary cruelty to an already difficult world.

And sometimes, when there is nothing more we can do, we can offer our quiet presence.

Breathing in, I allow my mind to become still.

Breathing out, I make room for understanding.

May I remain steady in difficulty.

May I remain open to learning.

May I recognize suffering without becoming lost in it.

May I act where action is possible.

And may I have the patience to recognize what cannot be changed by force of wishing.

V. The Freedom That Must Come Home

On the Life Beyond the Gate

Perhaps we may now return to the question with which we began.

What do we mean when we speak of freedom?

We might imagine a gate.

For a long time, the gate has been closed.

People have gathered on either side.

Some have waited for years.

Some have grown old.

Some have died before they could pass through.

Then, one day, the gate opens.

There is joy.

There is relief.

There may be disbelief.

People cross.

They embrace.

They celebrate.

And then, after the celebration, life continues.

Someone must prepare breakfast.

Someone must find work.

Someone must care for a child.

Someone must seek medical treatment.

Someone must repair a home.

Someone must learn how to live in a place that has changed.

Opening the gate matters.

But so does the life that becomes possible beyond it.

This may be one of the gentlest ways to understand the relationship between freedom and responsibility.

Freedom is not only the absence of a barrier.

It is also the opportunity to live.

And living requires conditions through which we may care for ourselves and one another.

Food.

Shelter.

Safety.

Medical care.

Companionship.

The freedom to speak.

The opportunity to participate in the life of a community.

These things need not all be provided in the same way.

Different societies may make different choices about how to organize their institutions.

People of goodwill may disagree about the most effective arrangements.

But beneath these disagreements, we may recognize a common concern.

Human beings need conditions in which life can flourish.

When we consider the responsibilities of government, we are also considering the lives of the people affected by its decisions.

A budget concerns resources.

But those resources may become food, medicine, shelter, or education.

A medical record concerns information.

But that information may affect whether a person receives treatment.

A law concerns rights and responsibilities.

But those rights and responsibilities are experienced by people in the ordinary course of living.

If we remember the person, we may find ourselves asking better questions.

Not only whether a procedure has been completed, but whether the need it was intended to address has been met.

Not only whether a promise has been made, but whether it can be fulfilled.

Not only whether a right has been recognized, but whether a person can meaningfully exercise it.

And when we discover that something is not working, we may ask what can be learned.

We do not need to begin with blame.

We can begin with attention.

What happened?

Who was affected?

What is still needed?

What can be changed?

These are ordinary questions.

Yet they may be among the ways compassion becomes visible in public life.

The Four Immeasurables do not provide a complete plan for the organization of society.

They are not a substitute for careful judgment, professional knowledge, or democratic deliberation.

But they may help us remember why such work matters.

Loving-kindness reminds us that people wish to be safe.

Compassion reminds us that suffering calls for care.

Appreciative joy reminds us that happiness is worth making room for.

And equanimity reminds us that we can remain steady enough to examine difficulties without losing our capacity for kindness.

Perhaps we can carry these qualities into our understanding of freedom.

Not as demands that everyone must agree.

But as invitations to consider what kind of world we are helping to create.

VI. On the Morning After

A Practice of Peace

Imagine, for a moment, a quiet morning.

The celebrations have ended.

The crowds have gone home.

The great events of history have become yesterday's news.

Somewhere, a person wakes in a place they were once forbidden to visit.

They open the curtains.

Light enters the room.

There is breakfast to prepare.

Perhaps someone they love is waiting at the table.

Perhaps they will go for a walk.

Perhaps they will spend the day doing something entirely ordinary.

Nothing remarkable may happen.

And that may be a wonderful thing.

Now imagine someone returning from a long and difficult journey.

There may be people waiting to welcome them.

There may be familiar places.

There may also be uncertainty about what comes next.

We do not need to tell this person how they ought to feel.

We can simply wish them well.

May you find rest.

May you find companionship.

