

Meditations

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Body Scan:

Meditation: The Body Scan

You may do this practice laying down, sitting on a meditation cushion or a chair.

Let your body relax and soften.

Bring your attention to your breath.

Breathe deeply into your belly.

Your body is beginning to settle.

If you become uncomfortable, you can quietly adjust your posture.

Breathing deeply, bring your awareness to your body.

Remind yourself of its inherent awareness, ease, and vitality.

Invite yourself to relax into these elements.

Let your body feel open and safe.

Bring your attention to the top part of your head, to your skull and scalp.

Breathe into your scalp.

As thoughts arise, just let them be.

Be aware of any tension in your scalp.

On your next inhalation, breathe out gratitude.

Move your attention to your forehead.

Be aware of your forehead, accepting whatever tension might be there.

Breathe into your temples.

Let your temples feel cool and relaxed.

Accept any tension or pain in your temples.

As you breathe in, let your temples feel open and soft.

Put your hand over your eyes as you breathe into them.

See if you can soften your eyes as you breathe in.

As you breathe out, let go of all hardness in and around your eyes.

Breathe openness and awareness into your eyes.

Breathe out gratitude for your clear, bright, and relaxed eyes.

Bring awareness to your ears and the muscles around and in your ears.

Breathing in fully, opening your ears.

Exhaling, feel grateful for being able to listen and bear witness.

Breathe in through your nose.

Feel air passing in and out of your nostrils.

Breathing in, imagine that the air you are inhaling is full of vital energy.

Breathe out with gratitude.

On your next inhalation bring your awareness to the place in your nostrils
where you can feel air entering.

Feel the exhalation passing out of your nostrils.

Let your concentration deepen,

as you are aware of where the air enters and leaves your nose.

Bring your awareness to your mouth.

Feel your lips, your gums, teeth, and tongue.

Let your mouth feel warm and open.

Relax your whole mouth, letting your jaw soften.

On your inhalation bring a slight smile to your mouth.

On your exhalation feel yourself letting go of tension

in your jaw, your cheeks, your lips, your tongue, and your throat.

Gently move your awareness to your throat and neck.

Let your awareness rest lightly in this area.

Feel your neck and throat.

Breathe into your neck and throat

and accept whatever tightness might be in this area.

Breathe out gratitude.

With your awareness on your shoulders, breathe into your shoulders.

Let all tension melt from your shoulders as you exhale.
Let your shoulders drop as you relax them.
Give away any sense of heaviness in your shoulders, letting go of your burdens.
On your inbreath give your shoulders space.
On your outbreath drop your shoulders even farther.

Let your awareness be in your arms.
Inhaling and exhaling, breathe into your arms.
Be aware of any tightness in your arms.
There is nothing that you need to hold.
With your attention lightly on your arms, breathe spaciousness into your arms.
Breathe out relief and release.
Touch your hands with your awareness.
Let them open.
Your palms are facing upward.
Breathe into the palms of your hands.
Inhaling, feel simple generosity in your hands.
Exhaling, imagine the tension in your arms and hands
 flowing out through the ends of your fingers.
Let your hands feel light and alive.

Your awareness is in your spine.
Breathe into your spine, letting it stretch with your inbreath.
Feel the strength of your spine on your outbreath.
On your inhalation be aware of your rib cage expanding.
As you exhale, feel the aliveness of your spine.
Appreciate the strength of your spine.

Bring your attention to your chest and lungs.
Breathe deeply into your lungs
 and fill them so that your chest rises after your belly does.
Give your chest space in which to breathe deeply.
Breathing in, you feel your chest opening, your lungs expanding.
Be aware of any tightness or feelings of loss and sorrow.
This is a very deep breath.
Breathing out, appreciate your lungs.

Now breathe into your heart.
Be aware of any tightness in and around your heart.
Feel your heart open, as it trusts your attention and your breath.
Bring your attention to the tissue around your heart.
Feel your heart being supported by healthy tissue and cells.
Bring your attention to the veins and arteries leading to and from your heart.
Visualize your arteries as clear and open.
See your veins carrying healthy blood into your heart.
As you breathe in, appreciate your heart.
Breathing out, feel gratitude for your good heart.

Bring your attention to your diaphragm.
Let your diaphragm open as you breathe in deeply.
Be aware of your whole torso as you exhale and you feel your diaphragm.
Breathing in, feel your diaphragm drop, giving your heart and lungs space in which
to expand.
On your exhalation maybe you can let go of tension.

Move your attention to your liver.
Breathe into your liver and gallbladder.
Be aware any tightness you may have there.
As you breathe in, give your liver and gallbladder space.
As you exhale, let go of any feeling of anger that you might have.
Breathing in and out, appreciate your liver and gallbladder.

