

Room to Breathe

*An At-Home
Meditation Retreat
with Sharon Salzberg*



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Introduction

I was once visiting a friend in Houston, Texas, with my colleague Joseph Goldstein. We all went out to a restaurant to order a take-out dinner. As we were waiting for the food to be prepared, Joseph struck up a conversation with the young man working behind the counter. After a few minutes he told Joseph that he had never left Houston and revealed, somewhat passionately, that his most cherished dream was to one day get to Wyoming.

When Joseph asked the young man what he thought he would find in Wyoming to arouse such interest and devotion, he responded, “Open, expansive space, a feeling of being unconfined, with peacefulness and freedom and room to move.” Joseph then said, “There’s an inner Wyoming too, you know.” At that point the young man fixed a stare at Joseph and said, “That’s freaky,” and sidled away.

But there is an inner Wyoming—a potential for openness, peace, spaciousness, clarity, and freedom that exists within each of us. We might spend most of our days very far away from it: our minds cluttered and our hearts confined, believing we have no options, feeling stressed and overwhelmed. Even if we feel better than that at any point in time, we still might be out of touch with the greater resilience, joy, and energetic interest of which we are actually capable.

We get used to moving at a certain speed, and we build momentum in order to go faster and faster—a rush that is difficult to step away from. At times we do this out of sheer habit, at times to avoid unpleasantness. We may not notice what is around us, what is within us, what we are feeling or longing for or lacking. We may not remember what was making us uneasy to begin with.

We can be moving so fast that we lose touch with who we fundamentally are, what we care about most, and what the actual source of our concern or discontent or pain was in the first place.

To make the journey to an inner Wyoming—to discover it, nurture it, and be able to trust that it is there to return to even when we might have wandered away—we need to be able to slow down, to *unplug*. The decision to unplug from our habitual patterns and activities is one that allows us to take a step back. Unplugging opens our perceptions so that we can more accurately tune in to the reality of a situation. It allows us the space to be creative, and the freedom to examine options. It calms our minds and opens our hearts.

Usually when we think of an adventure we think of traveling to an exotic place, or climbing a mountain, or of learning to test ourselves physically by taking up skydiving or bungee jumping. It is rare to think of letting go, settling down, taking a retreat, and unplugging as adventures—yet they are. We can undertake a period of retreat in just that spirit: by being curious enough to explore, bold enough to step into new terrain, and open enough to take the twists and turns of the unfamiliar as inevitable parts of the journey. We can have great fun as we explore alternatives to the pace, complexity, and extreme levels of outside stimulation with which we normally live.

Perhaps we think that by stopping and looking inside we will find something quite a bit more alarming than the spaciousness and ease of an inner Wyoming. When we unplug and look inside, we actually do see a great amount of thoughts

and feelings, positive and negative, uplifting and hurtful. But we can also learn the skills to deal with them all with awareness and tenderness, clarity and kindness. We discover we can experience difficulties in a new way, one that nourishes us to the core of our being. We learn not to identify with passing experiences, but to see beyond them to an entirely different sense of who we are—to the place where peace comes from.

The most critical step in this journey is actually the initial one: making the decision to explore something different. This program is a guide to trying a new way: that is, stopping for a while, whether you have a day, a weekend, or an hour. The guided meditations on the CDs provide the skills training we need to use that period of time well, rather than simply furthering our tendency toward distraction or avoidance. The inspirational messages are here to inspire our interest and enthusiasm, to uplift us, and perhaps to remind us of truths we already know but which may feel somewhat out of our reach. And this workbook will offer a context for our efforts, so that what we do in this dedicated period of time is interwoven with how we live the rest of our lives.

There may be times when we can devote an entire weekend to a retreat, and other times when we have just an hour or two. It is good to start by engendering as much peace and solitude as possible. If you don't need to be reached in case of emergency, turn off your cell phone, email, television, radio, computer, and the other accoutrements of modern life.

It is often helpful to have a certain space in your house you can retreat *to*. It can be a place you have set aside for reflective moments, a particular sacred space you have created, or even your living-room couch if you think you can be left alone there.

The content in this program is divided into eight core topics. Each topic is covered by a chapter in this workbook and a section of the guided-meditation CDs. I suggest reading the chapter before doing the meditation on the CDs. You can stay with one topic for as long as you like before moving on. This is your journey to experiment with, explore, and enjoy.

