



From Joel & Michelle Levey
Living in Balance: A Mindful Guide for Thriving in a Complex World
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chapter eleven

Breathing Into Balance

IN THIS FINAL CHAPTER OF THIS SECTION, WE'LL WEAVE TOGETHER many of the key themes, images, principles, and teachings offered throughout this book. The loom of our weaving will be the natural flow of the breath which comes to us and flows through us approximately 21,600 times each day.

LESSONS FROM ARGON

Breathing in ... and breathing out.... We receive and we radiate, carried by a life-long rhythm of living in balance. For most people, most of the time, these breaths and moments flow by mindlessly, unnoticed, un-lived, and irretrievable. But an alternative is available and we can learn, through practice, patience, and dedication to keep the light of our clear presence and great compassion aglow during more moments of each day.

If we were to hold in one hand all the moments when we are truly awake — when our wisdom eyes and compassionate presence are alive within us — and in the other hand, all the moments when we are mindlessly adrift, compelled by habit, and unaware, we would likely see that the balance is disappointingly skewed. As we mentioned in the Mindfulness chapter, most people are mindful only 1 to perhaps 20 percent of the moments of their lives, while the vast majority of the precious moments of their lives are forever lost to mindless distraction and inattention, as they sleep, walking through their busy lives.

Though such reflection may be humbling or even unsettling, it is heartening to realize how much potential we have for improvement,

“Since every particle in your body goes back to the first flaring forth of space and time, you’re really as old as the universe. So when you are lobbying at your congressperson’s office, or visiting your local utility, or testifying at a hearing on nuclear waste, or standing up to protect an old grove of redwoods, you are doing that not out of some personal whim, but in the full authority of your 15 billions years.”

—Joanna Macy

and to realize that we can actually set our intention to improve the quality of our lives, to be more fully present, to wake up, live in balance, and presence the light of our compassion more fully and more often in our lives and world.

As we wake up to this limitless potential and engage in these practices, we can be assured of greater and greater success if we embrace this great work. And as we do, each precious moment, each precious breath, can become an affirmation and dedication of our compassionate spirit, reminding us that in each moment we truly breathe with and for all beings.

With each one of the 21,600 breaths of air and life you breathe today, oxygen and nitrogen—which comprise 98 percent of the air—are absorbed into your body to fuel the natural functions of your life. When you breathe out, you exhale carbon dioxide released from the body. One of the most interesting molecules in the air we breathe is the element argon, an “inert” molecule that doesn’t react chemically with anything and therefore isn’t absorbed into our body. Harlow Shapley, an American astronomer, once estimated that in *each* breath of air we breathe, there are 3×10^{19} molecules of argon (that’s 3 followed by 19 zeros—which is a lot of argon molecules in each breath!)

So if we were to track the flow of argon molecules streaming through you in your next exhalation, it would diffuse into your immediate environment, perhaps flow in and out of the people or pets near you with a brief visitation, then flow out into your neighborhood and city, to then circulate in the air currents flowing around the globe. Shapley calculated that since the atmosphere is a relatively closed system, in one year—no matter where you might be on planet Earth—each breath you would breathe in would contain an average of 15 argon atoms from the original breath you exhaled a year earlier.

What this means is that with each breath we breathe in millions of atoms that have streamed through the bodies of countless beings of the past and that in a sense we truly do breathe with “all our relations” as the First Nations people would say. We breathe with the trees, with the birds and the bees, with the eagles and polar bears. We breathe with the salmon, and the whales who live on the earth today—and with all creatures great and small who have ever walked, or flew, or swam or crawled upon our earth in ages past. We breathe with the rich and the poor, the kind and the cruel, the greedy and the generous peoples of our world. We breathe with those living now, with all our relations from the distant past, and with those of countless generations to come. We breathe the same air that flowed through the lungs of the Buddha, Jesus, Joan of Arc,

“When you eventually see through the veils to how things really are, you will keep saying again and again, ‘This is certainly not like we though it was!’”

—Mevlana Jalaluddin Rumi

Mohammed, Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Aung San Suu Kyi. Each breath, clearly seen, deeply felt, and taken to heart, is truly a gesture of balance, equalizing and humbling us to receive and to release, to share intimately the flow of energy and primal elements and atoms that weave our lives together.

In those moments when we expand our creative, intuitive wisdom and open our wisdom eyes to envision this, we behold the flow of the breath we share with all living beings, the two legged ones and the four legged ones, the creatures of the air and the seas, the noble and humble beings of all realms of being, and we realize that in a very real, deep, and intimate way, our lives are truly interweaving with each moment and each breath. For the First Nations people of the Americas this wisdom is reflected in the Thanksgiving prayers that are offered at the beginning of any gathering or ceremony. One refrain is often, “All my relations, let us join together, and as one heart, and one mind, give thanks,” or the phrase, “. . . and now our minds are one.”