Move your attention to your stomach.
Breathing in, you are aware of your stomach.
Breathing out, appreciate your stomach.
Breathing in, be aware of the digestive function of the stomach.
As you exhale, let yourself feel grateful for your stomach.

On the next inbreath let your awareness be in your kidneys and lower back.
On your outbreath be aware of any anxiety you may be experiencing.
Now breathe in strength and awareness into your kidneys and lower back.
Breathing out, give space to your kidneys and lower back.

Bring your attention to your bowels and bladder.
As you inhale, feel your guts expanding with the inbreath.
On your outbreath be aware of any tension in your bowels and bladder.
Be aware of the function of elimination performed by your bowels and bladder.
Bring breath and spaciousness to your bowels and bladder.
Feel grateful for your bowels and bladder.

Move your awareness to your reproductive organs.
On your inbreath be aware on how your reproductive organs feel.
On your outbreath give these feelings space.
Breathing in, appreciate your reproductive organs.
Exhaling, give your entire pelvic area a feeling of space and ease.
Be aware of your thighs.
Breathe into your thighs as you settle your attention into them.
Breathing out, let your thighs soften.
On your inhalation feel gratitude for the support of your thighs.
Breathing out, appreciate your thighs.

Your awareness is on your knees.
Breathe into your knees.
On the outbreath be aware of the small muscles around your knees.
Feel grateful for your knees.
Breathe in healing to your knees.
Breathe out any tension and pain in your knees.

Bring your attention to your calves and shins.
Breathe into your calves and shins.
Exhaling, be aware of any tension in your calves.
Breathe in spaciousness to your calves.
Breathe out gratitude that your legs have taken you so far in your life.

Breathe into your feet, bringing all your attention to your feet.
On your outbreath, be aware of any tension in your feet.
Imagine on your inbreath, that you are breathing all the way through your body into
your feet.
Your mind touches your feet.
On your outbreath appreciate your feet.

To complete this practice, slowly, gently, and smoothly bring your awareness from your feet to your legs; to your pelvic area; to your stomach and liver; to your chest, heart, and lungs; to your spine; to your shoulders, arms, and hands; to your neck; to your face; to the top of your head.

Breathe in and out smoothly as your awareness travels up and through your body. When you have reached the top of your head, return your awareness to your breath, then let it gently spread to your whole body.

Stay this way for some minutes.

Take a few moments to relax with an open and quiet mind.

Before completing the practice, send all of the well-being that you have experienced to others on your breath. When you are ready, open your eyes.

Boundless Qualities of Mind

Lovingkindness, Compassion, Sympathetic Joy, and Equanimity

A Brahmin once came to the Buddha and asked him how he could enter the Abode of Brahma or the Divine. The Buddha told him that this was possible by practicing boundless kindness toward all beings, boundless compassion with all beings, boundless joy in the salvation and basic goodness of all beings, and boundless equanimity toward all beings, whether friend or foe. Practicing thus, the Buddha explained, makes it possible for one to transform the obstacles of meanness, gloating over the misfortune of others, unhappiness, and preferential mind. This was the way, he explained, that we enter the abode of the divine.

In another sutra, there is a story about the Buddha manifesting these boundless qualities of mind that he taught his Brahmin student. Once there was a very ill monk. His body was covered with suppurating, foul-smelling sores that were leaking pus. No one wanted to care for him because he looked and smelled so terrible. The Buddha went to the monk's bedside and cleaned his sores, bathed him, and gave him support and inspiration as well as teachings. Some time later the Buddha told his followers that if they really wanted to serve him, they should serve the sick with boundless kindness, compassion, joy, and equanimity. The Buddha knew that he was not separate from any form of suffering.

The Four Boundless Abodes are lovingkindness, compassion, sympathetic joy, and equanimity. These are qualities of the mind and heart that are inherent to our basic nature. Buddhism calls these universal virtues the Four Boundless Abodes. By cultivating them in our activities, we strengthen their presence within us. As their presence grows stronger, so does their boundless quality. These abodes are the unconditional treasure that is always available to each of us, even when we are dying.

Generating these four qualities is the ultimate form of self-care. They connect us to the stream of basic goodness, and they connect us to one another. They are the qualitative basis for our work in being with dying. In some deep sense strengthening their presence is the best self-care we can give.

You can practice each of the abodes by directing its energy to yourself, a benefactor, a friend, a loved one, a difficult person, a person about whom you feel neutral, or all beings. You can also start with yourself and expand the practice by spending a few minutes directing the energy toward each of these parties sequentially, until, at the end of the practice, all beings are included.