CHAPTER ONE

Calming the Mind

Theologian Howard Thurman recommended that we “look at the world with quiet eyes.” It is an intriguing phrase. Usually we more resemble cartoon creatures whose eyes are popping out on springs: “I see something I want! Give it to me!” Then our arms extend, reaching out to acquire that object. Our fingers flex, ready to grab on to what we want in order to keep it from changing. Our shoulders strain to hold on even tighter. Our heads rigidly turn to this object so as not to lose sight of it. Our bodies lean forward in anticipation. It’s a moment of grasping—or an hour of grasping, or a day, or even a lifetime—and it’s very painful.

All too often we seek happiness in the wrong places and in the wrong ways. We cling to people and experiences and objects as though we could glue them in place, while ignoring the precipice of change upon which we are standing.

When we practice looking at the world with quiet eyes, we develop a degree of calm and tranquility. The surprising discovery is that this quietness isn’t passivity

or sluggishness; in fact, we can be fully connected to what is happening, and have a bright and clear awareness of it, yet be relaxed. This quality of calm isn't deadened or coldly distant from our experience—it is vital and alive. We find that the world will come to fill us without our straining for it.

Imagine for a moment a state of mind that is gentle and spacious enough to see things without harsh judgment, yet sees all things as they actually are. Within that mind-state, there is no hatred of our self because of our actions, speech, thoughts, desires, or fears.

As we release that momentum toward clinging—no longer falling into the future, ignoring what is here as we obsess about what we don't yet have, fixating on defeating change and insecurity—we calm our minds. Such calm is its own special type of happiness, one of composure and strength. In that alert yet relaxed state we find peace.

As we develop more calm, we experience being more at home in our body and mind, with life as it is. That feeling is quieter than a lot of the intensity we try so hard to experience, but it is ours, not someone else's to give us or to take away. That calm can be steadfast and supportive, unbroken when conditions change. It can flourish in the face of obstacles; it can be there for us when everything else seems to fail. This kind of calm is born from deepening concentration. Concentration is the ability to keep the mind steady on an object; it is one-pointed and powerful in its attention. It's not that we reject or dislike the thoughts and emotions that come up, but rather that we don't get swept up and tossed around by them all the time. We have a calm center.

Serenity is the most important ingredient in being able to be present or being able to concentrate the mind. Concentration is an act of cherishing a chosen object. If we have no serenity, the mind will be scattered, and we will not be able to gather in the energy that is being lost to distraction. When we can concentrate, all of this energy is returned to us. This is the potency that heals us.

When I first started practicing meditation, I assumed that it took a great deal of grim, laborious effort to experience concentration and its fruits, including calm.

As my practice evolved, I learned that the conditions required for concentration to develop were far from the kind of tormented struggle I had imagined. As I came to realize, straining to keep the mind on an object does not create the atmosphere in which calm most readily arises. When the mind is at ease, serene, and happy, on the other hand, we can more easily and naturally concentrate.

It is only due to our concepts that we feel separate from the world. We are isolated by ideas of inadequacy, ideas of danger, ideas of loneliness, and ideas of rejection. While we may indeed face external difficulties, our thoughts can amplify them—or even create them—leading us deeper into delusion. If we do not want to be enslaved by our thoughts, we can choose to transform our minds. In any given moment, do I choose to strengthen the delusion or the truth of connection?

Rather than coming from grasping, calm and concentration come from being able to begin again. We look at the world with quiet eyes—even with

our scattered and wandering minds, those long stretches of aimless fantasy even though we are trying to be present, and those regrettable interludes of caustic self-judgment even though we are trying to be more loving. Whatever distraction we notice, we practice letting go of it, and we begin again by reconnecting to our meditation object. We discover that, no matter what comes up in our experience and no matter how long it lasts, nothing is ruined or damaged irreparably. No matter what happens, we can view it with quiet eyes, and we can always begin again.

Awareness of the breath serves as a clear mirror, not for or against anything, but simply to reflect the moment, without the obstruction of concepts and judgments.