Live in the present,
launch yourself
on every wave,
find eternity in
each moment.

—Henry David
Thoreau

“God has no body now on earth but yours
no hands but yours, no feet but yours.
Yours are the eyes through which he pours out,
compassion in the world, compassion in the world.
His are the hands, blessing me now.
All praise to the One.
Ring the bells that can still ring,
Forget your perfect offering,
There is a crack in everything,
That’s how the light gets in.”
— *Anthem*, by Leonard Cohen

HARMONIZING: ALIGNING AND ATTUNING

Taking our sense of balance even deeper, we find that we can go beyond merely “equalizing” ourselves with all the beings we share the breath with, to actually “harmonizing” ourselves in a deeper sense of harmony and balance. We do this by learning to align and attune ourselves to sources and forces of inspiration, strength, beauty, blessings, and healing that are available to us in our lives and world.

Can you remember how good it feels to come out of the cold and warm yourself by a glowing fire? Leaning in close, rubbing your hands above the flickering flames, you absorb that warmth and circulate it

through your body, dissolving the sense of cold, and then naturally radiating your warmth back into the world around you.

In a similar way, guided and inspired by a myriad of teachings from the world's great wisdom traditions, we realize that we can gather and breathe in the light of the sun or the stars, and then offer or shine that light out into the world adding our light to the light of all beings. We can align and attune ourselves to these forces and sources, and breathe in the vitality, beauty, and freshness of our natural world and weave those streams of inspiration with our own inner elements to harmonize, balance, revitalize, strengthen, and renew ourselves.

We can also align and attune ourselves to the steadiness and strength of the earth, the fluidity and suppleness of the waters, the light and warmth of the sun, the vast spaciousness and openness of the sky. We can gather into ourselves with the breath the essence of all those elements, qualities of being available in or associated with those realms, and mix them with the countless subtle streams that nourish our inner, many-dimensional being. As we do, we realize that we can also radiate these positive qualities out into our world in balancing and harmonizing ways, and that we can add to and amplify this natural radiance through our heartfelt intentions and prayers, and our dedication of consciously offering this radiance in the spirit of blessings and inspirations we offer to the earth, to the plants, to the people we care for and who share our lives and our breath.

Such ways of living were discovered, taught, and practiced in millions of ways by the wisdom keepers of countless peoples who knew that the quality of their lives was deeply influenced by the depth of relatedness, connection, and harmony they cultivated in relation to the many dimensions of the mysterious and natural world. Such simple and profound ways of living, breathing, and moving through the world are in a sense truly “super” natural.

RECEIVING AND RADIATING

Expanding our view of living in balance still deeper, let's add another harmonic to this suite of practices for living in balance.

Resting in the easy natural flow of your breathing, reach up, touch your heart, and smile with a tender sense of deep connection and deep reflection. Give thanks for the blessings and the opportunities of your life and dedicate yourself to living ever more deeply in the compassionate spirit of balance that you sense is most essential to your true being. Allow your mindful awareness to blend more deeply now with

“Our individual well-being is intimately connected both with that of all others and with the environment within which we live. It becomes apparent that our every action, our every deed, word, and thought, no matter how slight or inconsequential it may seem, has an implication not only for ourselves but for all others too.”

—The Dalai Lama

the natural rhythms of your breathing and settle into this state of deep connection and flow.

As you sit here now, envision yourself sitting at this center of your universe, surrounded by all living beings. Holding this image in mind, pause for a moment to remember, invite, or sense the presence of those who have most deeply inspired you with their examples of compassion in action. These may be people you know, teachers, mentors, or family members, or people whom you have read about in scripture, books, or discovered on the web.

Reach out now from your heart, and with your hands, to these beings whose inspiring presence in your life is truly a blessing, a source of renewal, deep information and strength. Imagine that all of them are right here with you now, surrounding you and shining like a constellation of radiant compassionate suns. Or if you like, envision that these many sources of compassion merge into a single brighter star that shines a radiance of compassion and blessings into your life.

Imagine that with each breath you reach out to them, and they reach back to you. Envision yourself holding their hands, and that through your connection with them sense that you can draw strength and inspiration to deepen in your sense of wisdom, compassion, and balance. Notice how the stronger and more sincere your own aspiration, the deeper and stronger the flow of inspiration streaming to you and through you becomes. With each breath receive this light and inspiration, and radiate your gratitude back to each of them. Receiving... and radiating ... with each breath.

Imagine now that each of these inspiring people in turn reaches out to hold the hands of those to whom they look for guidance, strength, and compassion, and that they in turn reach out to those who have inspired them. Sense your teachers reaching out to their teachers who reach out to their teachers, who reach out to their teachers.... Envision yourself balanced within and receiving from this endless cascade of wisdom, compassion, and inspiration as it flows to you and through you from countless inspired ancestors of the far and distant past.

