

~ Meditation and instructions

Meditation is not a technique and cannot be practiced. We use several techniques to help us go beyond technique into the natural spaciousness of real meditation.

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(instructions facilitated by Open Dharma in www.opendharma.org)

~ **Basic Instructions**

I. To begin with, invite your body to be as comfortable and relaxed as possible, lying down or sitting on a cushion, bench, or chair. To help yourself fully arrive here, breathe out two or three times as profoundly as possible. Let the in-breath happen by itself. Then just let the breath be: short, long, shallow, deep. Notice that the experience of the breath and body are not separate.

II. Enjoy the luxury of simply being: perhaps it is enough to be a human on the earth, with no need to compete, to “get it right,” to do or add or remove anything.

III. Relax into the back of the body as if it is a comfortable sofa. In an atmosphere of gentleness, tune into hearing. Allow sounds near and far to be received by a fluid attention. Notice the brilliant precision of attention, how clearly and immediately each sound is known and released. Notice if any image comes to match a sound—a mental picture of a bird for a birdsong, for example. Is it possible to know the difference between the image of a bird and the simple sound? Notice if any other reactions come in response to the sounds—the body tightening or the mind judging and commenting. These reactions are interesting in their own right, but for now open yourself again and again to the naked sounds themselves.

IV. Whenever you remember, relax into the back of the body and allow attention to receive direct experience.

V. With the sounds more in the background, let this same receptive attention open to the body: its weight and posture, movements and textures, warmth and coolness. Let the experience we call “body” just float in relaxed attention.

VI. Bring softness into first the head, then the chest, then the belly. Where can you connect most easily? Let about 25% of your attention rest in that place, while also staying open to sounds, thoughts, and the whole body. All else being equal, the lower belly is

preferable. Every time you notice that the attention has wandered, gently rest back "home" in your chosen place.

VII. The opposite of what most of us are used to, this training of the mind is simple but not necessarily easy. The training is two-fold: ~ Remembering to soften and let attention receive experience. ~ Remembering to connect to direct experience. The connection between the receptivity of attention and the aliveness of experience empowers our innate potential for wisdom.

(instructions facilitated by Open Dharma in www.opendharma.org)

~ Postures

The Buddha said meditation flows through all "four postures" of walking, standing, sitting and lying down. The sage Patanjali defined good meditation posture as the position in which you can happily stay still and steady. Notice how striving to find an imaginary perfect posture is just a nagging, unpleasant, mind-game. Experiment with different positions, especially if you struggle with pain during much of the session, or if pain persists after you move out of your chosen posture. It is not necessary to use the same position in every session.

With acceptance of the body and mind as they are in the moment, an ease and stillness can begin to develop.

Reclining Posture

For many people, lying down is the position most suitable for being relaxed, open and still. This relaxed stillness makes it harder for the controlling mind to dominate and therefore leaves space for a deeper and more fluid awareness to come through.

You will need a soft, flat surface to lie on. Usually a yoga mat is too thin if you want to be able to stay still long enough for a deep meditation. Use a mattress, folded blanket, soft carpet, or a combination of two or more things.

You may also need extra cushions or some improvised substitute, such as a folded sweater or blanket. It is really worthwhile to experiment with different degrees of softness and different heights of cushions and surfaces. A centimeter of difference can make all the difference.

~ Lying on your back

Make sure you are lying on a soft enough surface and preferably with no extra pillow under your head. Put pillows under your knees to protect your back. Even better for many people is to place pillows under the whole length of your legs, with the feet higher than the knees and the knees higher than the hips. Be careful with your knees: if the legs roll out to the sides too much, you may feel strain in your knees after a while.

~ Lying on your side

With your hips and knees bent and your arms comfortable, lie on your side with pillows under your head and between your knees/legs.

You might notice a difference between lying on your left or your right side.

See hand suggestions for hand positions.

~ Lying turned 3/4ths of the way towards the floor or bed

If you start by lying on your side, you can shift towards the floor or bed, and straighten one leg. Usually a very small, soft pillow under your ear is enough, but be caring about your neck. Some people prefer this position without a pillow under the head, and others prefer to put a larger pillow under the whole upper body. You may also like to put one hand under the hip of your straight leg, and the other near your forehead, face, throat or upper chest.

~Lying on the belly

Lie face down with both legs straight, and perhaps both hands palm face up under the hips. Your head will need to tilt slightly to one side, and a soft pillow under the ear may suffice.

Hands

Where you place your hands is up to you. It can make a big difference where your hands are, and what they are touching. Some people need to have the hands not touching the body; others find certain hand positions helpful for meditation.

In many postures, we can let the hands find their place and even let them help harmonize body, heart, mind and spirit.

We can also play with some **Jin Shin Jyutsu** as part of meditation posture. (For more on Jin Shin, [click here.](#)) Try holding one or more fingers on one hand with the other hand.

If lying on your back:

~ you can place your hands on your hips

~ or on the base of your ribcage.

~ If you support your bent elbows with soft pillows, you can also place the hands on the upper chest, although the arms may tend to fall asleep after 20 minutes or so.

If lying on your side:

~ you can place your lower hand between your knees and the upper hand on top of the upper outer knee.

~ Or with the lower arm bent, place your fingers on the middle of your neck. At the same time, you can place your upper arm along your hip and buttock, so that the fingers are near the coccyx.

~ Or invent a comfortable way for you to place one hand on one cheek and the other hand on the collar bone of the same side of the body as the cheek.