Listen to tracks 1, 2, and 3 on CD 1

1. Feeling the breath
2. Breath and not-breath
3. Counting the breath

CHAPTER TWO

Trusting Yourself

A friend once brought me to a particular paper goods store in Manhattan for the first time. Once I could see inside, I noticed that every single thing was made of paper (items like lampshades and notebooks and wrapping paper) and that every single thing was just beautiful. As we stood on the threshold of the store, my friend declared, “This store will satisfy all of your paper needs.” I immediately responded, “I don’t have any paper needs.” But within two minutes of being in the store, I felt like I needed absolutely everything in it.

It’s common to be filled with nearly constant yearning. The message we receive all of the time in our consumer-oriented society is that our lives are lacking. We do not have enough, we are not enough, and the remedy—that which will make us complete and whole and finally at peace—is available through acquiring a product (or maybe two).

Lost in this perspective, it is easy to feel disconnected from everything but the object of our pursuit. Our emotional life gets restricted to grabbing on to what or who will help us come closer to getting what we want, and resenting that which seems to be keeping us from it. If we are caught in this pattern, ours can become a pretty small world, and a lonely one.

We can start breaking out of this habit by asking ourselves, “What do I need right now in order to be happy, to be at peace? Where is my greatest happiness actually to be found?”

Our greatest ally in the practice of love is the wish to be happy. This wish functions as a homing instinct for freedom when we can unite it with understanding what actually brings us happiness. But sometimes we may feel that we do not really deserve happiness; we may feel almost ashamed of wanting it. Yet this wish is one of the finest things about us—it opens the door to transcending our limited selves.

The process of unplugging is one where we create the conditions for learning to trust our own experience, for developing an inner sense of what we need and who we are—not the story we have learned from our background or upbringing, not the narrative created by the pressures of society or the constructed view of ourselves we have incorporated from others. We let go of those reflections, images, and ideas, and go within to discover ourselves anew.

One of the fundamental tools we have to begin to steady attention on our own experience, rather than the importunities of others, is awareness of the breath. To start a meditation practice, we place our attention on the sensations of the normal, natural breath. The breath is often chosen as the primary object in meditation for a number of reasons: first, we don't have to subscribe to any belief system or accept any sectarian dogma in order to feel the breath—if we are breathing, we can be meditating.

Concentration is steadiness of mind, the feeling we have when we are powerful in our attention. When we can concentrate, a door opens to insight and wisdom. Concentration is thus the foundation for the

development of correct knowledge and vision. Concentration means being able to see things as they actually are, without so quickly distorting the experience through the filter of our hopes and fears, and it is the release from these filters that leads us to trust in our own sense of truth.

Another reason is that, as one of my meditation teachers once said, “The breath is very portable.” We can practice in a rather formal time of dedication, like our hour alone and unplugged, but we can also practice standing in line at a grocery store, or waiting anxiously in a doctor’s waiting room—if we are breathing, we can be meditating.

The breath becomes our home base. It is not the only thing we pay attention to in meditation, by any means, but it is the place we keep returning to. It forms a shelter for us, a refuge. Awareness of the breath serves as a reminder of how to be aware of what is happening in the moment without getting swamped by it. Awareness of the breath serves as a clear mirror; it is not for or against anything, but simply reflects the moment, without the obstruction of the mind’s endless storytelling.

The bravest thing we can do, and the beginning of an awakened life, a life suffused with kindness, is to question our assumptions about what we are capable of, what brings us happiness, and what life can be about.

In being mindful of our breathing, we see clearly the fragility of life, as we are completely reliant upon every inspiration. We unplug from our normal

distracted or restless activities in order to nurture a finer and deeper awareness of all of our experiences, beginning with this delicate movement of air, upon which life itself depends.

As faith deepens, the “container” in which fear arises gets bigger. Like a teaspoon full of salt placed in a pond full of fresh water rather than a narrow glass, if our measure of fear is arising in an open, vast space of heart, we will not shut down around it. We may still recognize it as fear, we may still quake inside, but it will not break our spirit.

CHAPTER THREE

Letting Go

I once led a retreat in California where it rained so hard it was like being in a monsoon in India. I felt so badly for the participants. I kept thinking, “This is really terrible. People can’t walk outside so easily, and it’s so soggy everywhere. It’s such an unpleasant atmosphere; people aren’t going to have such a good retreat.” For some reason I felt like I was responsible.

I found I wanted to apologize to everybody because it was raining. I went through that for a little while, and then one day I watched it flip around in my mind, and saw the thought arise, “Wait a minute. I’m not even from California. I’m from Massachusetts. This isn’t *my* weather. This is *their* weather.

