



REFLECTIVE MEDITATION

Cultivating kindness and curiosity
in the Buddha's company

Linda Modaro & Nelly Kaufer

TUWHIRI

FINDING MEANING IN A DIFFICULT WORLD

Reflective Meditation: cultivating kindness and curiosity in the Buddha's company welcomes you into a lively, open minded, often humorous, and astoundingly insightful conversation between the founders of Reflective Meditation.

You may find yourself laughing out loud or feeling a great sense of relief as Linda Modaro and Nelly Kaufer lightheartedly articulate a broad, roomy, and inclusive path for turning inward, reflecting, and using the language of experience to cultivate a deeply rewarding and satisfying meditation practice.

Amidst the banter, you will receive clear instructions and guidance on how to develop your own Reflective Meditation practice, as well as a sensitive and intelligent overview of basic early Buddhist teachings.

How do you share your experience of meditation? Linda and Nelly share their personal journey of meditation and offer ways to relate that completely fit in everyday life.

– **Sharon Salzberg**, author of *Lovingkindness* and *Real Change*

You are invited into the room as two dharma friends, highly accomplished meditation teachers, engage in intimately reflective conversations on topics such as power, feminism, and the many causes and conditions of their lives.

– **Carol Newhouse**, co-author of *A Woman's Guide to Spiritual Renewal* and *Country Lesbians*

You may discover, as I did, a gentler, kinder and more ethically integrated doorway into the heart of the Middle Way.

– **Josh Summers**, host of the *Everyday Sublime* podcast

This is a wonderful book for both experienced practitioners and beginners on the spiritual path. It is real, wise, funny, practical and deeply encouraging.

– **Brigid Lowry**, author of *Still life with teapot: on Zen, writing and creativity* and *A year of loving kindness to myself, and other essays*



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Introduction

It's common practice in an introduction to tell you, the reader, 'who we are'. The inquiry 'Who are you?' is a big part of certain philosophical and spiritual traditions. We're not going to bog you down with all the debates that attempt to answer this question. Instead we'll tell you something about the characters in this story, our story.

Reflective meditation, a friendly way to access Buddhist teachings (the *dharma*), is the main character in this book, but you've probably never heard of reflective meditation because we coined that name. It evolved out of recollective awareness meditation, which evolved out of insight (*vipassana*) meditation, which evolved out of Theravada Buddhism, which evolved out of early Buddhism. Some would say reflective meditation evolved directly from the words of the Buddha. The conditions at the time of the Buddha were so different, so how could we know? So it goes, on and on. Just like the following descriptions of ourselves, the description of reflective meditation shifts and changes and cannot tell the whole story.

First of all, you should know there are a few more characters in this book: Nelly Kaufer and Linda Modaro and various meditators from Pine Street Sangha, in Portland, Oregon USA, and Sati Sangha, online around the world – our respective spiritual communities. When the coronavirus pandemic hit, we combined our communities online and became Piti Sangha. Pīti means joy in Pali, the language in which the Buddha taught.

Our publisher is in Aotearoa New Zealand and uses Aotearoa

New Zealand English spelling and punctuation. Depending on where you live, this spelling and grammar might feel familiar. Or somewhat strange. Wow. They do misspell a lot of words according to our US education! Isn't this the challenge of diversity?

By the way, we aren't quite sure who you are, though we made a list of possibilities: Buddhist practitioners, spiritual seekers, meditators, psychologically-minded people, environmentalists, artists, feminists, people looking for self-reliance etc. If you're not on this list, do please add yourself. Actually, come to think of it, the main character in this book is you – your experience, and the evolving story of how you relate to these experiences. If the words that follow overshadow your experience for very long, please put this book down, turn inwards, and return to yourself.

But, more about us. We're two friends, Nelly and Linda, Linda and Nelly. Spiritual friends. We met on a meditation teacher-training retreat in 2005. We both founded communities (*sanghas*) and have many spiritual friends. We practise reflective meditation with a passion. For us, this involves meditation and reflection and conversation together. We consider our practice to be a refuge for kindness and curiosity. This book is full of conversations between us.