Sitting Posture

Hands rest comfortably on knees or lap. Chest is open, with shoulders relaxed down and

back. Chin is slightly tucked in, allowing the neck to be straighter than usual. Top of hips is slightly rolled forward, so that abdomen opens and spine is supported and straight. Angling the cushion or the seat of the chair can help hips to tilt forward. If sitting on cushions, experiment to find the best height. Some people need to sit directly on the floor without a cushion, and some people need several cushions stacked up.

Sitting in a chair:

With feet resting firmly on floor or cushions, sit upright and without leaning on the back of the chair if possible. Propping the back two legs of the chair up on small supports helps hips roll forward, and keeps the front edge of the chair from cutting off circulation through the backs of the legs.

Sitting on the floor:

"Japanese style" ~ Kneel with the buttocks resting on a cushion or bench. Make sure not to put too much weight on the knees.

"Thai" or "Sri Lankan style" ~ Sit on cushion or floor, and bend one leg across the front with the knee pointing out to the side. Bend the other leg to one side so that the knee points to the front and the foot points behind you. As with other cross-legged positions, please alternate legs in alternate sittings: if the left leg is in front in one sitting, then have the right leg in front in the next sitting.

"Burmese style" ~ Bend both legs, with knees pointing out to the sides, and with both lower legs and feet resting on the floor, one in front of the other. Alternate which leg is in front, if possible.

"Lotus style" ~ Same as "Burmese" but with one or both feet and lower legs crossed on top of the opposite calf or thigh.

(instructions facilitated by Open Dharma in www.opendharma.org)

~ Stretches for sitting

These stretches, when done regularly for several months, can help the body sit more comfortably for a longer time. The most important thing to bear in mind while stretching is that each person's body is unique. The challenge is to stay in touch with your own body, and make sure that you don't overdo it. It is especially important that you give the highest authority to your own body's wisdom since I am not an expert. I am just sharing as a friend these stretches that I have gathered from various yoga teachers and physical therapists over the last few years.

Hips

~ Lie on your back; lift right leg so that foot points to ceiling; bend left knee out to the left; place left foot on right thigh (bending right leg if you wish); reach left hand through the angle of left leg and clasp hands behind right thigh; pull right thigh towards abdomen; hold. Reverse.

~ Cradle the baby: sitting with right leg straight out in front, bend left leg with left knee out to side. Place left foot in right elbow or hand, and left knee in left elbow. For more stretch, lift left leg higher and then pull it in closer. Reverse.

~ *Gaumukhasana* (Cow's face position!): Sit up on sitting bones with the help of a blanket. Cross right leg in front of you, with knee pointing towards the front, and right foot close to, but not under, left buttock. Cross left leg over right, so that eventually left knee will be over right and left foot will be next to right buttock. Gently lean forward if you need more stretch. (To stretch the chest at the same time: bend left arm behind back with elbow down. Bend right arm behind head with elbow up. Clasp hands if you can. If you cannot reach, use a cloth between your hands. Then bend forward with sitting bones still in contact with floor.) Reverse. Hold each side for at least 2-3 minutes. These are tough muscles.

~ The box: Sitting on sit-bones, cross right leg in front with knee pointing diagonally to the front/right. Cross left leg on top. Left outer foot is along the outside of right knee. Left knee would drop into right foot's arch if the hip were flexible. Reverse. (Each side 2-5 minutes.)

~ Anton's pigeon: Go into a lunge with right leg straight behind you and top of right foot and toes on the floor, and right knee off the floor. With sole of left foot flat on floor and not far in front of left hip, turn left foot and bent left knee out towards left. Look back over right shoulder then return to face front. Gently lower right knee, left hip, and torso towards floor until you find a good stretch. If you want more stretch, try turning left knee and foot fully 90° to the left. Use pillows or other supports under torso to relax into the stretch longer. Reverse to stretch right hip.

~ Pigeon: Similar to Anton's pigeon with right leg extended behind you, and left knee bent out to left, but now with left knee, lower leg, outer ankle and foot lying along ground perpendicular to torso and straight right leg. Keep center of gravity over straight leg. Again, supporting torso with pillows may help relax into the stretch.

Hips and legs

~ Sit with both legs out in front. Use a blanket under the back edge of your buttocks to help you sit up on your sitting bones.

a) Let the in-breath help you pull your toes toward you; the out-breath helps you point your toes away from you. Then the same with the whole foot. Next, keeping in tune with the breath, circle the ankles: first together in each direction, then in opposite directions. Clasping hands under one knee, bend your knee and pull thigh in towards trunk with the in-breath; on the out-breath straighten your leg and point toe. Reverse.

b) Cross left foot up on right thigh, as close to the trunk as you comfortably can. Support left foot with right hand, and let left knee point out to your left. Use left arm to pull left leg towards you on in-breath; down towards floor—gently—on out-breath. Then other side.

c) Starting in same position as in (b) above, circle knee in each direction in tune with the breath. Reverse.

(From the Bihar School of Yoga)

Backs of legs

~ Lie on your back with tailbone (coccyx) on the floor and sacrum off the floor slightly. Bend both knees slightly and rest soles of feet on floor. Lift left leg (bent is fine) and "point" the ball of the foot towards ceiling. Clasp hands (or wrap a cloth) over ball of foot and gently pull leg down towards trunk. Right leg can be straight if your back is strong. Reverse. Lifting both legs together is the next step.

~ Standing near a step or low table, put left foot up on the step-table. Lean belly towards thigh with back straight. Reach with your belly not with your shoulders. Reverse.

~ Any other forward bend.

Upper back, shoulders, chest

~ Clasp hands behind back while standing; straighten arms; bend forward and let arms move over your head and towards floor.