Sense this inspiration flowing to you as the light of wisdom, blessings, or compassion, soaking into you, illuminating and empowering you. It energizes the parts of you where your life force is weak. It balances whatever needs to be balanced, and heals whatever needs healing within you. This light floods, cleanses, and opens the spaces and places within you that are clogged or congested, and nourishes the seeds of your deepest potentials to blossom in your learning how to live in balance. Like sunlight filtering into a deep clear pool, sense these waves of

“Taken to heart, each breath becomes a breath of compassion, a gesture of balance, and an affirmation of your relatedness and caring, affirming your wholeness and freeing you from the illusion of separation.”

—Joel and Michelle
Levey

inspiring grace flooding your body-mind-energy-spirit. Every dimension of your being is illuminated, blessed, balanced, and renewed.

With each in-breath you are filled, saying silently to yourself, “receiving.” Envision that with each exhalation you can radiate and expand this circle of gratitude, extending balancing and harmonizing energies with each out-breath. Receiving with each inhalation ... and radiating with each exhalation....

Breathing in, imagine the inspiration and blessings flowing into you, filling your heart, infusing your whole body and being. Breathing out, sense, imagine, or feel that your heart is silently radiating balancing and harmonizing qualities of being like a bright, shining star. Effortlessly offer the natural radiance to inspire all beings to live in greater harmony and balance. Allow it to shine out through the darkness within or around you. Allow the light of your influence to effortlessly illumine your inner and outer world. Let this be the light of your presence, the light of balance, the light of peace, the light of goodwill and compassion.

Now, as you sit here at this center of your universe, surrounded by all living beings, envision yourself reaching out to those who look to you as a source of inspiration, guidance, or loving support and imagine each of them reaching back to you. Reach out to your children, to your friends, to your family, to your students, clients or customers, to your patients, and to all those who look to you as they seek for greater balance, belonging, or well-being in their lives. Receiving compassion, inspiration, wisdom, and strength from those you draw guidance from, reach out with your hands and from your heart, and allow each exhalation to radiate harmony and balance to those who, in turn, look to you. Let each inhalation bring you inspiration from the sources of strength you are aligning and attuning to, and allow each inhalation to also gather the gratitude that streams back to you from those that look to you as a source of strength and inspiration. Receiving ... and radiating ... with each breath.

Envision each person you reach out to receiving the harmonizing and balancing influence you offer to them and taking the light of your love, strength, or compassion to heart. Sense that this deeply touches, strengthens, and inspires each of them. As your compassion reaches out to your children, envision them receiving and taking this light to heart and then passing it on to their children, who pass it on to their children, who pass it on to their children and to all whose lives they touch or ever will touch—directly or indirectly. Envision your students reaching out to their students who reach out to their students. Imagine that all those

“The call of this era for me is, BRING IT ON! Bring your gifts to the table and let them shine. We need all the light, the fierce light, we can muster. We need the vision, the energy, the enthusiasm of each and every one of us. NOW IS THE TIME. We need to bring our full individualism in all it’s quirks and uniqueness out so that we can have the rich diversity we need to solve all the multiple converging crises of this era. AND, we need to harmonize, to work together, to bring this collective energy into focus so we can have tangible, real world results.”

—Velcrow Ripper

“Last night I had a conversation with someone whose heart keeps breaking at the cruelty she observes in our world. I explained to her that tears, sorrow and outrage at cruelty and oppression are not a sign of weakness. They reflect an awakening heart. The more our hearts awaken, the greater we feel the pain of the world. But we also need the wisdom that recognizes how even tiny acts with great intention can move mountains. Getting stuck in tears, sorrow and outrage will burn us out before we have a chance to change our world. When we see the cruelty and create alternatives, when we alleviate some of the suffering, when we model other ways of living and being ... then the interconnectedness of all things begins to shift reality. The two go together.”

—Laura Bruno

to whom you reach out, take this light of your qualities of being and compassion to heart, and pass it on to those who will pass it on in an endless cascade of inspiration and blessings that reaches out into the world to help affirm and presence the light of compassion for countless generations to come.

In this way, receiving and radiating, sense yourself balanced in the infinite expanse of “deep time,” surrounded by all beings, reaching out from this fleeting moment where all the experiences of the infinite past and all the potential for the boundless future converge. Viewed in this light, realize that your real life-work is to truly balance yourself in order to increase your capacity to reach out and realize your connectedness and wholeness, to increase your capacity to gather inspiration, wisdom and compassion, to take it to heart, and to then expand this circle of light, strength, love, compassion to all beings. As you rest in this contemplation, remember Einstein’s famous words that once we have freed ourselves from the “optical delusion of consciousness” that leads us to feel separate from others, then our “task in life is to widen the circle of our compassion to embrace all living beings and the whole of nature in all of its beauty.” With each breath, receiving, and radiating, expand your circle of harmony, balance, peace, compassion, and well-being for the benefit of all beings.