Maybe they should apologize to me!” Making the choice to be still instead of always distracting ourselves enables us to develop a new relationship with what is. This is a choice allowing for discovery and openness, fueled by courage, curiosity, insight, and love both for ourselves and for others.

And then the voice of wisdom arose, “Weather is weather. This is what happens.” But for how many days of our lives and around how many incidents and in how many encounters do we feel this strange kind of responsibility, as though we had wished or willed things to be just so? Early in my meditation practice, I was appalled at many of the elements of my own mind when I looked within. I was quite young when I began—just eighteen—and though I knew I was terribly unhappy, I wasn’t psychologically sophisticated enough to distinctly know the different strands of thoughts and feelings operating inside me. Once I took a good look, I was very upset.

We practice meditation because, rather than grasping for what we do not have, or trying futilely to hold on to what is changing, we can instead settle into the moment and know the refuge of letting go. We practice meditation so as not to waste our precious lives.

In a state of high distress over a storm of jealousy that had come during a meditation session, I went to one of my meditation teachers, Anagarika Munindra. He said, “Why are you so upset at these thoughts which have arisen in your mind? Did you invite them?”

Indeed . . . do we say, “At 3:00 today, I’d like to be filled with jealousy, or hatred, or fear, or self-loathing”? Of course not. When conditions come

together for something to arise, it will be there. We can't successfully say, "I have decided never to feel fear again," or "I've grieved enough now," or "I've decided I will never feel sleepy in meditation again."

The art of concentration is a continual letting go. We let go of that which is inessential or distracting. We let go of a thought or a feeling, not because we are afraid of it or because we can't bear to acknowledge it as a part of our experience, but because it is unnecessary.

Munindra's question was an interesting one, and it provoked a new understanding for me. We often act as though we can somehow wrest control over what will arise in our experience. And yet this moment's experience is like the weather, born of so many conditions coming together in a particular way at a particular time. To expect it to be within our control is to be unrealistic, and to be repeatedly disappointed at what we cannot do but think we should be able to.

This view doesn't leave us complacent, or apathetic, or passive. Rather, by letting go of incorrect assumptions about control, we capture the energy previously used to blame ourselves for what was out of our hands to begin with. Then we use that energy for a creative, intelligent, aware choice as to how we want to relate to what has come up in our minds. The possibility of a new relationship is the field of our transformation.

To see things as they are, to see the changing nature, to see the impermanence, to see that constant flow of pleasant and painful events outside our control—that is freedom.

I judged myself mercilessly for having so much jealousy, but it didn't make it go away. Seeing I wasn't in control of jealousy's arising—but that I could forgive myself for it having come, and that I could work with it in lots of different skillful ways once it was there—left me feeling empowered and inspired.

We don't need self-recriminations or blame or anger to effect transformation—in fact they often hinder our ability to change because they are so demoralizing. Instead, we let go of mistaken self-judgment in order to reawaken our awareness, our insight into how change happens, our intention to live with clarity and kindness, and our compassion.

We have been trained to fear anything we can't control: the unruly emotions of our minds, the unreliable characters of our bodies, uncultivated nature, death—as well as all the little echoes of death that appear in everyday change. It might feel safer avoiding or denying the fierce uncertainty, the volcanic underpinnings of life. But as we learn to see with less illusion, we begin to accept that no matter how we feel about it, life will never become predictable and orderly and fixed. We have to find something other than fear to guide us.



Listen to track 4 on CD 1

4. Flow breathing

CHAPTER FOUR

Facing Challenges

The Taoist philosopher Chuang Tzu told this story: There was a person so displeased by the sight of their own shadow and so displeased with their own footsteps that they determined to get rid of both. The method they hit upon was to run away from them. So they got up and ran. But every time they put their foot down there was another step, while their shadow kept up with them without the slightest difficulty. They attributed their failure to the fact that they were not running fast enough. So they ran faster and faster, without stopping, until they finally dropped dead. They failed to realize that if they merely stepped into the shade, their shadow would vanish, and if they sat down and stayed still, there would be no more footsteps.

Making the choice to be still instead of always distracting ourselves enables us to develop a new relationship with what is. This is a choice allowing for discovery and openness, fueled by courage, curiosity, insight, and love both for ourselves and for others.