~ Sitting or standing, place left fingers on top of left shoulder and right fingers on right. On the out-breath, draw elbows towards each other in front of you; circle elbows up, brushing face with forearms as you go. Begin to inhale as your elbows circle back and open like wings. Several times in each direction.

~ Sitting in a chair, hold the bottom surface of the chair's seat with the right hand. Lean head gently to the left. Then turn face slightly towards the left shoulder. Adjust till you find a good stretch. For more stretch, lift the left arm and wrap the hand over back and side of head on or near the ear. Reverse.

~ After a sitting meditation:

a) Simply lean forward and drop weight onto shoulders / chest / arms on floor to release upper back.

b) Place each hand on top of opposite shoulder; breathe 10-50 times.

c) Place hands in opposite underarms with thumbs in front and fingers pointing back; breathe 10-50 times.

~ Other good stretches for those of you who have studied yoga: wind-relieving exercises, shoulder stand and plow; downward and upward dog; cobra, camel, and vajrasana kneeling for overall alignment.

(instructions facilitated by Open Dharma in www.opendharma.org)

~Why vipassana (*vipasyana*)?

We all come to retreat for different reasons. Some come out of curiosity; or because depression, suffering, or loss has awakened a need for something deeper in life. Perhaps time seems to be flying by, and life with it. Or perhaps even within relative success or happiness, a search has been sparked for greater understanding of, and intimacy with, the way things really are. Perhaps wonder or amazement motivate us to learn more about what it is to be alive.

Whatever brought us to retreat, we can learn simplicity, honesty, and gentleness.

Calmness

first focus is to gather the scattered mind somewhat, so that instead of one hundred directions and distractions, there are just a handful!

Mindfulness

Then we begin to be able to observe the basically unexplored experience of our human body and mind.

Gentleness and clarity

Continued practice allows this awareness to be more and more honest and kind. Judgment and flattery, especially of ourselves, are seen for what they are: habitual viewpoints with little relevance and much inertia.

Continuity of awareness

Gradually, as we each begin to let meditation take root deeply within ourselves, our previously rather mental and self-conscious version of awareness gets strength from deeper levels of our beings.

Untying knots

We more often catch ourselves in the middle of habitual reactions, and are able to see them more clearly, take them more lightly, be less driven by them.

Wisdom

At times, as habits lose permission to reign over us, a surprising and simple wisdom has a chance to be heard. The more we listen to and flow with that fresh and unobtrusive voice, the more we sense that fulfilment is nearer than near.

Vipasyana

vipassana in the Pali language of the ancient Buddhist scriptures) is translated from Sanskrit in many ways, such as "insight," "clear seeing," or even "mindfulness." For a different perspective, we can break the word down into its root components: *vi* means "behind" or "before" *pasya* (or *passa* in Pali) means "to see" *na* means "path" or "method" Thus, *vipasyana* offers a method of seeing from behind the reactive mind, seeing from further in towards the source of life, gradually allowing that source to take over one's being.

(instructions facilitated by Open Dharma in www.opendharma.org)

~ Inner investigation

Discussion & inquiry

Dharma discussion and inquiry, in addition to silence, are essential to the heart's unfolding. Optional teacher-facilitated discussions are based on the direct experience of participants in an atmosphere of caring and simplicity. Group and one-to-one interviews with teachers allow questions to be aired and explored, to adapt general instructions to individuals, and to practice deep listening to self and to others. Unlike the discussions, these twice-weekly interviews are required of all participants.

Sanskrit text translation

In the text translation class, Ajay Singh, a Sanskrit scholar and original thinker, leads a discussion based on his direct translation of one of the great Sanskrit scriptures. In previous retreats we have looked into such classics as *Yoga Vasisht*, *Bhagavad Gita*, or

Patanjal Yogasutra.

The text, however, simply stimulates conversation and reflection on one's own experience. Our purpose is to deepen our own understanding, rather than to attempt to create a "perfect" translation.

Those who haven't had the privilege of studying ancient texts through direct translation may be surprised at the subtlety of the Sanskrit language, and therefore the range of English words which can be used to translate a single Sanskrit word depending on the context. Ajay deliberately uses unusual or surprising English words to challenge the listener, stop us from assuming too quickly that we understand.

Those who have been more focused on Buddhist scriptures, will probably be surprised how similar some Buddhist and "Hindu" techniques and wisdom are.

*The class is optional.

(instructions facilitated by Open Dharma in www.opendharma.org)

~ Deep Rest & Jin Shin Jyutsu ®

Meditation is not a competitive sport. Our beings are asking for another way of living.

What we know so far is to over-activate body and mind and then to shut off completely.

What we can learn is to rest and refresh our energy, and then we are more likely to have a visit from deep meditation. Have you ever woken up from a nap and enjoyed a moment of breezy friendliness before remembering your list of things to do? That moment—restful, agile, receptive, alive—is much closer to meditation than years of trying to sit still.

Years of experience have shown us that many people need to rest, to lie down for meditation, and allow their natural awakening gradually to take over.

(instructions facilitated by Open Dharma in www.opendharma.org)

~ Lying Down Meditation

To rest is not only to relax but also to energize ourselves—a paradoxical combination of qualities essential for the alchemy of meditation.

Lying down

In contrast to sitting for meditation, lying down to rest or meditate brings a different

atmosphere which can be disconcerting at first.

Experienced sitters often complain at first that they don't find the same clarity when lying down as when sitting. However, this accustomed clarity of sitting often turns out to be the dead end of "me controlling my experience." One can be an expert at mind control and leave the heart sadly untransformed. Once we "sitters" dare to lie down for meditation, we often ask ourselves, "Why did I wait so long to dive in when there is so much to explore and so much uncontrived flowering of the heart?" As the heart opens, a different realm of clarity also unfolds.