TRANSFORMING: THE BREATH OF COMPASSION

“Wisdom tells me I am nothing.
Love tells me I am everything.
And between the two my life flows.”
— Nisargadatta Maharaj

Compassion is a natural response to the sufferings in our lives and world. It is an active response that emerges when we are balanced in the face of suffering and moved to alleviate that suffering. For our compassion to be effective and not create more problems it must be guided by wisdom, and for wisdom to deepen courage is required—the courage to keep looking ever more deeply into the web of complex, subtle, and meaningful interrelationships that weave the fabric of our lives and world. As you continue to explore and implement the principles and practices we have offered you in this book, a profound realization that there truly is no separation between us will deepen and grow. You will also come to appreciate that for compassion to flourish and be sustained, it must be

fueled by heartfelt commitment, dedication, or devotion. The transformative practice that follows builds on the power of the previous ones in this chapter and fuels this fire of compassion with wisdom, love, and dedication. It too is woven on the loom of the breath. It is called *tonglen* in Tibetan, which means taking and sending. We also call it “the breath of compassion.”

THE ESSENCE OF THE PRACTICE

As you breathe in now, gather the raw energy of any agitation or discomfort you may find in your body or mind, drawing it into the transformational vortex of your heart center like fuel for a furnace — and out of compassion, let it fuel the fire of transformation, giving you more light to radiate. With each breath, breathe in compost, and breathe out flowers and fruit. Breathe in fear, and let its energy be released into the radiance of confidence on the exhalation. Breathe in imbalance, and let it too fuel the radiance of your steadiness and resilience. Radiate the light of compassion out on the waves of your breath as a blessing of balance and peace in the lives of all those who share your world.

In this way, with practice, begin to understand that you can embrace any experience that comes to you as a vehicle to open your heart ever more widely and deeply to compassion. When you are faced with fear and suffering, let it fuel the radiance of your compassion for yourself and for others who “just like me” suffer in similar ways. Faced with beauty and the sweetness of life, let it intensify the radiance of your gratitude and joy. Imagine yourself as a light-bearer of wisdom, strength, and compassion illuminating and protecting the goodness of the world. Imagine the silent light of your innermost being blazing with radiant compassion in countless helpful ways. Holding your loved ones and friends in mind, radiate this light to them. Bring to heart and mind the leaders of the world, the children of the world, the beleaguered nations and species of the world, and radiate your heartfelt compassion and care to them.

Of all the contemplations that we know of, this breath of compassion practice is without equal in its universally practical applications and its profound implications for learning to live ever more deeply in the flow of dynamic balance. Taken to heart, this practice which rests in the natural rhythms of your breath, refines the balance of our sense of inner and outer, self and others, me and we, joy and sadness, pleasure and pain, peace and turbulence. The power of this practice helps us expand and affirm our intimate interrelationship with all of life, awakens our generative compassionate capabilities, and activates a genuine

“The whole idea of compassion is based on the keen awareness of the interdependence of all these living beings who are all part of one another and all involved in one another....The whole purpose of life is to live by love.”

—Father Thomas Merton

“There are only two ways to live your life.

One is a tough nothing is a miracle.

The other is as though everything is a miracle.”

—Albert Einstein

heartfelt concern for the well-being of others, who just like you, want to be happy and free from suffering.

As a mother moved by compassion for the suffering of her child might wish to take in and transform her child's suffering and give back her love, strength, and healing energy, this practice of *tonglen* teaches us to embody this same gesture with regards to ourselves, our loved ones, and all suffering beings. It is widely regarded as the ultimate practice for opening our hearts fully to compassion and dissolving fear and separation. In our work we teach this practice widely, especially for people who work as caregivers or who offer protective services to others.

The practice of *tonglen* widens the circle of our compassion to reconnect us with a larger field of relationship and a vaster sense of the true dimensions of ourselves. Oftentimes we get out of balance and experience pain and suffering because we've become fixated and overly preoccupied with our own contracted, personal, and narrowly limited view. When we are suffering physically, emotionally, or mentally, there is a strong tendency to withdraw from the world and implode into a very self-centered and self-protective state. We lose perspective of the larger picture and identify too much with the dramas that we are immersed in at the time. This contraction cuts us off from feeling connected, and impedes our access to the healing and balancing energies we most need in those times. The greater our sense of isolation, the greater our suffering because self-isolation cuts us off from the flow of balancing and compassionate connectedness that is available to us.

DEEPENING THE PRACTICE...

As you begin, brighten the light of your clear presence with a gentle, heartfelt smile, and touch your heart to activate and affirm your connection with the light of compassion that shines from the true depths of your being. Then allow this clear presence and great compassion to flow with the natural rhythm, flow, and balance of your breathing.