The Buddha taught his students to develop a power of love so strong that their minds become like a pure, flowing river that cannot be burned. No matter what kind of material is thrown into it, it will not burn. Many experiences—good, bad, and neutral—are thrown into the flowing river of our lives, but we are not burned, owing to the power of love in our hearts.

In retreat, as in life, we might judge our difficult experiences—restlessness, negative mind states, physical pain, and so on—as not being right, as being somehow out of place or worthless. Many of us are conditioned to believe that we cannot work skillfully with painful experiences, that we cannot use them to increase our compassion, understanding, and empathy. Our hearts shut down and we say, “I can’t do that. I am not capable of that. I’m not strong enough. I don’t have the ability . . .” In time, these decisions about ourselves solidify into an image of how limited we are.

In times of great struggle, when there is nothing else to rely on and nowhere else to go, it is the return to the moment that is the act of faith. From that point, openness to possibility, strength, patience, and courage can arise. Moment by moment we can find our way through.

But as long as life continues to bring us varied experiences—be they delightful, draining, demanding, fulfilling, boring, sorrowful, or exhilarating—we need to look beyond our conditioned reactions to live fully. The effort we make in meditation is the unconstrained willingness to persevere through difficulty. It is not a harsh, straining, desperate effort, but rather a willingness to open where we have been closed, to come close to what we have avoided, to be patient with ourselves, and to let go of our preconceptions.

The English word “courage” has the same etymological root as the French coeur, which means “heart.” To have courage is to be full of heart. With courage we openly acknowledge what we can’t control, make wise choices about what we can affect, and move forward into the uncultivated terrain of the next moment.

When we meditate, we practice viewing whatever arises with acceptance and a spirit of generosity, with a mind that is as spacious as possible. The purpose of this acceptance is not to develop passivity but to get as intimately connected to our experience as we can. If we are busy running away, or discrediting our experience, or feeling hostile toward it, there isn't going to be a great deal of learning or understanding arising. If we forge a new relationship with our difficult experiences, we have the opportunity to see more deeply into them, and to have a new understanding of ourselves and, ultimately, of others.

We all want our pain to disappear. We don't want to feel the constriction of fear in our throats. But the transformation we are seeking isn't to be found in what happens to the pain; it is found in what happens to us in relationship to it. It is found in opening rather than in closing down, in compassion for ourselves rather than in contempt. All we can do is deal with whatever experience we are actually facing, and add one more moment of mindfulness, of transforming our relationship to suffering.



Listen to track 5 on CD 1

5. Working with hindrances

CHAPTER FIVE

Being Present

Psychologist William James once said, “My experience is what I agree to attend to. Only those items I notice shape my mind.” We could say that attention is life itself, that there is no life without a quality of being mindful and attentive. The term “mindfulness” actually means the observing power of the mind, which has the characteristic of non-superficiality because it’s penetrative and profound.

The example used sometimes is that of the difference between throwing a rock into a pool of water or throwing a cork into that same pool. The rock will sink. If we throw in the cork, it will just bounce around on the surface. Mindfulness is not a glancing or superficial awareness, but one of powerful connection. When I was first practicing this technique of meditation, I was encouraged to bring that immediacy of attention to each breath, each step, each sound, each taste, each emotion.

Very simple actions can make a big difference. We may not be able to take away the mass of somebody’s suffering, but we can be present for them. Even if through our small act of being present somebody

does not feel as alone in their suffering as they once did, this will be a very great offering.

As we develop greater mindfulness, we are more able to look at our experience directly, or face to face. Our attention is not shallow or oblique or distorted. This happens because of a great presence, a gathering of all of our attention and interest and bringing them to just one moment. We are not distracted by obsessive concern about what has already gone by or by what has not yet come.

Early on in my meditation practice, I discovered an interesting habitual pattern. I noticed that when a painful experience would arise—whether physical or emotional—I would project it far into the future, assume it would never change, and try to hold the next hour's worth, week's worth, lifetime's worth of pain all at once. Of course I found it unbearable. It took some time and practice to be able to be with a painful experience in the moment, and not add such imagined distress and difficulty.

Simply by being with our breath we are giving birth to our wholeness.

It also took some time to see that there were two things happening in any experience: one was the actual physical sensation or emotional state, the other was the entire level I was adding according to my attitude, my supposition, my assumptions. These add-ons are based on memories, beliefs, desires, fears—many aspects of our conditioning. We tend to get lost in various add-ons whether our experience is pleasant, painful, or neutral.