While you'll hear our voices in this book, you may not always know who is speaking. This is a step forward in our practice. We've become less concerned with who said what. In fact, many times we can't remember who said what, but if it's honest and relevant then it belongs to us all. We keep cross-fertilising each other's thoughts, feelings, experience and understanding. We write about ourselves not to elevate us, but to take our teaching out of the abstract and conceptual, and into the nitty gritty stuff of life.

But now we are each going to say a bit about ourselves. So, Nelly, you're up.

Nelly

I've been teaching meditation for over 40 years. Yikes, that dates me; you can see I'm in the later years of my life and work. Most of my friends have retired and think I should do the same, but something compels me to continue to teach from the understandings and experiences that transform and free me.

This is not all of who I am, or even most of it. I'm also a psychotherapist in private practice and seem unable to retire from this pursuit as well. I hold a master's degree in counselling psychology, focused on the integration of Buddhism, feminism and psychology. Life has been the lab in which I've researched ever since graduation.

When I listen to people speaking honestly and intimately about their lives – in both psychotherapy and after meditation – it offers profound meaning and connection. Curiosity characterises the various chapters of my life.

There are many other ways to describe myself and the chapters of my life. You'll learn about them as you read through this book. You can find out about Pine Street Sangha at <https://pinestreetsangha.org>.

Linda

It seems to me I've lived my life as a series of short stories. Starting in the late 1980s teaching Tai Ji and Qi Gong, body-based moving meditation, I dived into that practice like my life depended on it. This led me to another chapter: becoming an acupuncturist and treating patients for 15 years.

The next short story was scary. I received a hefty blood transfusion because I almost died from a ruptured ovarian artery. Afterwards, my body no longer felt like mine. I had new blood and could not move the same way – something was very different! In fact, I could no longer even practise Tai Ji and Qi Gong. My mind was searching for a way to integrate this experience. This is when I came across Buddhism and the practice of recollective awareness meditation, which evolved into our current practice of reflective

meditation. When I first heard people sharing their experiences of meditation sessions, what honestly happened during meditation, another short story began.

My short stories continue; integrating my search and finding a path that holds my heart. My most recent experience being here with you now, writing this book. You can find out about Sati Sangha at <https://satisangha.org>.

Linda and Nelly

Who's speaking will not be so clear in the rest of the book. While you may not know who is speaking, we do want both our names on this book. We believe that most of us need acknowledgement and care when presenting ourselves to others. There are many ways that people can feel hurt by not being given proper attribution, so we follow the middle way between applauding our personal accomplishments and neglecting them.

In this book, we're choosing not to cite or name others – authors, teachers, friends, meditators. We don't want to forget some and remember others, or assign incorrect attributions. To be honest, it's challenging for us to tease their words apart in our shared consciousness, so we keep to this practice throughout. However, we do want to acknowledge the many teachers and other people who have informed our hearts, minds and practice. Their efforts and dedication have blended with and been integrated into our voices.

Voices and conversations with our community

We have ongoing conversations with meditators about their experiences. In our groups meditators get to listen to and learn from one another. Throughout this book we share these voices from our community, at times with a kind and curious response. This is how we interact when we teach. We can't fully replicate this process in the book, but these examples of meditators' reflections will give you a taste of how we collaborate. The dharma emerges between us during these conversations.

Though they might inspire you, the voices and conversations with our community here are not meant to be testimonials. They might resonate with your development and provide words that describe it and function as a touchstone on your path.



Feministic

After a split happened in our former sangha around abuse of power, I saw strong feminist principles and values come into play. Not that we are without hierarchy, but power is more transparent and there is a real clear naming of how power works and how to address it – how that power is used so that it is non-abusive. These values are embedded in our code of ethics. What I have seen with female leadership acknowledging these values is a shift in our practice. Although gender discernments get muddy, I think there is a women’s way of knowing and understanding. There’s a sense that this is growing in our sangha.