Resting in the natural flow of your breathing, allow the area of your chest around your heart center to relax, open and soften, and establish a clear sense of inner spaciousness, like a vast open sky. Imagine or feel yourself as completely open and clear inside, like a big body balloon. Totally open and pervaded with the clear light of mindful awareness, there is a deep sense of being completely transparent inside and the sense that the space within you is continuous with the space around you. It is as though all the pores of your body are totally permeable to the flow of air and currents of energy that pass in and out through you,

“Transformation comes from looking deeply within, to a state that exists before fear and isolation arise, the state in which we are inviolably whole just as we are. We connect to ourselves, to our own true experience, and discover there that to be alive means to be whole.”

—Sharon Salzberg

and you feel almost as if you can breathe in and out of all of your pores. Pause and rest here until you can clearly establish this feeling of open, clear, and unobstructed inner spaciousness.

Then, sense that within the region of your physical heart is a dimension of your true, pure, noble heart—your heart center or chakra. Sense or imagine this as a stainless dimension of deep inner strength, purity, and compassionate presence. Classically this dimension is symbolized as the sacred heart, or the pure heart jewel, whose light shines forth with the light of limitless lovingkindness and compassion embracing all beings. In this contemplation you can also envision this dimension of the heart as a transformational vortex, where you can draw in the fire of the suffering of the world, and turn it into the pure light of radiant compassion and well-being.

One of our teachers, Geshe Gyaltzen, often called this practice “Hoover vacuum cleaner meditation!” Powered by the motivation of compassion, use the “motor” of your inhalation to work like a “Hoover” suction, gathering up and drawing into the transformational vortex of this pure dimension of the heart any pain or negativity that might be present in your physical, mental, emotional, or spiritual continuum. If you don’t feel any particular discomfort at the present moment, simply let your inhalation draw in any seeds or latencies that may be lying dormant in your body or mind—potentials of future suffering that could ripen if conditions became right. You can envision these as heavy, hot energy, or dark smoke.

Motivated by compassion—the desire to embrace, reduce or resolve suffering—as you inhale, imagine drawing any of these negative energies or potentialities into this pure dimension of the heart, and just as the darkness in a room disappears completely and immediately the moment the light switch is turned on, sense or imagine that any pain, suffering, or negativity is completely dissolved, resolved, and transformed. Breathing in heat or the fire of suffering and pain, let it dissolve into this pure dimension of your true heart, and sense that the suffering is completely dissolved and resolved, and then ride the waves of the out-breath to radiate back cooling waves of compassion, comfort, and ease back to where the suffering came from.

As you exhale, imagine that from your heart center waves of clear, radiant healing light pour forth. Imagine these waves filling your whole body and mind, healing, energizing, and transforming you. Allow the vortex at your heart to function as an energy transformer drawing in negativity, darkness, or pain, and transforming it into radiant light and healing energy. For example, drawing in agitation as you inhale, let it

On the journey of the warrior-bodhisattva, the path goes down, not up, as if the mountain pointed toward the earth instead of the sky. Instead of transcending the suffering of all creatures, we move toward turbulence and doubt however we can.

We explore the reality and unpredictability of insecurity and pain, and we try not to push it away. If it takes years, if it takes lifetimes, we let it be as it is. At our own pace, without speed or aggression, we move down and down and down. With us move millions of others, companions in awakening from fear.”

—Pema Chödrön

“We are tiny and unknowledgeable in our individual selves, it is the whole-Earth part of us that contains immense knowledge. Over the generations of human life, we have come to discern small parts of that knowledge, and humans house this internally. The way we act in our human capacity has significant effect on the Earth because it is said that we are the hands of the spirit, in that we can fashion Earth pieces with that knowledge and therefore transform the Earth. It is our most powerful potential, and so we are told that we are responsible for the Earth. We are keepers of the Earth because we are Earth. We are old Earth.”

—Jeannette
Armstrong,
Okanagan Tribe

dissolve into the pure dimension of the heart, and radiate peace back as you exhale; drawing in anger on the in-breath, let it dissolve, and radiate patience and compassion mounted on the waves of the out-breath. If you’ve taken the suffering of *fear in* with your breath, now send back *faith* and *strength* with your *out* breath. If the pain you breathed in was *tension*, let it dissolve, and breathe back *relaxation*, and so on. “Breathing in hot and heavy . . . breathing out cool and light . . .”

With each exhalation send waves of compassion, healing, balancing energy or influence mounted on the out-breath to whatever region of your body or mind are calling for compassion. Using the movement of the breath as a motor and compassion as the motivator, direct whatever quality is needed to antidote, neutralize, or resolve the kind of suffering or pain you are embracing and transforming.

