

A Caring, Joyful Heart

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As you probably know, compassion and lovingkindness are central elements of Buddhism.

They arise naturally in response to one of those three fundamental characteristics of existence: interdependence/not-self/emptiness. They are also a beautiful path of spiritual practice. And they just feel good: "Through compassion one is free from lethargy and depression." (Acariya Dhammapala)

Interestingly, a scientifically based tradition as hard-headed as Western psychology is also beginning to find that working with compassion and related heartfelt feelings has both mental and physical benefits.

For example, the Institute of HeartMath (in Boulder Creek, California) has researched connections between the heart and emotional well-being.

Even a regular heartbeat - e.g., 60 times a minute - still has a little variability in the interval between each beat. A large and smoothly changing variation in those intervals changes your brain waves, activates the para-sympathetic nervous system, lowers blood pressure, supports the immune system, and has other health benefits.

It also helps you feel more peaceful and happy and caring.

So let's try a simple technique that can bring your heart beat into a healthier rhythm. It has three parts:

- Breathe in such a way that the length of your inhalation and exhalation are the same (perhaps counting in your mind to make the breaths even).
- Imagine that the breath is coming into and out of the area of your heart.
- As you breathe evenly through your heart, call to mind a pleasant, heartfelt emotion such as gratitude, kindness, contentment, or love -- perhaps by thinking about a happy time, being with your children, gratitude for the good things in your life, a close friend, etc. You can also imagine that feeling moving through your heart as part of the breath.

Why don't you try this for a few minutes, right now?

Just three to five cycles of this sort of breathing can have a noticeable effect. Also try five to ten minutes straight sometime, and see how that feels.

Of course, there are other ways to cultivate compassion, such as through metta - or compassion and lovingkindness - meditation that many people here are familiar with. In fact, metta practice could also help release oxytocin, a hormone that is involved in warm feelings of safety and contentment - and is released in women when they are nursing, to give you a sense of its qualities.

Enjoy!

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A Meditation on Gratitude

Set aside a quiet time during which you can reflect on some of the many things you could be thankful for. As a starting point, you might read the passage below to yourself or out loud, adapting it to your situation as you like.

There really is so much to be thankful for.

I am grateful to my friends. For their good qualities, for the good things they have done for me. For the ways they are fun, for the good times we've had.

I am grateful for my children - if I have any - for the delight and love they bring, for the sweet smell of their hair and the soft touch of their skin. For the first time they smiled at me or walked into my arms. For the meaning they bring to life. For receiving my love and lessons. For being their own persons, for giving me their own love and lessons. Having them at all is a miracle, and the rest is details.

I appreciate myself. For the love I have given to others, for all the conversations had, for all the helpful acts toward others, for all the dishes done. For the long hours I've worked, the hoops I've jumped through to keep all those balls up in the air. For the efforts I've made, the many times I've stayed patient, the many times I've found more to give inside when I thought I was empty.

I appreciate my lovers and mates, past and present. I can focus on one of these persons, perhaps my spouse or mate if I'm currently in a relationship, and bring to mind the ways he or she has been good to me. I appreciate the fun we've had together, the humor and the companionship. I feel grateful for the times of support, understanding, and sympathy. For sweating and suffering too.

I feel thankful for the life I've already had, for the good parts of my childhood, for everything I've learned, for good friends and beautiful sights. For the roof over my head and the bread on my table, for being able to have a life that is healthier, longer, and freer than most people have ever dreamed of. For this beautiful world, where each breath is a gift of air, each dawn a gift of light. For the plants and animals that die so I may live. For the extraordinary gifts of evolution I carry in each cell of my body, for the capabilities accumulated during three and a half billion years of life's presence on our planet.

I feel thankful for the wonder of the universe, for all the atoms in my body—the carbon in my bones, the oxygen and iron in my blood—that were born in the heart of a star billions of years ago, to drift through space, to form a sun and planets, to form the hand that holds this piece of paper and the eye that reads this word.

I feel thankful for all that was in order for me to be. For grace, for wisdom, for the sacred, for spirit as I know it. For this moment, this breath, this sight. For every good thing that was, that is, that ever will be.