Slowly, over the course of practice, I could separate these two levels and see them as distinct. I learned that one was the natural property of the experience and the other was what got created around it. I saw what my direct experience was and what was added by assumption and interpretation.

Great fullness of being, which we experience as happiness, can also be described as love. To be undivided and unfragmented, to be completely present, is to love. To pay attention is to love.

With the quality of mindfulness or wise attention we get closer and closer to the natural property of any moment, any experience, until we can touch it very deeply, fall into it, and rest with it in its simplicity. This doesn't mean we lose our ability to discriminate, or differentiate between what we like and what we don't. What it does mean is we can separate our direct experience from all that surrounds it based on habit, convention, culture, desire, and fear. We can take that essential experience of the moment and access it, touch it. This is incredibly exciting because it means that with this power we see beyond the surface level of life, beyond the conventional and assumed, beyond what we have been taught but have not necessarily learned for ourselves to be true.

When we practice mindfulness, our attention moves from predominant object to predominant object in a way that is very restful. We don't have to create something to look at; we don't have to take what is happening and make it better, or try to trade it in for another experience. We just allow the mind to rest on whatever is capturing our attention, to settle on it, to pay attention fully.

I've seen the tendency in myself—and I think this is common—to try to experience an entire retreat in one hour, as though we have to hurry up and take it in all at once. But all we can be with is just one breath, just one step, one moment of happiness or pain. Through practical experience, we learn to relax, to open to what is happening, to be attentive, and to renew that attention over and over again.

The simple act of being completely present to another person is truly an act of love—no drama is required.

Listen to track 6 on CD 1



6. Walking meditation

CHAPTER SIX

Opening the Heart

Being willing to experiment with the use of our attention—what and whom we pay attention to, and how—is often the key to opening our hearts. For example, as you unplug, you might find your mind going back over the preceding week, evaluating yourself and how you behaved in different situations. It is very common to remember and even fixate on the mistakes you made, the stumbles, the awkward missteps. We might go over and over the really stupid thing we said at lunch yesterday.

It takes a conscious effort, and an intentional use of attention, to recall the good we might have done as well—the flashes of kindness, the moments of generosity, of listening to someone even if they were boring, of caring.

We make a conscious effort to recall these moments not for the sake of egotism or arrogance, but to have a more balanced, and in fact more realistic, perspective on our lives.

This doesn't mean that we try to pretend yesterday's lunchtime blunder was the essence of wit and grace . . . maybe it *was* a really stupid thing to say. But that moment is not the whole picture of who we are. If we open our perspective we will open our hearts.

*With insight we see that we all share the urge toward happiness,
and also that no one leaves this Earth without having suffered.
Thus, we look at others and see something not only about them,
but about ourselves.*

In a similar way, there may be people whom we tend to overlook, or look right through with at best a halfhearted interest: supermarket checkout clerks, dry cleaners, bank tellers. There are those for whom we have a ready, or automatic, hostility or indifference. Once when I was leading a meditation retreat in New York City, a participant who had gone outside to walk during the walking meditation was approached by a street person asking for money. He gave the man a dollar, as was his habit, but came back in the room somewhat shaken, saying, “That was the first time I looked a street person

in the eye as I was giving him the dollar, and realized that they were a human being.”

Only love is big enough to hold all the pain of this world.

What happens when we really look at, or listen to, others? We find that a quality of caring emerges.

And there may be those whom we have categorized due to previous experience, or assumption. We may think, “They are stupid,” or “boring,” or “uninterested in me,” or “completely different from me.” We file them away in some designation and don’t necessarily take a new look.

But when we stop and take the time to pay full attention, not holding to a limited or preconceived view, we often find surprises. Sometimes we discover tenderness, or vulnerability, or an unexpected concern for someone else. We are able to genuinely connect. Our hearts open. Even if we still find this other person rather stupid, or tedious, we can now feel the vitality of a real, changing being—not the inertness of a category. We can identify with that aliveness, and wish the person well.

Developing care toward ourselves with the power of concentration is the first objective, and is the foundation for later being able to include others and finally all of life in the sphere of kindness.