Some people find it helpful to visualize a color, texture, image, or sound that carries the feeling of the quality they are sending. Others prefer to simply ripple out a pure clear wave of intention. The key is to allow each breath to deepen and affirm your sense of being capable of this compassionate transformation in the pure dimension of our heart.

Continue in this way, embracing, gathering, sweeping and vacuuming, resolving and transforming, mounted on the waves of the breath, for as long as you like. Remember to keep your breathing gentle and natural, not forcing or holding the breath in any way. As you practice, you may find that the grosser, more noticeable discomforts dissolve or change. As this happens, allow your awareness to be drawn to subtler and subtler messages that call for your compassionate attention.

“Lord, make me an instrument of thy peace.

Where there is hatred, let me sow love;

Where there is injury, pardon;

Where there is doubt, faith;

Where there is despair, hope;

Where there is darkness, light;

Where there is sadness, joy.

O Divine Master, grant that I may not so much seek to be consoled as to console,

To be understood as to understand,

To be loved as to love.

For it’s in giving that we receive, and it’s in pardoning that we are pardoned.

And it’s in dying — that we are born into eternal life.”

— SAINT FRANCIS

The true power of this meditation comes alive as you begin to realize that the radius of your compassion can be vast and limitless in its scope, and that you are able to receive and transform the energies of others who share the larger body of life with you. The larger the field of connection and interrelationship that you acknowledge and participate in, the greater will be the reservoir of resource you have to draw from.

As you deepen in this practice, you realize that just as you wish to be free of the pain in your back, your loneliness, or heartache, so too does the person in the seat or house, the office, village, or country next to you, or across the world. And you also realize that it really doesn't take any extra effort at all as you breathe in, to hold the compassionate intention to embrace and transform their suffering at the same time as you're breathing in and transforming your own.

If you are tormented by anger or grief, imagine and affirm that with each breath, as your compassion transforms these energies or feelings within the sphere of your own personal, local body or mind, those same feelings shared by others can also be embraced and transformed by your compassion as well. Envision and affirm that the radiance of this compassion emanates out through you to be received by anyone who shares the same feelings, who suffers in the same way, or who even has the latency for such vulnerability in the future. Whatever the form of distress or suffering you find within yourself, embrace that in others or in the world at large. Mounted on the waves of the breath, receive and transform this discord with the balance of your heart of compassion and affirm the universality of your humanity and your kinship and heartfelt relationship to countless other beings who might share the same feelings, vulnerabilities, or concerns.

When it feels natural, allow the circle of your compassion to widen to embrace anyone else who comes to mind: a friend or loved one, a neighbor or coworker, a whole group of people who are living with fear, suffering, or danger. Breathing in, allow your heart to open, to touch, receive/embrace, and transform the fear, the distress, the loneliness, grief, or suffering. Allow these sorrows or distresses to dissolve and resolve completely within the pure, open, limitless dimension of your true heart. As this transformation naturally unfolds, allow the energy of your heartfelt compassion to also dissolve or explode the optical delusion of a separate self and expand your sense of identity and balance in the larger field of being that includes all life. As you feel the sensations of your out-breath, allow your heart to naturally open to send back waves of peace, patience, calm, protection, lovingkindness, and radiant compassion to all who suffer. Experience the openness and

“There is a light in this world, a healing spirit more powerful than any darkness we may encounter. We sometimes lose sight of this force when there is suffering, too much pain. Then suddenly, the spirit will emerge through the lives of ordinary people who hear a call and answer in extraordinary ways.”

—Mother Theresa

“One day there was a seagull out on the yard in San Quentin. It had been raining and the seagull was there paddling around in a puddle. One of the inmates picked up something in the yard and was about to throw it at the bird. Jarvis didn’t even think about it—he automatically put out his hand to stop the man. Of course this escalated the man’s aggression and he started yelling. Who the hell did Jarvis think he was? And why did Jarvis care so much about some blankety-blank bird?”

Everyone started circling around, just waiting for the fight. The other inmate was screaming at Jarvis, ‘Why’d you do that?’ And out of Jarvis’ mouth came the words, ‘I did that because that bird’s got my wings.’”

—Pema Chödrön, sharing a story of Jarvis Masters [a prison inmate on death row, who took vows as a Buddhist from behind bars] in *Practicing Peace in Times of War*

connectedness that awakens as you expand the circle of your active, engaged compassion, caring, and balance in this way.

Continue to deepen into this meditation for as long as you like or have time for, allowing each cycle of breaths to further deepen and affirm your capacity to open your heart and expand the circle of your compassion.

This contemplation can be done in many different kinds of situations. First start with yourself, then let the circle of your compassionate awareness reach out to others yearning for the same quality of peace, harmony, and well-being that you’re looking for, and keep expanding the circle of your compassion to individuals, groups, or other living beings who come to mind.