I begin by sitting quietly and remembering how much suffering there is in the world and how much I would like peace and happiness for all beings. I remember that someday, sooner or later, I will die and all beings will die. I want to use this precious human life as best I can. I then vow to free myself from suffering and help others be free from suffering.

Resting in openness, I bring my attention gently to my breath. Then I begin my practice with myself, a friend, a loved one, or a relative who is suffering. This opens my heart and deepens my commitment. On the inbreath I take in suffering. On the outbreath I offer one of the abodes. I often practice with one of the phrases below, directing it to the chosen recipient. Feeling open and committed, I pay attention to what is arising in my heart and mind during practice and let the practice shift accordingly. For example, I might find myself resisting inhaling the suffering. Then I shift the focus to sending compassion to myself.

At the end of a period of practice, I again rest in openness, inviting the feeling of gratitude to be present. How rare it is to open to the nourishment of basic goodness! Then I dedicate the merit of the practice to all beings everywhere.

Charnel Ground Meditation

A traditional Tibetan saying tells us that if, on waking up in the morning, we do not meditate on death, the entire morning will be wasted. If we don't meditate on death at noon, the entire afternoon will be wasted. And if we don't meditate on death in the evening, the night will be lost to meaningless and frivolous pursuits.

The simple Buddhist practice that follows provides us with a graphic way to meditate on death. In it we visualize the decomposition of our body after death through nine stages of dissolution, from bloating to bone dust. The practice points us toward seeing the impermanent nature of this body and, by association, of all phenomena. It also reminds us of the emptiness of the self.

The Practice

Let your body settle as you bring your awareness to your breath.
Recall your aspiration to free all beings from suffering.
Rest in presence before you begin the practice.

Imagine that you are observing your body as a corpse.
You are sitting next to and observing this form that once was you.

You have died this day.
Notice the pallid face and sunken cheeks.
The skin is smooth and waxy.
Observe the shadowy mottling on the underside of the arms and legs.
With no blood pressure, the blood is pooling.
Observe the fingernails; they are pale and bloodless.
In this stillness, the whole body appears to have sunk into itself.

Look closely.
The skin is pale, with a grey blue cast.
The eyelids seem almost transparent.
The eyes are dry, opaque, and slightly open, gazing into nowhere.
The mouth is slack, and jaw dropped open.
All is still.

Now imagine that several hours have passed.
This body that once was you seems to have grown darker.

Its shadowy color has deepened.
There is now a slight odor to the body.

Reach out to touch this body.
Feel the cool and lifeless flesh.
This body, which once was you, is now cold, stiff, dead weight.

Three days pass, and you are still sitting in front of the body.
It is now bloated and festering, swollen with bacteria and gases.
The smell coming from this body that once was you is strong and putrid.
Was this your body?

Several more days pass.
Still you are sitting in front of this body, looking closely at it.
You see something move.
Maggots are feeding off this body.
Flies land on the body.
Other insects are laying their eggs in this rotting body.
The odor from the body is strong.
Be with this body.
Open yourself to the truth of the change in this body.

Two more days pass.
Crows arrive and start pulling at the decaying flesh.
Other carrion eaters rival each other to consume this rotting body.
Flesh is torn from bone.
Tissue is stripped from calf and thigh, from arms and chest.
The belly is ripped open.
More and more bones are exposed.

A month has passed since the time of death.
You are still sitting in front of this body that once was you.
All that is left now is a skeleton with some flesh on it.

Look deeply.
If this is all that it has come to, what was your life about?
Just this skeleton, with a little sinew here and there.

Old blood staining the bones.
Observe this skeleton.

Three months later this skeleton has just a few tendons holding bones together.
Look with equanimity at this body as it disappears?
Just a few tendons hold together this collection of bones.

More time passes.
The tendons loosen their hold on the bones themselves.
The bones of the feet have gone one way, the bones of the hands another.
The thighbone, the pelvis, and spinal vertebrae are coming apart.
The body you took such good care of is just bare bones scattered around.
You spent so much effort tending it, and all that remains is disconnected bones.

Six months later, still sitting there.
Now all you see is a pile of old bleached white bones.
The bones are beginning to fragment and turn to dust.

A year later, still sitting beside that which was your body,
You see just a pile of old bones, hard to distinguish one from another.
Some have been carried off by animals.
Weathered by sun, wind, and rain, the bones that are left crumble when touched.

Two years later you are sitting where once this body was.
There is nothing left but dust.
Wind rises and blows here and there the dust of what was your body.
Ask yourself: Who is this?

Rest in presence.
Let yourself stay with this openness.
Wake up in this spaciousness.
This body is always changing.
One day it will be dust.
Let your mind settle into this truth.
Awaken to this reality.
Only this breath separates us from the pile of blowing dust.
Please ask: Who dies?