Our usual fears about lying down to meditate are:

(1) "What if I fall asleep?" and (2) "What if I'm wasting my time, not really doing anything?"

Sleeping

Experience shows that, yes, it is very likely that we will sometimes fall asleep and perhaps even snore! In spite of our conditioning to the contrary, sleeping is not a sin, and snoring is actually just one more sound of nature. In the meditation hall, we can welcome sleep as well as waking and the many, often fertile, states of mind between sleep and waking. If one knows one just needs a nap, then feel free to do it in bed rather than the hall.

Our accelerated lifestyles leave us disconnected even from the ability to feel how tired we are, so we often need to go through a few days of feeling more tired the more we rest. We need to "rest through" our accumulated exhaustion to start to uncover our deep life's eyes.

Another way of moving

You may remember sometimes waking up from a sleep and—before plugging into your persona, your list of things to do, and your limited sense of who you are—feeling for a moment a breezy, caring ease. The flavor of such moments gives us the taste of genuine meditation much more so than do our usual attempts to control or train the mind.

We desperately need to discover a different kind of wakefulness, clarity, and creative action—a way of being moved from within by our connection with life and with our deepest wisdom. We need to find a way of giving up our tense and uninspired "should's." We need to feel permission to be pulled into loving creativity for "no reason."

Then we can celebrate the marriage of these complementary factors of ease and flow, letting go and being inspired, restfulness and wholeness of energy. Our loving life is that celebration.

(instructions facilitated by Open Dharma in www.opendharma.org)

~ **Jin Shin Jyutsu** ®

An approach to being human in a heartfelt and grounded way.

“Through Jin Shin Jyutsu our awareness is awakened to the simple fact that we are endowed with the ability to harmonize and balance ourselves (in rhythm with the universe) physically, mentally and spiritually.” From www.jinshinjyutsu.com

Jin means human; *Shin* means god or heart or spirit; and *Jyutsu* means tricks, games, art or, as I like to call it, improvisation. This healing art from Japan is not just about technique. The hands and deep heart know or remember harmony, and help align the whole human being, not just physically, but on all levels. By allowing the hands to find their place on the body—perhaps just holding one of the fingers—harmony resonates through the being.

Many people have been amazed at how much quietness and clarity comes from just holding one of their fingers while they meditate.

Mary Burmeister, a student of Jiro Murai, brought the art of Jin Shin Jyutsu from Japan to America in the 1950's, and courses are now held around the world.

Until her death in January of 2008, Mary offered rich teachings often in short, potent sentences: “What you think of me is none of my business.” “Exhale and be the smile.” “Energy is enthusiasm in motion.”

With connections to the whole family of Ayurveda and traditional Chinese medicine, Jin Shin is accessible and safe for anyone to practice. By offering our hands and attending the official Jin Shin courses, our learning can be unending.

For information about official Jin Shin Jyutsu courses:

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~ Effort & Relaxation

Most of us know how to make effort based on tension.

On retreat, each person can experiment with making “reversed effort,” or effort based on relaxation.

At the beginning with meditation practice, and periodically later on, an intense struggle with strong habits of mind is unavoidable. But don't assume that this same quality of exhausting effort must continue forever.

At first, attention has to rely on the intellect. The intellect, or conscious thinking mind, cannot function continuously, and therefore, effort is necessarily uneven and choppy. But the kind of effort most often needed is like the effort required to hold a rose petal in the palm of your hand: not much strength is needed, but rather a continuity of remembrance like a river.

This continuity comes naturally as we access the gentle power of the heart.

If you want to let the heart direct and empower your practice, then it is worthwhile to nurture self-motivation and restfulness.

Self-motivation

Try to recall a time when you did something just because you wanted to --not because you thought you had to, and not because you wanted to get money, prestige, or acceptance. If you can remember such a time, then you will remember how good it felt. On the open retreats, four afternoons and one full day a week are unscheduled, so that we all have a chance to find self-motivation and to experience its joy. You don't need to find an exciting, newsworthy pastime, with which you can “fill up” this “empty” time. Try to find out what you most love to do and immerse yourself in that, rather than letting the unscheduled time slip by in dullness or busy-ness.

Restfulness

Resting is an art. We continually try to relax, but don't really know how to do it. We also very often feel that we should do “more important” things first, so that we can later enjoy a well-deserved rest. But somehow the time for rest never comes.

Bringing freshness, energy, kindness, and even cheerfulness, rest benefits formal meditation and spiritual growth tremendously. You can begin to discover restfulness through practicing the art of resting:

- 1) Lying down for at least half an hour every day and doing absolutely nothing--not making a to-do list, not reading, not listening to music.

2) Once your formal meditation is focused on body sensations or other aspects of the "inner world," you can recline during formal practice. To avoid sleep, you can keep one arm raised; if you start to get sleepy, the arm's falling will wake you up. Even if you fall asleep, that refreshing rest may be more beneficial than holding yourself in a rigid sitting posture, as if you are working at an office (and practicing aversion). In fact, the meditation that happens after you awaken is likely to be fresh and bright.

(instructions facilitated by Open Dharma in www.opendharma.org)

~ **Heart meditation**

For thousands of years, meditators have used techniques to help the mind feel its way back to natural kindness. When the mind remembers that it is "allowed" to appreciate things as they are, the being can relax into a heart of vastness infused with cheerful love.