Taken to heart, this practice of *tonglen* can become a profoundly integrative practice for living in balance as you move through the world. In the Mahayana tradition it is said that once one begins to sense that their true life, identity, and purpose is intimately related to all living beings and one begins to cultivate this mode of higher-order relationship and balance in relation to all beings, one’s capacity to engage in this meditation naturally and intuitively expands until in the moment of completely awakening to one’s true nature and highest potentials, all that is left is a selfless quality of presence that exists in the mode of *tonglen* for the benefit of all beings.

Once you understand how this practice works, you can weave it into your flow of your daily life. Quietly and invisibly while you are waiting for or riding on public transportation, driving in your car; being present during a particularly tense meeting; while listening to or watching the news; sitting at home or walking through the busy city streets. (Of course, if you’re operating a vehicle, be particularly attentive to your driving and keep your eyes open!) This mode of being is well suited for living in dynamic balance with a spirit of compassionate engagement in your world. It offers a glimpse of how it might be to become a beacon of inspiring, balancing, healing presence as you move through the world.

We once heard from a military leader that he had gone to a contentious meeting and had brought along an assistant adept in such practices to “work the field” and “generate good vibes” during the meeting. At one point in the meeting, when things were not going very well, the Colonel passed his assistant a note, saying “pump harder!”

Tonglen is a practice that we often do when we pull into a hospital parking lot to visit a patient or go to work. We’ve found the healing process begins before we even get into the elevator, and acts especially to balance the quality of mind and being that we carry with us!

When Joel was running the pain center at Group Health HMO, one of his most dear patients, “Jenny,” was in remission from breast cancer and they worked together over many months to help her learn the life skills necessary to manage her stress, increase her strength, wellness, and resilience, and embrace her vulnerability. After some years, Jenny’s cancer ultimately reasserted itself, and she found herself back in the hospital for treatment.

One day, after a particularly challenging and restless night, she called Joel’s office at the medical center, and asked if he could make time for a consultation with her while she was still in the hospital. As Joel entered her room, Jenny said, “Please have a seat. I have a story to tell you...” Jenny went on to describe how the night before she was feeling miserable, alone, and imploded into her discomfort and self-pity. After some time, she became aware that the woman who shared her hospital room was crying. That recognition opened her heart to realize that there were two suffering people in the room and in that moment Jenny remembered the *tonglen* practice that she had worked with for years, and she began that meditation. Breathing in she gathered the fear, loneliness, helplessness, and despair that she was feeling along with the suffering of her roommate’s, and envisioned those feelings of pain and suffering dissolving into the pure, open dimension of her heart, dissolving her sense of separate self, and affirming her compassionate, engaged presence in relationship and solidarity in suffering.

As the suffering dissolved it, it opened her heart to radiate waves of comfort, ease, and well-being to herself, and to the woman in the bed next to her. As she deepened in this contemplation, Jenny realized that there were other rooms on the oncology ward with other suffering patients and family members, and her heart opened to reach out to connect with and embrace their sorrows as well, and to radiate her loving-kindness and compassion to them all. She then realize that there were other floors of the hospital with others in need in cardiology, critical care, etc., and her contemplations expanded to embrace and include them as well. It then dawned on her that there were other hospitals in Seattle, filled with countless people who are anxious, uncomfortable, or suffering in countless ways ... and that there were countless cities with hospitals and suffering people and loved ones watching over them filled with their own concerns, fears, and suffering. She then sensed the deep vulnerability of all living beings whose lives were certain to offer up fleeting joy and sorrows that would inevitably end in death.

As Jenny’s contemplations expanded the sphere of her compassion to embrace more and more people, a deep peace, joy, sense of meaning

“You will suffer, not just from your own worries and fears, but because of your love for all beings. When you open yourself in this way, your companions will be other beings on the path of awakening who share your insight. The will work with you, side by side to alleviate the world’s suffering.”

—Thich Nhat Hanh

and purpose, well-being, and even a sense of great bliss came aglow within her. Finally, Jenny relaxed into a deep, restful, healing sleep, and when she awoke she felt a profound sense of peace and balance within her. As we sat together, listening to her story, Jenny reached out, took Joel's hand and said, "Joel, I know that long after I am gone you will be able to share my story with others, and that this will inspire them in appreciating the value and meaning of this profound practice for living in harmony and balance."

We've now taught this practice to tens of thousands of people from all walks of life, and of different philosophical and spiritual inclinations: to medical staff working in clinics and emergency rooms, to Special Forces troops facing untold dangers and fear, to children, corporate executives, clergy, and world-class athletes. For some, this practice makes immediate intuitive sense from what they know of the unobstructed flow of energy and information in the natural world. Others will translate this practice into a deeply personal participation in God's love or the compassionate presence of Quan Yin radiating and extending from the pure, sacred dimension of their heart out into the world.