Co Meditation, Practicing with a Dying Person

I learned about this practice from Patricia Shelton and Richard Boestler, who developed a practice called Co-meditation based on teachings from the late Tibetan teacher Chogyum Trungpa Rinpoche. I have simplified the practice according to my experience of sharing it with others.

The practice entails a simplified version of the Body Scan, the practice of shared breathing with emphasis on the outbreath, and finally a guided visualization on the light. The practice is supported by an assistant who makes sure that there are no interruptions, a caregiver who guides the dying person, and the dying person herself. The practice can be done in the hospital or home. The most important element in the practice is the relationship of trust between the dying person and the caregiver.

The Practice

The caregiver and a helper make sure that the atmosphere around the dying person is comfortable, secure and quiet. The helper is there to make sure there are no interruptions and to get the dying person whatever he or she needs. The caregiver helps the dying person find a comfortable position that he or she will be able to sustain for up to an hour.

The practice is explained to the dying person. (“This is a way that we can meditate together. It will involve several relaxation exercises and a guided visualization. I hope you will be able to let go and be helped by what we are doing. I really hope this will bring you peace.”) The practice is calibrated to the needs and situation of the dying person. The light should be low and the dying person covered up so he or she is comfortable.

The caregiver then does a simple version the body scan with the dying person, beginning with the feet. It is done as a relaxation exercise. The caregiver might say: “Let the feet and toes relax, and so forth, to the top of the head, and then moving down the body back to the feet. Then the caregiver invites the dying person to relax his or her entire body and mind.

When the dying person is ready, the caregiver breathes gently and quietly with the dying person. When the caregiver feels it is an appropriate time, he or she breathes

quietly and audibly the phoneme “ah” on the outbreath of the dying person. The caregiver does this for five to ten minutes with the dying person, so the one who is dying can really bring their attention to the outbreath. If the dying person wishes, they may also say “ah” on the outbreath. The sound “ah” is soft, almost like a yawn. The feeling is of surrender, of letting go.

When the dying person is deeply relaxed, the caregiver softly suggests that there be a short period of silence. Then the caregiver may say a prayer that is favored by the dying person or give a guided visualization on light. For example, the caregiver might suggest the dying person visualize a boundless ocean of light; then the caregiver guides the dying person to merge with or dissolve into the luminosity.

The session can finish with the dedication of the merit, a deep thanks, or a period of silent meditation. Sometimes it can be helpful for the caregiver to ask the dying person how he or she responded to the experience.

Meditations Preparing You for the Moment of Death

The Experience of Active Dying

Tibetan Buddhism has four categories that relate to one’s capacities in practice. They are Action, Performance, Yoga, and Highest Yoga. The latter is aimed at transforming the experience of dying, death, and rebirth into the experience of enlightenment and liberation. The practice that follows models the experience of active dying and death and has been used as a way for a practitioner to gain control over death, thus transcending death.

According to Tibetan Buddhism, when the bases of our consciousness begin to collapse, we are in the process of dying and soon enough meet death itself. The bases of our consciousness in this system refer to the so-called “winds” which control all forms of motion in the body, including talking, swallowing, spitting, urinating, defecating, movement of the limbs and joints, movement of the eyes, movement of the blood vessels, respiration, and digestion.

In the Tibetan medical system, the winds that have served as the bases for our consciousness, or moving life force, melt into the right and left channels as we near death. These two channels are on either side of the central channel, which runs from our crown to the base of our spine. The winds then dissolve into the central channel,

and as a result, loosen the constriction around the heart center, thus liberating more subtle aspects of the mind.

When the winds begin to transform in the process of dying, the mind goes through radical changes. Most of us who might experience the transformation of the “winds” will feel annihilated by such an experience. But an advanced yogi practices in order to have this type of experience, and in this way, gains control of the mental states that arise in the process of dying. This is done so that death can be experienced as the liberation it truly is.

The description and practice of the dissolution of the elements in the experience of dying arose over many centuries from the finely tuned observations of skilled meditators in Tibet. Although it is an esoteric practice, I have found it very helpful in working with dying people as a caregiver. The practice confirms the observations that many caregivers have had of the physical, mental, and energetic changes in those who are dying. It also has been an aid, a map, and a source of inspiration to those who are actually going through or preparing to go through the experience of dying.

This description of the dissolution of the elements also includes the dissolution of the aspects of our subjective experience that give us a sense of an identity. These five aspects include the experience of our body, our feelings, perceptions, mental formations, and the capacity to discern. These five aspects are also affected in our experience of sickness and aging. When we have been ill, for example, we can feel the body’s heaviness and weakness; and we can experience some of the signs and symptoms described in the dissolution process. As we age, the force of gravity becomes more and more apparent to us as our physical strength diminishes. Our senses become less sensitive, and our grasp of the world lessens. In both sickness and aging, we are given a taste of what we will face as we are dying. Lamas have also told me that we go through the dissolutions in the case of sudden death.