We can also look at how we pay attention on any given day, and consciously bring benevolence into the attention we foster toward all of life . . . people, creatures, animals, friends, strangers. We make the effort to wish ourselves and others well, so that our lives can be enriched by inclusiveness, interest, and caring. Instead of going around feeling alone and cut off, we can allow attention to lead our hearts to an ever-more expansive openness and connection.

What we do right now has an effect over the reaches of time and space. Even when we feel helpless, we can find support in this truth. We can, with love and compassion, continue to offer our hearts beyond the hurdle of pain, stirred by faith to act the best we can in the life we all share together.



Listen to tracks 1 and 2 on CD 2

1. The practice of lovingkindness
2. Lovingkindness toward oneself

CHAPTER SEVEN

Knowing Yourself

By slowing down and looking within we lay the foundation of knowing ourselves more completely. Over time we see the range of what a human being can feel and want and dream of and fear. We see the kaleidoscopic shifts of a life, with sensations, emotions, sensory experiences, and thoughts that are

constantly changing. We find that every experience—whether it's seeing a visual image, hearing a sound, tasting some food, knowing a sensation in our body, smelling an odor, having an emotion, or thinking—has a feeling tone for us. We experience it as pleasant, painful, or neutral.

In looking within we also discover that often, through the force of habit, we try to prolong pleasant, satisfying experiences as though they are the only ones worth having. When something good comes our way, we commonly complicate the experience by trying to hold on to it and preserve it, trying to own it and keep it, even though we know that everything we have ever experienced in life is subject to transition and change.

We can travel a long way and do many different things, but our deepest happiness is not born from accumulating new experiences. It is born from letting go of what is unnecessary, and knowing ourselves to be always at home.

We can be aversive, impatient, and unkind to ourselves or embarrassed by difficult or challenging experiences, as though this might allow us to push them away successfully. It is almost as though we believe that enough resentment of, animosity toward, or general grumpiness about our experience will turn it around—when in truth, it is merely a means of adding stress or far greater suffering to the pain we felt to begin with.

And when we have neutral experiences—ones that are commonplace, repetitive, or lack intense feelings of pleasure or pain—we often become numb to them, or

go to sleep. Most of the time our attention isn't attuned to subtlety, and so we miss a lot of what goes on in our day: the ordinary experiences that could soothe us if we only noticed them, the small things of beauty we simply don't see, the everyday joys that go unappreciated. When we are disconnected in this way, we tend to wait for something intense to come along and wake us up.

Loving ourselves opens us to truly knowing ourselves as part of a matrix of existence, inextricably connected to the boundlessness of life. When we keep opening past any version of who we are that is crafted by others, when we see that we are far bigger than the person that is delineated by family or cultural expectations, we realize that we are capable of so much more than we usually dare to imagine.

Through meditation we learn how to more fully enjoy pleasant experiences and to be filled with the delight of them, without becoming distracted by extraneous concerns or getting lost in anxiety about whether we will be able to hold on to them. We learn to be with what is happening, without a determination (which is futile) to not let it change in any way.

We learn how to open to painful experiences with a more compassionate heart, to not add disparagement or bitterness to something that already hurts. We learn to not make an enemy of our bodies or minds when they disappoint us, or when we've made a mistake or a bad choice. We learn how to be a friend to ourselves in times of sorrow or difficulty.

The Buddha said that within this fathom-long body lies the entire universe. If we can understand our own experience and connect to it, we can connect to all of life.

And we learn to connect more completely to neutral experiences, so that we are not relying on intense pleasure or pain in order to feel alive. With just a breath, just a sound, just a sip of tea, we can find ourselves centered, aware, and connected to the moment.

No matter what is happening—pleasant, painful, or neutral—being fully aware of what it is, how it feels, and how we are reacting is a direct path to knowing ourselves in a deeper way.

Completeness and unity constitute our most fundamental nature as living beings. That is true for all of us. No matter how wonderful or terrible our lives have been, no matter how many traumas and scars we may carry from the past, no matter what we have gone through or what we are suffering now, our intrinsic wholeness is always present, and we can recognize it.



Listen to track 3 on CD 2

3. Bodyscan

CHAPTER EIGHT

Being with the World

At the retreat center I cofounded, the Insight Meditation Society, someone once created a mock brochure featuring the quite funny motto: “It is better to do nothing than to waste your time.”