As we have traveled and taught in Asia, we have found that this practice of *tonglen* is especially accessible for our Asian students who have grown up with a sense of relatedness to Quan Yin, "She Who Hears the Cries of the World." For those of us with the faith, intuition, or experience to know that there is a dimension of pure heartedness within us that is stainless and virtually invulnerable to any sort of discordant energies, the sense of offering the cries of the suffering world to the heart of your own inner Quan Yin can be as natural as breathing in and receiving, and breathing out and radiating compassion to all beings. One beloved Christian colleague who had practiced *tonglen* for many years, wrote a profound sermon for his congregation musing how likely it was that the final contemplation of Jesus on the Cross might have been in the spirit of *tonglen*, taking in and transforming the ignorance and sins of all beings who had "missed the mark" (the actual meaning of "sin") and dedicating all his love and compassion to their salvation—be they in the historical time of Jesus, or in future times when his teachings were still present in our world.

The universal spirit of this practice of "taking and sending" is as natural as the wish of a mother to take upon her self the suffering of her child and to offer all her strength, love, and joy to comfort them. Each of us will translate this potentiality in our own way. In this spirit, we invite you to take this sage advice to heart, to practice with it in your unique way, and see how it speaks to and lives through you.

"The holiest of all
the spots on earth

is where an
ancient hatred

has become a
present love."

—A Course in Miracles

As you practice this method of living in balance, keep in mind that whether you are visibly able to transform the sufferings of others through this practice is secondary to transforming the illusion of your own sense of separateness and dissolving your own fear and narrow self-protectiveness. The real power of this practice lies in developing a deeper experience of kinship with the world, and in breaking free from our preoccupation with our own personal situation or limited personal identity.

The practice of *tonglen* is essentially a mind training that empowers your inner access to qualities of balance, and an immense source of compassionate transformational potential. *Tonglen* can awaken the wisdom and compassion necessary to free us from the anxiety, fear, imbalance, and exhaustion that come from trying to vainly protect the illusion of a separate self. It teaches us to live in harmony and balance within a more expansive, generative, and universal view of wholeness, and to honor and deeply respect the sacred mystery of interdependence by seeing how activating compassionate regard for others works simultaneously to heal our relationship with ourselves as well.

INTEGRATION: RECEIVING AND RADIATING COMBINED WITH TONGLLEN

We come to naturally realize that with each breath, we can gather the light, strength, power, blessings of all creation, add our light to that, and offer it to all beings.



“Once you have adopted such an attitude of infinite interconnectedness, you naturally want to liberate not just yourself but all beings from suffering. The Buddha calls this ‘the conception of the spirit of enlightenment.’ It is the soul of the Bodhisattva, the person who dedicates himself or herself to helping all beings achieve total happiness. When you open to the inevitability of your infinite interconnectedness with other sensitive beings, you develop compassion. You learn to feel empathy for them, to love them, to want their happiness. You want to keep them from suffering, and you do so just as if they were a part of you....You don’t congratulate yourself for helping others, just as you won’t congratulate yourself for healing your own leg when you hurt it. It is natural for you to love your leg because it is one with you, and so it is natural for you to love others. You would certainly never harm another being. As...Shantideva wrote, ‘How wonderful it would be when all beings experience each other as limbs on the one body of life!’”

—Robert Thurman

With each breath we can align and attune ourselves with all the sources of guidance and blessings available in our lives and world, back through endless time, and we can radiate, offer, and extend those streams of blessings and inspiration to those who look to us, and through them to all who look to them, and through them to all who look to them. . . .

With each breath we can gather into the pure depths of our true heart the pain of all the fires of ignorance, greed, and aggression raging in our world, and we can transform, dissolve, and resolve those raging fires in the deep, clear pool of our heart, and radiate the cool, clear, radiance of compassion, balance and harmony into the hearts and souls of others.

Freed from the fear that breeds in the shadows of the optical delusion of consciousness that leads us to sense or view ourselves as separate from the world and all beings, we are ennobled and empowered to open our hearts and mind, our wisdom eyes and pure hearts, to become sacred vessels of transformation capable of embracing and transforming our relationship to the sufferings of the world.

And, in those inevitable moments where the darkness or complexity of our lives or world overwhelms us, we can also reach out to hold the hands, or draw into us the hearts of all the ennobling beings we receive and draw light and inspiration from, and we can blend those streams of empowering light with the torrents of grief, pain, or sorrow that we are tapping into.

Understood and taken to heart in this way, we realize that with each breath, 21,600 times a day we can balance ourselves, stand strong, shine bright, dispel fear, and connect with streams of sustaining and life-affirming strength, blessings, and inspiration, and that we can extend our light, love, and strength out to others. In this way we balance and weave together with each breath the practices of receiving, transforming, and radiating.