Feministic principles arise and pass away. They have been integrated into religious traditions and secular movements alike. Not only do we value these principles, we intentionally make them dominant conditions for practice in reflective meditation. We chose the word feministic for a couple of reasons: it’s an adjective, a descriptive word for our practice. And, we aren’t specifically addressing feminism, a political movement that advocates for women’s rights, though the feministic values in our meditative instructions and process pay homage to feminist thinkers and movements. Also, we acknowledge the countless women and men who have softened the patriarchal edges of Buddhism.

What are the feministic values embedded in our practice and code of ethics? Gentleness, receptivity, a relational approach, inclusivity, responsible and transparent use of power, accountable collaboration, and respectful feedback – to name a few.

Feminism didn’t begin in the 1960s. There were many waves before this, such as the suffragette movement. Less commonly known are the matriarchal societies that existed in the past. Archeological digs reveal European matriarchal societies dominated over 5000

years ago. Today, there are isolated pockets of matriarchal cultures that still exist around the world – in China, Ghana, Costa Rica, Kenya, Indonesia and India. In our sanghas. What might it be like to come into a sangha where matriarchal principles inform the meditative approach and the people who are practising it?

We're not drawing hard distinctions between the way men, women and non-binary people are conditioned, nor suggesting that gender should be the dominant factor in our lives. We point meditators back to the dominant conditions in their own lives. What are they? Your skin colour, your class, your abilities, your gender, your sexual orientation? What do you allow into your meditation? What do you pay attention to? What do you remember from your meditation? All of this is conditioned. We encounter innumerable influences, not just gendered ones.

In reflective meditation, we practise receptive listening: learning to listen to our own inner voices while listening to others when they're speaking. We thread the needle between both. Why? Because we have been conditioned to respond to authority – male authority – so thoroughly that at times we have not paid attention or even known what we are feeling and thinking. With receptive listening we grow our capacity to listen to ourselves while listening to others.

There are deep-rooted biases about the capabilities and limitations of women, and also of men. I think we all have them, because we're conditioned by the culture we live in. Conditioning propagates a plethora of biases. Biases about whether there should be clear-cut gender attributions and identities. Even biases about what is valuable in meditation and what is not. Through listening to ourselves in the sanctuary of meditation, we slowly become more and more aware of our biases. Through listening to others speak honestly about their hopes, fears, and developing wisdom, our biases can relax, soften, decondition. We can look at our biases. They're everywhere aren't they?

Our life experiences shape how we identify and the paths we

take. For me, growing up and spiritually waking up were intertwined. I wasn't looking for a new man to follow, I was seeking a new spiritual practice. I had staved off all encounters with Buddhism after following the Christian and Taoist guys. The Buddhist teachers I came across were men in the vipassana tradition. In this dominant and popular practice, I couldn't submit to the authoritative, prescriptive instructions on how to meditate, or the way they were imposed. I was so used to being told what to do in spiritual practices and how to do them, that I rebelled against becoming more invisible to myself. By leaving the stricter male-dominated practice, I serendipitously ended up in one that is receptive, open and intuitive. With feministic ethical values.

Feministic. My mother told me the story of my birth. I seethed at her account of the obstetrician saying aloud in the delivery room how disgusting it was to look at my mother's vagina, especially since he was going out on a date that evening. It was in the years after the second world war and housing was scarce. We lived at my grandma's house. Back then when babies were born, fathers stayed at home; they didn't even wait at the hospital. After my birth my mother phoned my dad and told him, 'You have a baby girl'. He burst into tears. My grandma's response was: 'Don't cry, you can have a boy next time.' He didn't tell her that he was crying tears of happiness to have a child, and I became a daddy's little girl. It wasn't until 1969, 18 years later, that I was shocked awake when women's libbers came to my college sociology class. We called it consciousness raising back then. Feminism – a conviction that I was equally worthy – permeated the rest of my life.

What do we do with this complex mess of power moves, biases, and hierarchy?