Although that brochure was a lighthearted parody and the motto never made it into our official presentation, I loved it. Doing nothing means not doing the things we usually do, so that we can get new perspectives, new insights, and new sources of strength.

Doing nothing does not mean going to sleep, but it does mean resting: resting the reactive, restless mind by being present to whatever is happening in the moment; resting from activities which may have lost their heart for us, and which we need to look at to see if that heartfulness can be renewed; resting from meeting others’ expectations of us. Doing nothing means being at peace.

Restraint is the foundation for the absence of remorse. When we restrain a momentary impulse to do a harmful act, we are able to see the impermanence and transparency of the desire that initially arose. Having avoided harmful action, we also avoid the guilt, fear of discovery, and the confusion and regret that come when we forget that what we do has consequences.

Going on a meditation retreat gives anybody who pursues the practice an opportunity to look within for a sense of spaciousness, depth, and connection to life. We enter into retreat out of the belief that each of us has the capacity to understand ourselves more fully, to care more deeply both for ourselves and for others, and to do nothing for a while, with awareness and love. We end retreat with the dedication to bring the skills, insights, and values we have worked with back into our ordinary lives, to make something extraordinary of them.

Having been on retreat doesn't remove us from the inevitable ups and downs of life experience—we will still have good times and bad, strong doses of sorrow and times of great joy. But we can roll with the punches more, with less of a sense of disappointment and personal failure, and with greater calm.

Having some understanding that our happiness and unhappiness depend on our actions shifts our life into a place of empowerment. If we understand that all things arise due to a cause, then we understand safety. Thus, when we see suffering or a conflict arise in our life, we do not merely try to eliminate it. Rather, we courageously change the conditions that provide the ground for its arising and that maintain its existence.

As we develop skill in meditation, we look at our life in a new way. What is revealed through clear seeing is a world where no one and no thing stands apart. This sense of interconnectedness isn't an abstract, fanciful notion, but a direct seeing of a deeper reality.

Consider for a moment something like a tree. We think of it as a distinctly defined object, standing there just by itself. But on another level of perception, it's not so completely separate. It's also the manifestation of an extremely subtle net of relationships.

The tree is affected by the rain that falls upon it, by the wind that moves through and around it. It's affected by the soil that nourishes it and sustains it. It's affected by the weather and by the sunlight and by the quality of the air. The tree couldn't exist outside of that network of connections. And that is true for all of us.

In order to live with integrity, we must stop fragmenting and compartmentalizing our lives. Telling lies and then expecting great truths in meditation is nonsensical. Every aspect of our lives is connected to every other aspect of our lives. This truth is the basis for an awakened life.

We can take that vision of life into our everyday encounters and situations. Based on a view of interconnection we respond with much more empathy, compassion, and a realistic sense of the world. A view of interconnection allows us to see that what we do matters, because it ripples out along these threads of connection. What we care about matters, and who we are matters, because we are part of a greater whole.

A commonly held idea (you may have encountered it) says that doing a retreat promotes self-absorption. I have often thought it peculiar that if someone were to tell us that doing an activity for only one weekend now and then, or for an

hour at a time when we could manage it, would significantly help a friend, we'd likely do it. And we'd likely do it frequently if we possibly could. Being told that same thing about an activity to really help ourselves casts it as a selfish diversion to be avoided. Yet our own growth in calm, understanding, and love can only be of benefit to our families, our communities, and to the world.

May you enjoy many opportunities to close the door for a while, turn off the phone, and do nothing in this very special way.

Having dedication to kindness offers us a chance to make a real difference despite the obstacles and unhappiness we might face. No matter what our belief system, actions, status, we are joined together in this world through strands of relationship, interconnection.



Listen to track 4 on CD 2

4. Feeling our interconnectedness

About the Author

Sharon Salzberg has played a crucial role in bringing Asian meditation practices to the West. She has been teaching meditation worldwide since 1971 and is the cofounder of the Insight Meditation Society in Barre, MA. She is the author of nine books, including the *New York Times* bestseller *Real Happiness*.

About Sounds True

Sounds True was founded in 1985 with a clear vision: to disseminate spiritual wisdom. Located in Boulder, Colorado, Sounds True publishes teaching programs that are designed to educate, uplift, and inspire. With more than 1500 titles available, we work with many of the leading spiritual teachers, thinkers, healers, and visionary artists of our time.

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