Four Boundless Abodes

Phrases for lovingkindness:

- May lovingkindness flow boundlessly.
- May love and kindness fill and heal your body.
- May the power of lovingkindness sustain you.

- May you be peaceful in body and mind.

Phrases nourishing compassion:

- May you be free from pain and suffering.
- May you take care of yourself.
- May you be open to feel the pain in and around you.
- May all beings be free from suffering.

Phrases for engendering sympathetic joy:

- May all beings be happy.
- May joy fill and sustain you.

- May your wellbeing continue.
- May you feel joy in your wellbeing.

Phrases that foster equanimity:

- All of us are the heirs of our karma.
- Everyone must face his or her own situation.
- Your happiness or unhappiness depend upon your actions, not my wishes for you.
- May you accept things as they are.

Meditation: Practices for Forgiveness*

- May I know forgiveness.
- May the spirit of forgiveness sustain my heart.

Forgiving myself:

- May I forgive myself for mistakes made or things left undone.
- May I forgive myself for the pain I have caused myself and others.
- May I forgive myself for the pain of personalizing the actions or words of others.
- May I forgive myself.

Asking for forgiveness:

- May all those whom I have harmed forgive me.
- I ask your forgiveness for hurting you.
- Forgive me for not seeing who you really are.

- May I be forgiven for all I have done to hurt others.
- May I be forgiven for not meeting the needs and expectations of others.
- May I be forgiven for having unrealistic expectations.
- May I be forgiven.

Forgiving others:

- I forgive you.
- I forgive you for watering seeds of suffering in me, whether you meant to or not.
- May I freely forgive all those who have harmed me.
- May I realize the spirit of forgiveness.

*These phrases can be used by both caregivers and dying people.

Meditation Practices for Grief

Facing Loss

The ultimate relationship we can have is with someone who is dying. Here we are often brought to grief, whether we know it or not. Grief can seem like an unbearable experience. But for those of us who have entered the broken world of loss and sorrow, we realize that in the fractured landscape of grief we can find the pieces of our life that we ourselves have forgotten.

Grief may push us into the hard question of Why? Why do I have to suffer like this? Why can't I get over it? Why did he have to die? Why is my heart so broken? Why..... In the tangled web of "Why", we cannot find the reasons or words to make sense of our sadness. We can struggle with the feeling of being a pariah. We might feel, no one wants to be with a loser, one who has lost something that she cherishes, be it a person or a life of quality. It is just too painful and reminds those around us that they are "losers" too.

Dying people also can grieve before they die. They can grieve in anticipation of their death for all they will seem to lose and what they have lost by being ill. Caregivers will grieve before those they care for have died. They are often saddened by the loss of freedom and options of those that are ill and the knowledge that death will rob them of one more relationship. Those that have been left behind by the dying are often broken apart by the knowledge that they cannot bring back that which has been

lost. The irrevocability of it all often leaves them helpless and sad. And then there is the taste of grief in our culture which is conditioned to possess and not let go.

We all face loss, and perhaps can accept it as a gift, albeit for most us, a terrible one. Maybe we can let loss work us. The brave practices that follow turn us toward our grief. They are based on the Four Brahmaviharas or Boundless Abodes. They are short poems, affirmations, and prayers that keep us in the deep waters of grieving until grief is transmuted into feelings that give depth to our lives.

In these practices, we are guided again and again to turn toward the arms of grief. This is being really brave. To deny grief is to rob ourselves of the heavy stones that will eventually be the ballast for our wisdom and compassion. When practicing these phrases, let the body settle; you can either sit or lay down. Remember why you are practicing; cultivate a tender heart. Then find a phrase or phrases that are appropriate to you and practice them with the breath or let your attention be gently with each phrase as you work with it.

Meditations on Mercy

Exchanging Self with Other

Someone once told that that mercy is the grace of compassion. It is one of the ways we express our love and nonduality in relation to each other. Mercy is a quality of great value for our work with dying people and those who are suffering. How can we give care without mercy? Of course, mercy needs to be there, or our care is cold and mechanical, defended or shrunken with fear, or tentative and distracted.

This practice is from the Tibetan Buddhist tradition. I learned the practice from Christine Longacre, who is one of the pioneers in the work of contemplative care of the dying. The practice is so simple, and yet maybe one of the hardest things we can do. It is a practice of ultimate and extreme compassion, a brave act of love when we see through the eyes of another.

The Practice

First remember why you are practicing.