As one of the few men in the sangha, I have felt welcome and included, though I often feel at a loss or out of my depth when I am listening to the sharing. I am aware of some differences. My inner world doesn't revolve around relationships, though they are important to me. I am more inclined to hide my vulnerabilities, seeing them as weaknesses. I am inclined towards sexual fantasy. A surge of testosterone still arises when I am challenged or my group is challenged: I stiffen up. My memory works really differently. For example in meditation I remember my travels, setting up camps when I backpack, my successes and failures. Is this my conditioning, which also happens to be as a male?



Conditionality – a conversation between us

Seeing conditionality in my life changes how I perceive myself and others, and how my life unfolds. But do people know what we mean by conditionality here?

Okay, a short definition is in order. But I hesitate because conditionality isn't a concept to be tacked on. It's a lived experience.

Yes, that's why we talk about experience so much – in meditation and outside of it. We're asking people to look at what conditions their own direct experience. And we're not expecting we can do this perfectly or in some prescribed manner.

A simple definition for conditionality is that things – really all things, including (or maybe especially) our inner worlds – arise from myriad different and ever-changing causes and conditions.

Sounds simple. But it's not straightforward. I think that's because it's taught in so many ways that it becomes confusing

and complicated.

Yes, I didn't really understand this teaching for decades.

Our practice is a slow, cumulative recognition of the causes and conditions at play in our meditation and in our lives. Gradually, over time, seeing how one thing impacts the next, over and over, back and forth.

Sometimes the conditions impacting our experience will be obvious. At other times, it will be more subtle or inherent in how we think and teach.

Yes, and teaching conditionality is embedded and embodied in our meditation instructions, isn't it?

When we tell you to let your meditation process be more 'free-form', less focused on a specific object of meditation, you are more subject to conditions. Our dominant instruction is to let your thoughts, feelings and sensations wander about, find their own focus, and slowly you'll start to see how different aspects of your experience bounce off other aspects. Sometimes in predictable ways, other times in quite unexpected ways.

The Buddha used all kinds of metaphors when he taught. I love the wave metaphor for conditionality. I love it because I grew up near the New Jersey shore and exuberantly swam in the waves. The teachings on conditionality invite and require us to ride the waves of who and what is going on as skilfully as we can. We *can* fight the waves, though then they are more likely to pull us under, or we can learn how to roll with the waves. We can't stop the waves, but we can learn to surf.

There's also this quiet place, when you dive underneath the big wave, where there is not a great deal of turmoil. And this too is a part of meditation – a welcome guest. Quiet, still spaces

which open up idiosyncratically and unintentionally. We don't get to stay there. We have to come up for air. If we stay there – in a quiet oasis in meditation and life – we remain ignorant of so much. And ignorance feeds many of the difficulties in our lives. It's a big deal in Buddhism.

The Buddha didn't live near the ocean so he didn't use the wave metaphor. He used other metaphors though: tightening or loosening the strings of a vina (a musical instrument like a lute), or 'righting' the wobbly wheel of a cart or chariot.

This is conditionality. The Buddha taught it from the conditions in his life and world. We teach from the conditions in our life and world. We hope you will adapt our metaphors to the conditions of your life.

Remember when we played Aretha Franklin's version of the song *Chain of Fools* at the start of a retreat? This was a light way to look at the devastating outcome of ignorance. We are a tangle of chains that hook into each other, coming together and getting entangled. We don't need to go and find the start of any one of the chains. We don't need to untangle them all. There's no one key that will unlock them all for us.

Back to what I learned from body surfing. I needed to keep my body loose and let the waves take me where they took me. I also needed to stay alert, make choices, dodge under some waves and ride some to the shore.

That's the skill we're honing. How to be with the waves. Neither succumbing to them nor drowning under their force, nor believing that we can stay under the water and avoid their influence forever.

Or untangling enough knots. How to be in the chain. Neither getting entrapped nor cutting our way out, nor believing a

magic key can help us avoid the whole messy tangle.

So we come back to this direction of ours. A kinder, more accessible version of the teaching. Wearing away the idea that freedom lies outside conditionality, discovering the freedom that comes from perceiving conditionality.