(instructions facilitated by Open Dharma in www.opendharma.org)

~ **Gentleness**

Metta (*maitri* in Sanskrit) can be translated from Pali as gentle, friend, or lovingkindness. Cultivating lovingkindness is a crucial counterpart to other spiritual practices such as concentration, awareness, equanimity, and investigation. Traditionally prescribed to relieve fear for those who walked through jungles and slept in caves, metta practice is an antidote for negativity, whether self-hatred, anger, insecurity or resistance to change. Diligent metta practice brings easy sleep, pleasant dreams, protection from danger, a radiant face, a serene mind, and an unconfused death.

~ The formal practice

Formal metta practice taps into the power of intention, the ability of the mind to set itself moving in a particular direction. The metta practices mentioned below use the silent repetition of words expressing love to self and others. It is not important to feel anything special, but rather to connect again and again to the meaning of the words. Once the following methods are familiar to you, you may experiment with a focus other than words, such as visualization or the simple sense of love.

Start by making yourself comfortable. If you normally sit on the floor, try sitting in a chair or leaning against the wall. With the first few breaths, receive a sense of your body, heart, and mind as they are right now. Some people find it helpful to bring attention to the chest and breathe "through" the heart area.

~ Forgiveness

Sometimes it is helpful to clear space for metta with a short forgiveness offering. Silently reflect on and then repeat these or other similar words:

If I have caused any living being harm, intentionally or unintentionally, I ask forgiveness.

If any living being has caused me harm, intentionally or unintentionally, I offer forgiveness. (Some people feel more comfortable saying, "I offer peace.")

If I have caused myself harm, intentionally or unintentionally, I forgive myself.

~ Loving oneself

The traditional ways to cultivate metta start with oneself. The Buddha said, "You can search throughout the entire universe for someone who is more deserving of your love and affection than you are yourself, and that person is not to be found anywhere. You yourself, as much as anybody in the entire universe, deserve your love and affection."

To begin the metta practice, dig deeply to find your deepest wishes. Take your time to find your own words in your own language to express two or three or four of these deep wishes. Some of the traditional phrases are: "May I be safe. May I be free from suffering. May I be happy." You can also use single words such as "peace," "love," or "liberation."

Connecting to the meaning, repeat the words slowly, perhaps in rhythm with your breath, for at least 5-10 minutes. Feel as if you have all the time in the world. Once you find the right words, remain with the same words throughout the meditation.

Note that at times it might be helpful to focus lovingkindness on oneself throughout the entire meditation period. However, for some people, it is easier to offer self-acceptance rather than love: "May I accept myself completely. May I accept that I am okay as I am." Or visualize someone who has helped you, but with whom you don't feel tension, and imagine that person sending lovingkindness to you.

~ Three ways to expand the focus

After focussing metta on yourself, you can continue with one of three formats.

1.- Expanding circles

Feel the life in the space just around and including you. Direct the wishes you had for yourself towards these living beings. Mosquitoes, pigeons, trees, human beings, ants, and you. Visualize and/or get a sense of the whole space or of individuals in the space one at a time.

For several minutes or more, offer lovingkindness to all the beings in the hall, room, garden, or landscape. For example: "Just as I wish to be liberated, may all beings in this hall be liberated." "May all beings in this hall be happy."

Or: "May we all be liberated...."

After several minutes, again expand your sense of the moment to include a broader area, offering lovingkindness to the surrounding ashram or neighborhood or ecosystem.

Then expand your awareness periodically to embrace the town, the state or province, the country, the planet and the universe. If you prefer, instead of referring to political

boundaries such as states and countries, visualize natural "boundaries"--the forest, the river system, the mountain range, the plains, and then the continent or island you happen to be sitting on.

2.- In each direction

A second way to practice metta is mentioned frequently in the ancient texts. Once you have spent some time directing lovingkindness towards yourself, you can send it out to all beings in each of the directions one by one: north, south, east, west, above, and below. Visualize and/or get a sense of all beings to the north receiving your friendship as you repeat, "May all beings to the north, be liberated." Lastly, allow the loving intention to spread out in all directions.

3.- Individuals

A third way to practice metta is to focus on specific individuals, as usual starting with yourself. The second person to send metta to is called the benefactor, someone who has helped you, and whom you love and respect--preferably someone who is presently alive, and with whom you are not sexually involved. It may be a teacher, friend, or even someone like the Dalai Lama whom you may not know well.

The third individual to receive your well-wishing is a person about whom you feel neutral. It can be difficult to think of such a person, since we usually jump to conclusions about others as soon as we meet them. Think of a bus driver, someone you have seen walking down the street, or a bank teller. The fourth person is someone with whom you feel some tension. If it is too difficult to send well wishing to this fourth person, then return to one of the previous steps for a while.

With each person, visualize and/or get a sense of her or him, as you connect to the meaning of your chosen words.

~ Creativity

Once you have become familiar with the suggested forms of metta cultivation, you can be creative and find your own forms.

You may find it more effective to start with what is easier and move towards what is more difficult. For example, if sending love to yourself is excruciating, you can break from the usual pattern and begin with a benefactor or friend. If while sending love to a large group you become distracted, then return to a smaller group for a while.

However, metta has a healing power that may be beyond your expectations. Each time you practice, go to the edge of what is comfortable for you and see what happens.

Brahma Vihar
Boundless Resting Places
Divine Abidings
Limitless States of Mind

1) Lovingkindness ~ *Metta*

The near enemy is desire; far enemy is hatred.

“May you be free from danger and fear.
May you be peaceful, happy, and free from suffering.
May you live with ease.”

2) Compassion ~ *Karuna*

Near enemy is pity; far enemy is cruelty.
“I care about your suffering.”
Other phrases are similar to Metta.