Recall your aspiration, this vow to really be of benefit to others,
this vow to awaken from your own suffering.

Let your practice rest in the hands of your good heart

as you remember your innermost request.
Now, bring to your mind and heart the presence of someone who is suffering deeply.
Maybe this one is sitting before you now.
Open your heart and mind to this one.
Feel your way into this one's heart.
Look out through his or her eyes.
Really imagine that you are this person, living their life,
feeling their suffering, and knowing this one's heart.
Be this one.
Feel into how they experience their world, their life.
Exchange yourself for this one.
Spend time being this one.
After some time has passed, let yourself rest in unconditioned presence.
End the practice by dedicating the merit to the wellbeing of others.

Mindfulness Practice with Emphasis on Insight or “Not Knowing”

Let your body settle as you settle your sitting posture.
Remember: strong back, soft front.
Remember why you are meditating.
Let the truth of your motivation become present for you.
Cultivate a heart of kindness and altruism.
Bring your attention gently to your breath.
Allow yourself to breath naturally and comfortably.
Be aware of the breath moving in and out of your nose.
Bring your attention to the touch of your breath on the nose,
where the breath enters.

Gently keep your attention at this point.
If you lose touch with this point of attention,
When you realize that you have strayed,
bring your mind back to the breath.
Thoughts, feelings and sensations arise as you are breathing.
This is natural.
They are like waves on a beach or leaves falling.
No need to grasp or identify with these phenomena.

Accept that this is happening and keep your foreground attention on the breath.
Be aware of the quality of your breaths.
Are they long or short; shallow or deep.
Let your awareness touch and be aware of the quality of your breath
As you keep your foreground attention
 on the point where the breath enters the nose.
Be with each moment as it is.
Don't try to do anything or get anything from this experience.
Simply accept whatever is arising and let your attention rest on your breath.
Let your awareness penetrate to the experience of the sensation of breathing.
If thoughts arise, simply be aware of their presence and motion in the mind,
 and return to the breath.

Do not invite your thoughts to tea.
Just let thoughts arise and pass away.
The same for feelings and sensations.

Moment by moment, thoughts feelings, and sensations arise in our experience.
They pass from our experience.
Let them arise and pass away into emptiness.
There is no need to do anything.
And keep your attention gently on your breath.

Who we feel we are also arises from emptiness and will pass away into emptiness.
Do not cling to any idea or description.
Let go of the sense of a solid identity and be with the flow of your breath.
All things in our experience, whether the body, or in the mind or the world,
 arise and pass away.
Simply keep your attention gently on the flow of the breath, and let be the arising,
 abiding and passing of phenomena,
Including your own life.

Introducing Ourselves to Pain

Meditation: Transforming Pain Through Awareness

Remember why you are practicing: to help others and yourself.
Let your heart open to this possibility.

Gently bring your attention to your breath.
Let the breath settle down and become even and regular.
Take as much time as you need in settling the breath.

Now bring your breath deep within your body.
Gently merge your awareness with your breath, as your body settles.
When you breathe in, let the breath nourish you.
When you breathe out, softly say the sound “ah” as though you are sighing.
Continue this for at least ten breaths.

Gently bring your attention to your pain.
Let yourself soften to your pain.
Try to accept it without judging or fearing it.
Aware of your pain, breathe into it.
On the outbreath, have the feeling of fully accepting your pain.
Now merge your breath with you pain.
Breathe into it and out from it.
Breathing out, let go into whatever you are experiencing.
Continue this for at least ten breaths.

Now, with your mind, explore the sensation of pain.
Is it sharp or dull, pulsating or penetrating?
Is it focused or does it spread out from its source.
Let yourself explore the sensation, intensity and quality of the pain.
Feel objective about your exploration, not judging or fearing it, if possible.
Give yourself time to really explore your pain.
On the inbreath, bring warmth to your pain.
On the outbreath, soften to your pain, accepting your pain.
As you do this, be aware of any change in the pain sensation.
Do this for at least ten breaths.

Finally, gently bring your awareness to your whole body.
Feel your whole body.
Rest easily with the feeling of your body.

Now bring your awareness to your surroundings.
Accept whatever your experience might be.

When you are ready to complete the practice,
Send whatever good that has arisen to others.

Transforming Pain with Lovingkindness

- May I turn to my pain with kindness.
- May I be filled with compassion and lovingkindness for myself and others.
- May the power of lovingkindness sustain me.
- May love and kindness fill and heal my pain.
- May I relax and send warmth and ease to my pain.
- May this experience in some way be a blessing for me.
- May love heal my body and mind.
- May lovingkindness sustain me.