May you discover the possibility of new beginnings.

And somewhere else, a family remembers a person who did not return.

There may be a photograph.

A familiar object.

A story told at the table.

A moment of laughter that comes unexpectedly.

Perhaps there are tears.

Perhaps both.

We can make room for this, too.

Grief and joy are not always strangers to one another.

A person may miss someone deeply and still experience happiness.

A person may remember great suffering and still discover peace.

A person may have endured something terrible and still wish to enjoy an ordinary afternoon.

We need not make these experiences contradict one another.

A human life is spacious enough to contain more than one feeling.

Perhaps this is something the practice of the Four Immeasurables can help us understand.

We do not cultivate loving-kindness because the world is always gentle.

We cultivate it because gentleness is needed.

We do not practice compassion because we can remove every sorrow.

We practice it because suffering deserves our attention.

We do not welcome appreciative joy because grief has disappeared.

We welcome it because happiness remains possible.

And we do not cultivate equanimity because nothing matters.

We cultivate it because so much matters, and we wish to meet it with understanding.

On this November ninth, we may remember those who were denied their freedom.

We may rejoice with those who recovered it.

We may honor those who did not return from war.

We may extend our care to those who did.

And we may remember that the people whose names appear in history were never only the events for which they are remembered.

They were human beings.

They lived ordinary moments.

They loved.

They hoped.

They worried.

They became tired.

They laughed.

They wished, as we do, for happiness and safety.

Some of their wishes were fulfilled.

Others were not.

We cannot change the lives they lived.

But we may allow their memory to deepen the care with which we meet the lives before us.

Perhaps we may return to our breathing.

Breathing in, I am aware of my body.

Breathing out, I allow myself to rest.

Breathing in, I recognize that I am alive.

Breathing out, I remember that others are alive with me.

For a moment, we may simply enjoy this.

The chair supporting us.

The air entering our lungs.

The light in the room.

The quiet presence of the world.

There is no need to make this moment extraordinary.

It is enough that we are here.

And when we are ready, we may offer a wish.

May I be safe.

May you be safe.

May those who are suffering find relief.

May those who are happy continue to know happiness.

May those who are afraid find shelter.

May those who are grieving find companionship.

May those who have been separated be reunited.

May those who have returned from war find room to live peacefully.

May those who have died be remembered with tenderness.

May those entrusted with power exercise it with care.

May those who make mistakes be willing to learn.

May those who have been harmed receive protection.

And may we learn to meet one another without forgetting our common humanity.

Perhaps freedom begins in many places.

In the opening of a gate.

In the protection of a right.

In the relief of suffering.

In the recognition of another person's dignity.

In the courage to examine what has gone wrong.

In the willingness to let another person live without fear.

And perhaps freedom continues in the ordinary things we do afterward.

Preparing a meal.

Offering care.

Welcoming someone home.

Making room for another person's happiness.

Learning to live peacefully beside one another.

We do not have to complete the work of peace today.

We can begin with one breath.

One act of kindness.

One moment of understanding.

There will still be difficulties.

There will still be disagreements.

There will still be work to do.

But there may also be flowers.

There may be birdsong.

There may be good bread and a familiar voice.

There may be a quiet morning in which someone, somewhere, discovers that they are safe.

And we may rejoice.

Breathing in, I know that I am here.

Breathing out, I wish you peace.

Breathing in, I recognize suffering.

Breathing out, I offer compassion.

Breathing in, I welcome joy.

Breathing out, I allow it to flourish.

Breathing in, I become still.

Breathing out, I make room for understanding.

The morning continues.

The world is still here.

And there is still the possibility of joy.

May we be safe.

May we be free.

May we be at peace.

And may the freedom we cherish become a place where all may find a home.

November 9, 2026

In remembrance of those who were denied their freedom, those who worked to restore it, those who did not return from war, and those who returned carrying its consequences.

May all beings be free from suffering and the causes of suffering.

May all beings know peace.