

a year of
loving kindness
to myself
& OTHER ESSAYS

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CONTENTS

Prajna	7
A year of loving kindness to myself	9
January: Beginning	9
February: Slowing down	11
March: Having fun	15
April: Working with difficulty	20
May: Loving kindness to my feelings	23
June: Equanimity	28
July: Acceptance	32
August: Anxiety	35
September: On wonder	40
October: Solitude and connection	45
November: Living simply	50
December: Creativity	55
On New Year's Eve, a prayer	58
Unable to save the many beings	60
On journals, notebooks, diaries and me	62
On Friday	67
On death	71
On things to do when life goes sideways	74
On friendship	75

Onwards	78
On solace	80
On walking	84
A few of my dreams	87
On Singapore	88
On house-sitting	91
On the spiritual life	94
On an ordinary day	100
For Tony Hoagland	106
On thinking	108
Border lines	113
Life lessons	114
On gratitude and joy	117
On questions	120
On decision-making	122
On the singing heart kitchen	126
On travel	129
Following the moon home	133
On sitting quietly	134
Things not written about	138
Notes and acknowledgements	140



A YEAR OF LOVING KINDNESS TO MYSELF JANUARY: BEGINNING

**I commit to treating myself
with tender acceptance.**

I dedicate the coming year to the practice of loving kindness to myself. Why?

Because my childhood was pretty shit.

Because I can't be kind to anyone else until I learn how to be kind to myself.

Because I do not know how to be kind to myself. No-one taught me. As a child, my parents did not model loving kindness. They were too busy drinking.

Because I'm unhappy and I've gleaned enough insight to see that much of my unhappiness is self-created.

Because, as Anne Lamott says, life is amazing, but also weird and hard.

Because the Dalai Lama says kindness is his religion and I want to feel like his smile, at least some of the time.

Sometimes she is very loud. The witchy voice, the one who says: They didn't text you back because they don't like you. Your hair looks awful. You shouldn't have said that. Your appetites are dangerous. Nothing you do will ever be good enough. Do not be the way you are.

Thinking this way leads down a dark bleak road to nowhere good. I am so tired of being a prisoner in a self-created cage of Me-Not-Okay.

It's summer, a time of swimming, ice-cream, music, the languid pleasures of the season.

What will this year bring? Can I learn a new way to be?

FEBRUARY: SLOWING DOWN



There is plenty of time.

Summer holidays are over. People are returning from wherever they've been. School begins. It's very hot. Rude drivers, cranky kids, hassled parents.

I'm miserable about the ending of my relationship. My mind keeps chewing away at the past, processing who did what, trying to make sense of it, but it can't be solved this way. It was what it was. Now it is over. I notice myself trying to fill the emptiness with plans and activities.

It's an old pattern for me, hurrying into the future. Slowing down and fully inhabiting this moment is a lifetime challenge.

'You're up and down like a botfly,' my father-in-law would tease.

'You've always got a list and you never stay long,' a friend accused.

I am not alone in this behaviour. It's common, because

the imaginary Better Next Bit is such a seductive fantasy, especially when the present moment is confronting.

Why is it so hard to just stop and relax? Sally Kempton suggests that the ego's addiction to busyness has, at its core, a terror of its own emptiness.

Always being busy can become relentless, meaningless. No time to know anything fully, no time to savour the immediate. Our culture has led us to believe that doing and achieving more is better—but rising rates of stress, anxiety, depression, heart disease and cancer are not a good sign. It's important to take responsibility for our own mental health and wellbeing, not just for ourselves but for those who love us, and for the society we live in.

Not just for me, but for my grandchildren and my community, I commit to living in a healthy way, gently, creatively and with merriment.

I am practising doing one less thing, rather than one more thing. I'm trying to do each thing fully instead of juggling three things at once. I am learning to love and respect my body and not push on regardless.

Practising like this helps me stay connected with the simplicity and richness of the moment. Slowing down to the speed of now sounds easy but it takes effort, actually. It's not so hard when it is a beautiful here and now and we're feeling good, though even then we may miss the

true taste of the moment if we're not in touch with it long enough to savour it. As for being present with the more difficult emotions, it may seem counterintuitive but it is a wise thing to do. Being true to our humanity, to our shabby corners and dark places, can be deeply healing. Human weather comes and goes, no problem, when we relax enough to let it.

Zen teacher Ross Bolleter teaches a helpful practice called The Five Ring Circus of Now, which is good to do anytime, with a spirit of adventure.

Begin by taking an upright posture, relaxing into the body. Start to notice the breath, simple and easy. When you feel steady with that, include sounds. If you get lost, return to the breath. Expand the attention to include breath, sound, and sensation in the body: the itchy knee, tension in the belly, whatever is rolling. When you get lost, return to the breath. Widen the attention to include how you are feeling: tired, sad, calm, whatever mood is present for you. Getting lost, return to the breath. Finally, include thoughts. Notice thoughts arise but leave them alone, gently letting them come and go. This is a wonderful method for resting easy in the moment, right where you are.