We hope your waves become more gentle over time, that your chains loosen. In the meantime maybe you can be a bit gentler with how you engage with the storms of life.



Why is this kinder?

Seeing my life, the lives of others, and the life of our world through the lens of conditionality has the potential to change so many things. It's like watching a play performed on a revolving stage: when they turn the set around, you see a whole different scene. The scene as viewed through conditionality is kinder because we can see behind the curtain and come closer to understanding what is actually going on. We can see where we can have some impact. Some things are outside of the scope of our influence.

A friendly reminder. This seeing the world through the lens of conditionality develops slowly, and with it our insight into how we're all intertwined. But we inevitably slip back into seeing the world as composed of a lot of separate individual people and things. And then we just as inevitably blame ourselves and others for what goes awry. The set-change doesn't happen with the flick of a switch. Slowly we see a bit more, then a bit more, of the complexity of things unfolding. Slowly we see more about how they interplay, bounce off one another, impact one another.

Here's my take on a short conversation, reported in the Pali canon, between the Buddha and his good friend and assistant, Ananda:

Ananda: Conditionality seems obvious. Kind of basic. Baby stuff.

Buddha: Don't speak this way. It can be difficult to see and understand. It's through not understanding or penetrating this teaching that generations of living beings have become entangled together like a matted ball of yarn.

Nowadays, conditionality can be overlooked, considered too elementary. Or it's seen as something to transcend, to realise beyond our daily experience. Our inner world can be perceived like a matted ball of yarn, even if we don't knit. It takes patience, concentration, and dedication to untangle the mess, so we try to do our best with the matted balls in our lives.

The affirmation that '(I or you or we) are doing the best we can' makes more sense when we use the lens of conditionality. Given the myriad other things that are going on at the same time, this is as good as it gets. Because there's so much we can't change about the conditions in play. Knowing about conditionality lets us off the hook, off many hooks.

Actually, sometimes we aren't doing 'the best we can'. It's kinder to see what internal obstructions prevented us from doing what we wish we had done, what would have worked out better or caused less harm. Kinder than being dead-ended with feelings of shame and guilt.

So many people come to the dharma through the door of suffering from blame and shame. This simple teaching can become a revolutionary and evolutionary change in the way we recognise how things unfold. Every time we try to blame ourselves or others for what is happening in our lives and in the world (and this happens more frequently than we imagine) this teaching guides us back to look at what else comes with the situation. What else was absent? How did you feel about the situation? What does it mean to you?

Dharma practice can be very personal. If we try too hard to get past our own personal hurts and vulnerabilities they will grow

stronger, get suppressed, or be projected onto someone else. I can't tell you how many times meditators try to gloss over the things that really matter to them in their meditation practice. They are looking for a way to float past their problems. We're not taught how to look for value in our daily experience.

So we're cultivating kindness in the face of this omission. Compassion for ourselves and others when life is harsh and we hurt. It's an act of kindness to be with our hurt, pain, and vulnerability in meditation, rather than trying to escape it. An act of kindness to be with others' imperfections rather than trying to fix them.

We learn this teaching from our direct experience, from our relationships and the world around us. Sometimes, hearing others talk about their experience in meditation, you might be able to see the conditionality of their life before you can see it in your own life. You might be able to see conditionality in your garden, in the weather, or walking in nature more easily. We all have blind spots that block our kindness.

So we consider this is an opportune time to catch the kindness of this teaching. As you read these words, as you continue to meditate, as you take the teaching into your heart.

The greater capacity to see that when I'm feeling world-weary and irritated by others not behaving how I wish they would, that's when it's time to bring gentleness and kindness to myself.

A great twist of reflective meditation practice is becoming more aware of how we treat ourselves. The time when we are feeling out of sorts, world-weary and irritated as you mention, is the time to bring gentleness and kindness to yourself. This may go against a tendency to shape up or use our will power to make ourselves react better in those situations. We 'go against the stream' of our conditioned self-punitive habits and take time out for ourselves, to rest and recoup, and encourage ourselves more gently.