3) Appreciative Joy ~ *Mudita*

Near enemy is exuberance; far enemy is envy.
“May your happiness and joy never leave you.
May your good fortune ever increase.”

4) Equanimity ~ *Uppekha*

Near enemy is indifference; far enemy is restlessness, agitation, etc.
“I wish for your happiness but cannot make your choices.
I will care for you but cannot keep you from suffering.
May we be undisturbed by comings and goings.
May we accept things as they are.
All beings are the owners of their actions. Their happiness or suffering depends upon their actions, not upon my wishes.”

(instructions facilitated by Open Dharma in www.opendharma.org)

~ ***Tonglen* meditation**

Tonglen means "sending and receiving" in Tibetan.

We practice being revolutionaries of peace, welcoming the difficult and letting go of the wonderful.

Pema Chödrön on *tonglen* in her book *Start Where You Are*:

. . . this making friends with ourselves—it’s the key to a more sane, compassionate planet. . . Any gesture of gentleness . . . , of honesty . . . toward yourself . . . will transform how you experience the world. What you do for yourself, you’re doing for others, and what you do for others you’re doing for yourself.

p. 37

If you’re willing to drop the story line, you feel exactly what all other human beings feel. This practice cuts through culture, economic status, intelligence, race, religion.

p. 38

Completely reversing the logic of ego, which is to say reversing the logic of suffering, . . . you are essentially breathing in the cause of suffering . . . , which is fixation. . . .

p. 39

You need to work with both . . . the immediate suffering of one person and the universal suffering of all. . . . Not theoretical, not narrow.

p. 40

The idea is to develop sympathy for your own confusion. . . . It's extremely insulting to ego.

p. 41

The things that really drives us nuts [crazy] have enormous energy in them. That is why we fear them.

(instructions facilitated by Open Dharma in www.opendharma.org)

~ Meditation in movement

Luckily, the joy and depth of meditation is not limited to stillness. In fact, sometimes yoga, chi gong, or a walk in the forest may help lead us out of a bubble of self-absorbed anxiety into the wide transparency of life living itself--the body being moved by the larger life that it belongs to.

(instructions facilitated by Open Dharma in www.opendharma.org)

~ Chi Gong

Chi Gong is a Chinese system of gentle movements to encourage grounding, centering and opening.

(instructions facilitated by Open Dharma in www.opendharma.org)

~ "Ajaya" Yoga

This series of yoga exercises is helpful for meditation. Unlike much of the yoga popular today, these practices are designed to calm our over-stimulated systems. Please do these practices gently.

In the original text on yoga, Patanjali defines yoga posture (asana) as “that posture in which the body can happily be still for a long time.” This joyful stillness then allows the mind, breath, and energy to quiet down, harmonize, and find a way in towards deep meditation and freedom.

Most of the well-known yoga postures were developed centuries after Patanjali to address particular needs in the culture at that time: mainly to stimulate energy in people who were too passive to rouse themselves for meditation. In our current culture, the last thing we need for meditation is more stimulation. These very simple yoga exercises can help cool down our mental chaos and prepare us for going inwards.

These exercises also help us connect to the lower belly and clear, support, and awaken the spine. The spine may sometimes host stuck energy and certainly has the potential to flow helpful energy.

If possible, do these exercises

- 1) very gently
- 2) every day
- 3) in the recommended order
- 4) in the morning before having any food or drink (except water).

You can add other exercises if you want. If you are new to yoga, or have a delicate or stiff back, you may want to go to a few yoga classes and warm up the back with exercises 13 and 14, before you do exercise 11 (a backward arch).

If you cannot do all the exercises, then we recommend that you at least include the joint rotations, knees to abdomen, and half boat in your practice (exercises 3, 6 and 9).

Benefits may be felt immediately, but it usually takes many months of daily practice to feel the subtle energy of these exercises.

Use a soft, folded blanket, a firm mattress, or a yoga mat with a folded blanket on top. The full series should take about 20 minutes once you are familiar with it.

Some words of caution: Yoga literally means “union,” and at least we can let body, intention, and mind unite by connecting and listening to the body. Most of the exercises in this series are simple, but please do not strain your body. Approach unfamiliar exercises with gentleness and care. If you are not sure about an exercise, it is best to ask a yoga teacher or experienced practitioner.

Please enjoy.

Standing asanas:

1. Sweeping. Stand with legs slightly wider than hip-width apart. If you are 35 or older, turn your toes towards each other as far as possible without straining your knees, but so that you nearly lose your balance. If the sweeping takes longer than 5 minutes, then you can move your feet into a more comfortable position after 5 minutes. If you are younger than 35, just stand in a comfortable position.

Bring your attention to the top of your head and begin sweeping attention down through the body. You can pause and relax anywhere that you notice extra tension. First come down head, neck, shoulders, and upper chest and back, and then down the left arm and then the right arm. Then down the main body, and then the left leg and right leg.

Pay extra attention to the following areas:

-In the head, as you sweep down the head near the eyes, try to feel something like a heavy, horizontal curtain. Gently “shake” or “wave” this curtain with your attention.

~ Under arms.

~ Knees, particularly clearing the tissue between the joint and kneecap.

Initially the sweeping may take longer, but 5 minutes or so is enough after some practice.

2. Squats. Still standing, relax feet so they are only slightly pointing inward. Swinging your arms for help, come down into squatting position and then stand up again. Repeat 5 times.