Sunday. I leave it until the last minute to go somewhere I'd planned to go. When the time arrives, I'm exhausted. It's hard to abandon the idea of going and surrender to the reality of being too tired.

I make a cup of tea instead, and sit to enjoy it. Or that's the plan. Instead I hear the voice. The crippling one that blames, shames, negates and catastrophises.

You should have gone. Why didn't you go earlier in the week? You don't measure up. You can't get things together. You're not coping.

I refuse to accept this analysis of the situation. What a squandering, to spend the evening torturing myself about resting up. It's new to me to really listen to my energy level and act accordingly. I can't do everything. I don't have to explain myself to anybody, or justify my decision. It is my right to say no to something, and not guilt myself about it.

What is loving kindness to myself, really? It is stopping before I get exhausted, buying myself a favourite food when I'm feeling low, listening to things that nourish and inspire me, yoga for a sore back, a book beside the bed.

This is it, right now, the good bit, the only bit, I tell myself. Just do your best, one foot in front of the other, and take your time.

MARCH: HAVING FUN



**Treating myself like a precious
object will make me strong.**

I did not learn fun in my early life. I lived in a big sad old house with my two messy alcoholic parents, and I learned to keep quiet, to survive, to get by. I see myself in photographs. A solemn child. School was no fun, either, although intellectually interesting at times. As a young woman, a life of sex, drugs and rock'n'roll was fun for a while, but proved futile as a true road to serenity. As an adult I learned to achieve things, live sensibly, return library books on time, write books, save money, make food go a long way, be a dutiful citizen. Having fun, however, has not been my specialty area.

When I was little, books were my fun. However shit my day was, however violent the atmosphere, I could escape into the pages, and hang out with imaginary people whose lives were excellent. I liked *Bunchy* by Joyce Lankester

Brisley, about a girl having fun and creative imaginings in her gentle grandmother's house. I read and re-read *Drovers Road* by Joyce West, set in New Zealand's rugged South Island, in which Merry, Gay, Hugh and Eve had splendid adventures on their horses. I loved *The Good Master* by Kate Seredy, about a madcap girl in big petticoats, her kind aunt and uncle, wild horses and a boy cousin who didn't like the girl at first but later became a dear companion.

Eloise by Kay Thompson was another of my favourite books. It's the wonderfully illustrated story of a girl living in a hotel in New York with her nanny. She skibbles around the hotel, having maximum fun and creating innocent mayhem. She orders room service: a raisin for her turtle and a beef bone for her little pugdog, watches TV with her nanny, annoys the staff and other residents, and generally has a fine old time. My granddaughter also loves this book, and we have read it often.



Having dedicated this month to having fun, I decide that my granddaughter and I shall have a joyous experience together, as a birthday treat for me. I book us a night in a hotel by the beach, which has sea views and room service. We discuss room service.

'Will there be spring rolls?' my granddaughter asks. She

made spring rolls at school recently, using vegies picked from the kitchen garden.

‘Not sure. Maybe.’

‘How about light chocolate?’

She is keen to know about this, as her parents eat bitter chocolate. She’s not allowed much sugar, but is fond of the occasional chocolate bear or light chocolate of any kind.

‘Possibly. I think it’s mainly things like a chicken toasted sandwich, with chips.’

‘Okay.’ She nods agreeably. ‘Can I order?’

‘Yes, you can.’



We like our room and the view of the sea from our balcony. We like walking out the doors to the park, the skate park and the ocean. We sit up in bed at six am, watching cartoons, her with a tiny pot of ice-cream, me with a stiff cup of tea. We order room service for dinner and eat breakfast in a café beside the sea. When we cash our free drink voucher in the restaurant, she meets a chocolate thickshake for the first time in her life.

‘God, this is the loveliest thing I have ever tasted,’ she says, and keeps on drawing mermaids.

When we play at the pool she tells me that mermaids should wave their arms when they swim. I mishear, and

think she is saying that mermaids should wave their arses when they swim. Either way, they totally should. On the way home we agree that this would be an annual event.

Splurging out on a special occasion without worrying about the expense is something I've rarely done. It is delicious.



Fun is individual. It can be practised by oneself, or in company. It doesn't have to be elaborate, or cost money.

My fun vibe now includes stepping on crunchy food when I see it on the pavement, silly walks, weird face competitions, ice-cream, playing in the ocean, hanging out with happy people, dancing around the living room, dressing up.

What's your idea of fun? Fun is not an idea, it's an activity, and an outlook. Let's live merrily. Let's make like the Dalai Lama. His religion is kindness and his stated aim is to be happy.



March 25.

May the next bit be the best bit, I write on other people's birthday cards. Today I am nearer to death than I have ever been but this is it, now or never, my chance to be fully alive.

A YEAR OF LOVING KINDNESS TO MYSELF

I buy sourdough, mangoes, nectarines, a black cushion with red flowers, a soft blue rug. Happy Birthday to me. *May the next bit be the best bit.*