Transforming Pain with Compassion

- May my suffering show me the way to compassion.
- May I receive others' love and compassion.
- May I experience my pain with compassion.
- May I be open to feel my pain.
- May I be free from suffering.
- May I connect with all those who have pain like I am experiencing.
- Although I am in pain, so are many others.
- May those with pain like mine be free of their suffering.

Transforming Pain with Equanimity

- May I observe my pain with equanimity.
- May I be present for my pain and suffering.
- May I accept things as they are.
- May I have the strength to face my situation.
- May I accept my pain, knowing that I am not my pain, not my body, not my illness.
- Even though I am in pain, may I handle it.
- May I realize that this pain is not permanent.
- May I be aware of my pain, knowing that I am not my pain.

Acceptance Pain and Surrendering

- May I accept my pain.
- May I accept this pain knowing that it does not make me bad or wrong.
- May I be open to my pain and let go into it.
- May I let go of the fear around my pain.
- May I accept my pain, knowing that my heart is not limited by it.
- May I be peaceful and let go of expectations.
- May I be open with myself and others about my experience.
- May this experience open me to the true nature of life.
- May I accept my anger, fear and sadness, knowing that they do not limit my heart.
- May I be open to the true nature of life.
- May I find the inner resources to be present for my pain.
- May I be peaceful with this experience of pain.
- May I let go of my struggle.
- May I be peaceful and let go of my expectations around my pain.
- May I breathe into my pain, surrendering to it, knowing it will change.

Transforming Pain Through the Elements

Be aware of your whole body and let the body settle.

Accept whatever your experience might be.

Be with your body as you inhale and exhale.

Consider this: Your body is composed of earth, water, fire, air, and space.

Contemplate the element of earth.

Feel earth's solidity and strength.

Now feel the solidness of your body and the element of earth in your body.

Feel your bones, your tissue.

Your body is your home.

Feel welcomed by your body.

Invite your mind to feel at home in your body.

Contemplate the element of water.

Feel water's fluidity and power to accept anything and to purify.
Feel the water element of your body: blood, urine, mucous, and
lymphatic fluid.

Feel the sense of flow in your body.

Feel your body's power to purify.

Let your mind settle and be pure like a still pool.

Contemplate the element of fire.

Feel fire's energy to give warmth, light, and to heal.

Feel fire's power to transform.

Feel the element of fire in your body.

Be in touch with your body's warmth and its capacity to digest.

Let the element of fire open up the mind to its own luminosity.

Contemplate the element of air.

Feel the power of wind in your breath.

Feel the element of air in your body.

Be aware of the lightness and the strength of wind in your body.

Let the element of wind bring clarity to your mind.

Contemplate the element of space.

Feel the vastness of space.

Let yourself experience the openness of your own nature.

Give yourself room to experience space without limits.

Let the element of space give you room for peace.

Now bring your attention to your pain.

Let the element of earth give you tolerance for your pain.

Let the element of water absorb your pain.

Let the element of fire transform your pain.

Let the element of air release your pain.

Let the element of space give room for your pain.

Three Marks of Existence

Meditations on the Three Marks of Existence

The Buddha taught that there are three important aspects of life that we must discover. This first is impermanence. The second is seeing that we do not have a separate self identity; or that we are interconnected with everything. And the third is that all beings have a basic nature that is unconditioned and free from suffering. He called these the Three Dharma Seals or Marks of Existence, three profound impressions that can help us end suffering.

The first Mark of Existence, impermanence, may be the easiest for us to understand. We just have to look at our mind and our life. What hasn't changed in one way or another? If we start training ourselves in observing the changing nature of our everyday situation, we are already well on our way to freeing ourselves from suffering.

This practice gives us the chance to explore the truth of impermanence. This is a key way in which we come to peace with dying.

The Practice: Meditation on Impermanence

Let the body and mind settle into meditation, and remember why you are practicing. Listen openly and at the same time explore your response to the truth of change.

We are taught, in meditation, to contemplate five aspects of impermanence. The first aspect is that everything is continually changing. Our bodies constantly renew themselves, including our bones. Consider: we have a new skeleton every eight years. Our ideas are in a continual flow of change. How many times have you changed your mind? Our feelings move from pleasant to unpleasant or neutral, our perceptions shift as the world changes around us and within us, even our relationship to our psychological and cultural conditioning changes as we mature. And, of course, the world around us in big and subtle ways is in constant motion. This is the constancy and continuousness of change. Let yourself be aware of this. Feel this in your body, your mind, and the world around you.