3. Joint Rotations. Stand comfortably.

Rotate joints several times in both directions:

~ Ankles—one at a time in the air or sitting on the edge of a bed or chair;

~ knees—bring feet and knees together, hands to knees and rotate;

~ hips—bring feet wide apart and hands to hips and make wide circles with the hips;

~ waist and chest—hands still on hips, making circles with the chest and ribcage;

~ shoulders—bring hands to shoulders and breathe out as the elbows touch in front of the face, and breathe in as elbows reach out and back;

~ head and neck—especially gently, and before rotating the head it can help to stretch the neck forward and then back;

~ elbows;

~ wrists.

4. Breathing up. Standing with feet hip width apart, breathe in and raise arms along sides of body and upwards. Breathe out completely, sucking the belly in as the out-breath leaves your body. Allow the in-breath to happen on its own.

Repeat 2 times, keeping arms up through the two cycles.

On the third in-breath reach up, and while holding breath in, direct energy flowing down through the hands and arms into the back. Breathing out, gently release the arms back down to the sides of the body.

5. Half sun salutation and circular push-ups. Stand at the front of your mat or blanket. Breathing in, bring arms up along the sides of the body and above the head. Stretch arms

above the head and bring palms together, stretching and looking up. Breathing out, bend forward and stretch hips back.

As you find a good forward bend, let the hands touch the feet or shins. Bring your head to rest for several breaths by your left leg, then by your right, then at the center.

Breathing in and placing both hands on the floor, look up and bring your right foot straight behind you, bending the left knee. The weight of your body is balanced on both feet and both hands. Breathing out, bring your left foot back next to the right foot, pushing from the hands and the feet to create an upside down V shape.

From this position dive your main body down and forward, coming parallel to the ground and then circling back up to the upside-down V. Repeat this last sequence 5 times.

Finish in the upside-down V and stretch the backs of the legs as you press the heels towards the floor.

Then finish with a lunge where the right leg is bent in the front and the left leg is straight back.

You can also simply begin from the upside down V and just do the 5 circular push-ups.

Lying on your back:

6. Knee to abdomen. Lie down on a mattress or soft surface. Flex your feet until your lower back relaxes. Then point toes away from you until you feel the front, upper thighs relax. Then, “with permission” from your body, slowly bend left knee and bring it towards the abdomen and chest. Press the left heel into the inner right leg as the left foot travels up. Feel the whole body respond to each micro-movement. Clasp your hands on top of and below the knee, press your thigh into your abdomen, and raise your head to your knee. Hold for several breaths and release slowly. Repeat with right leg. Flex and point toes again and repeat knee bend with both legs together.

7. Gently rock into a spinal twist to each side.

8. Roll. As you roll backwards and forwards, notice if the back feels stuck anywhere and massage with the rolling at that point.

9. Half boat. With attention firmly resting in the abdomen, balance on the sitting bones with legs and main body in the air. Beka, a yoga teacher recommends: to “sit with legs straight out in front and feet together. Make sure you can feel the contact between your sitting bones and the floor. You can help this by taking the buttock flesh out and back with your hands. Bring legs up 60 degrees, and at the same time lean your upper body back 45 degrees. Have your arms straight out, parallel to the floor and with the palms facing each other. You should be balancing on your sit bones and not on the lower spine.” Hold for 5-20 breaths and release.

10. Bicycle. Lying on your back bring one leg up with bent knee while the other leg extends out away from you, and ‘cycle’ 10-30 times in each direction. If you feel a strain on your back bring your legs closer to your chest.

11. Backbend. Arch the back with hands and feet firmly on the floor. Beka: “Lie on your back with your legs bent at the knee and your feet on the floor, hip-width apart. Breathe fully and allow your spine to settle under your hips. Bring your arms over your head so that your hands are just behind your shoulders, the palms facing down and the fingers pointing towards your feet. Your elbows will be pointing upwards.

Press into your hands to push yourself up, first onto the crown of your head. This may be enough if you are new to the pose. You can continue the push into your hands to bring your head off the floor, so that your body makes a full arch. The palms of the hands and the soles of the feet stay in contact with the floor throughout, while the head simply hangs down. If you are unfamiliar with this exercise please be very gentle and careful, allowing your body to learn it over time. Take special care also coming out of the position. It is important to tuck your head in, bringing your chin into your chest, so as to protect your neck.”

12. Shoulder stand and plough. Balancing on the shoulders, support the upper back with the hands and move the main body and legs towards the vertical. Beka: Lie flat on your back. Slowly raise legs, bending them at the knees and continue raising legs and main body up until your body is straight and supported by your shoulders. Hold for a few seconds. Come down gently, allowing you legs to drop back behind your head. Keep your legs as straight as you can, and let the feet rest first to the left of your head. After a few moments, slowly move your legs to the right of your head. After a few moments, move your legs to the center, behind your head. Rest. Release your legs slowly and roll down to lying on your back.

Lying on the belly:

13. Cobra. Beka: Lying on your stomach, bring an intention of softness to your lower spine. Encourage your tailbone to incline downwards without causing tightness. Place your hands on the floor by the middle of your chest with your fingers pointing forwards. Breathe in and press into your hands, allowing your chest to come up, noticing where the arching of the spine begins. Encourage the shoulders to drop and the chest to stay open. The actual bend of the spine comes from the point between the shoulder blades and not from the lower back. Feel the spine uncurl as you come back down. Repeat one more time.

14. Wheel. Beka: You may wish to have more padding under you for this exercise. Lie flat on your stomach. Bend legs at the knees and bring feet towards your head. Reach back with arms and hands and clasp ankles or shins. Pull legs up as much as comfortable. Encourage the chest to lift and open, as the shoulder blades move in towards each other. Rock softly back and forth on your stomach.