The second aspect that we are taught to contemplate is all those who have died. Sometimes when I see an old movie, I remind myself that all those in the movie are long gone. They seem vital on the screen and so involved with their characters, and yet, they are in reality all quite dead. I often meditate on my mother and father, remembering that they have died. So many mentors and teachers of mine have died. I think about those who have harmed me who have died, and those who have been kind to me who have died. Sometimes I try to grasp the presence of all beings that

have died; they are like the stars in the night sky, beyond counting. And then I remember that I too will die, sooner or later. This is the natural outcome of birth. You should also contemplate the truth that all you care for and don't care for will be lost one day. And like Milarepa, contemplate the fact that your life is impermanent and someday you will die.

The third thing that is good to remember is that there are so many causes of death, even things we thought were good for us. Food can kill us. We can be killed for money. We can die in a burning house. We can die in a crashed car. Strangely enough, anything can be the cause of our death, and we cannot know what will be that cause.

The fourth thing to consider is that we cannot know what will happen to us as we are dying and at the moment of death. Right now, many of us might feel we can handle any kind of pressure. But dying can be a hard task. We can be in severe pain. It may be very difficult to breathe, to eat, to urinate and defecate. We may be confused and weakened. We may be overwhelmed with fear and despair. We just cannot know how it will really be when we are dying until it is happening. We then ask ourselves what will help us. In certain difficult circumstance, little can help us but a trained mind. This is where studying and practicing, atoning and purifying can make a difference. Remembering this, resolve to deepen your practice.

The fifth and last aspect of impermanence to contemplate is what will happen after death. When we die, the body will cease to function. But what of the mind? In Buddhism and other traditions, it is felt that the mind continues after the moment of death. We need to prepare for this possibility now, for if this is the case, then we will not be able to turn away from what is happening on the mental level. Our mental habits and causes of the past will be the factors determining our course after our physical death.

When we consider the reality of impermanence, we begin to see the how clinging to the things of this world is quite futile. In the end, at the moment of death, we will lose everything. We see that grasping, possessing and clinging will only cause us to suffer more in this life and as we die. This realization can inspire us to practice with greater commitment, so that we can not only have a peaceful death, but also so that no matter where we are, the mind is clear, calm, and free of conflicts.

At the end of this contemplation, dedicate the merit to the wellbeing of others.

Walking Meditation, Refreshing Mind & Body

Synchronizing Mind, Breath, and Body

Walking meditation is a practice where we bring the mind, breath and body together. We can fold our hands together at the waist, and let the body settle in the same way that we do in sitting meditation. The shoulders are soft, the face relaxed, the spine straight and alive, and the breath deep in the body. And then we take a step. We begin by inhaling and gently stepping with our left foot. When the foot touches the ground, we might be still inhaling or we might be on our exhale. We just let our attention sink with the breath into the foot, and feel solid and present as we complete our exhalation.

On the next inhalation, we step with the right foot. Sometimes, we might want to really settle our mind, and then we can pay close attention to the sensation of our heel touching the floor, then the ball of our foot, and then our toes. We can feel each toe as it touches the floor, and then we might pause until the breath is complete and feel the strength of just being present.

This is the practice of one breath, one step. We can go even slower, as is taught in Burma, when we slowly and carefully lift the foot with an inhalation and exhalation. And then gently place the ball of the foot and toes on the floor with an inhalation and exhalation. Or we can walk faster, with one whole step on the inhalation, and one whole step on the exhalation. No matter what our velocity, the structure of the walking is normal, that is to say, we don't lift the foot high off the ground or hold the foot in the air in mid-step. If we are doing a very slow walking meditation, we just lift the heel off the floor but keep the ball of the foot rooted until we have completed our breath cycle.

If you are walking outdoors, or down a hospital corridor and you want to practice walking meditation, just relax, breathe normally, of course, and you might take two steps on the inhalation and three steps on the exhalation. In any case, you need to find the number of steps to a breath that works for you. You can count your steps to the inbreath (as you breathe in, for example: "One, two" and as you breathe out: "One, two, three.")

The Vietnamese teacher, Thich Nhat Hanh, encourages his students to use verses with walking practice. When I am outdoors, I might say: “Walking (one step), the green (one step), earth (one step).” Or if I am walking down a corridor, I might simply count my steps with my breath or say to myself: “One breath, one step”. Sometimes I make up a verse appropriate for a particular moment. For example, when walking with my father, I said to myself: “I am grateful (one step on the breath) for my father (one step on the breath)”.

A student of mine from Nepal had never practiced walking meditation before, though he had lived in a monastery since he was six years old. It really surprised him that the practice was so refreshing. I feel his experience of the practice is true, and I encourage doctors and nurses to use this as a way to help them transform the often rushed and harried way they move through the hospital. I also have found that this a wonderful gift to give an old person or someone who is sick and needs to move. Doing this with the elderly and frail brings you together in a new and intimate way that can engender trust and well-being.