Sitting:

15. Alternate nostril breathing. While kneeling, or in any sitting position you like, bend the index, middle and little finger of your right hand down, so that only the thumb and ring finger are in use. Breathe out completely. Press your right nostril closed with your thumb and place your ring finger between your eyebrows. Breathe in through your left nostril. Now press your left nostril closed with your right ring finger and release your

right nostril, moving the thumb to rest between your eyebrows. Breathe gently out and then in through your right nostril. Move your fingers again, releasing the left nostril and placing the ring finger between the eyebrows, and closing the right nostril with your thumb. Breathe out through the left nostril. This is one round. Continue until you have repeated 3 rounds. Let the breath be smooth and subtle. As you get used to the exercise, you can also start to feel or imagine energy “trickling” and traveling up and down each side of the spine with the breath: up the left side of the spine with the in-breath through the left nostril, down the right side of the spine with the out-breath through the right nostril, etc.

16. The cat. Kneel or sit between your bent lower legs, with the feet pointing back. You can sit on a cushion if you feel strain in the knees. Feel the back straight and relaxed. Tune in to the base of your spine, until you feel the beginning of movement. Stay connected to the base of the spine throughout this movement. Allow your slightly arching back to move your upper body, arms, and hands forward and down gently, until your chin touches the ground. Supported on your hands and bent arms, and still forward of your starting place, come up slowly, and let the spine arch up and forward and pull you back up. Reverse the arch gently with the head down and chest pulled towards the back as you continue to return to the starting sitting position. Head comes up last. Feel as if the lower spine is guiding the whole movement. Repeat one more time.

If this position is too much on the knees then:

~ Try sitting on top of a small cushion or folded blanket.

~ Or, do the alternate cat: Kneel with legs parallel and close together but not touching. Feel the lower back throughout the exercise. Breathing in, imagine a balloon expanding in your upper abdomen, and let this area initiate movement. Let the “balloon” expand until your back arches slightly back, your neck and head stretch up and back. Maintaining the arch and the connection with the “balloon” and the base of the spine, allow your upper body to bend forward until your chin touches the ground. Feel as if the “balloon” is guiding the movement. Slowly come up, feeling the balloon pull you up. The head is still arched back when you sit up, and then comes back to normal at the end. Let the breath find its own rhythm. Repeat 3 times in all.

17. Abdominal out-breath. Sit in any position. Breathe out in short, forceful breaths for 5 minutes, allowing the in-breath to happen by itself in between the out-breaths. If this is too long, start with a shorter period, and gradually build up to 5 minutes. An out-breath happens about every 2 seconds.

18. Eyes. Sit or kneel in any position. Rub palms together until they are warm and press gently over eyes several times. Remove palms and make circles with your eyes, looking in a range as wide as your eyes can see. Repeat several times in both directions. If possible, make the eye-circles while turned towards the sun during the first hour after sunrise. Again palm the eyes 1-5 times.

19. Meditative breath. Sit or lie down. Close right nostril and breathe for 5 minutes through your left nostril only. After 3 months, breathe for 5 minutes through either nostril—whichever one you feel is appropriate that day. Breathing through the left is calming and cooling, while breathing through the right tends to be activating and warming—very good for drying up mucus conditions. Generally, however, we need more emphasis on breathing through the left side.

Rest as long as possible in a comfortable position, and enjoy your day!

(instructions facilitated by Open Dharma in www.opendharma.org)

~ Yoga & Pranayama

The daily retreat schedule sometimes includes guided pranayama and asana classes which work together with the meditation and silence to spread consciousness throughout the body, quieting and refining the quality of the observing mind. The gentle approach to pranayama helps to recover the natural breathing pattern and cultivate greater awareness of breathing in all postures while the flowing and meditative approach to asana practice directs the body toward deeper groundedness and inner alignment.

Vinyasa – joining poses together – allows us to connect back into our center, to the calm and panoramic awareness that directs our movements. With time we cultivate and learn to trust a deeper and innate intelligence to guide our movement. Sequences create a space for the mind to rest, expansive. The truth-seeking body moves, life moves with it, mind spills into the contours created by repeated patterns in space, quiet and receptive as a lover's breath. Sequences allow the mind and body to come together in joy. Breath aligns our movement from within, with vitality and in the truth and the freshness of the moment. Breath lends mind its brightness, transparency, effortlessness. Practicing this way allows non-separation to become a felt experience.

This approach to asana and pranayama is inspired by the vital tools identified by Dona Holleman and Orit Sen Gupta.

See their book *Dancing the Body of Light*:
www.donaholleman.com/BodyLight.htm

For more information about yoga-based retreats in this style,
see Odelia's web site: www.twobirdsretreats.com

(instructions facilitated by Open Dharma in www.opendharma.org)

~ **Mindfulness**

Mindfulness is being agile and receptive to one's own experience.

To describe mindfulness, Gautam Buddha gave an image of a barrel that is so full of water that even one more drop will cause it to overflow. We can learn to be completely filled with the flow of life, to trust and learn from rather than to judge our own experience.

Mindfulness can mean different things at different depths of skill and experience.

Although at first we may feel awkward as we “watch ourselves,” we do not try to control or suppress. If the mind is busy, we are intimate with the experience of busy mind.

Sometimes we may rejoice when we remember we are allowed to feel fully our feet, or even one part of an out-breath, or when the sound of a bird surprises us into presence.

As we learn from experience of body and mind, life gets lighter, and we are less often trapped in habit-energies and stories divorced from reality. There is much more room for wise decision-making in daily life—when not to speak, when to speak, about what, and to whom, for example.

Gradually, mindfulness reveals a spaciousness that allows a deeply contented flow of life--spontaneous joy can float through us, and we are more available to serve the common good.

(instructions facilitated by Open Dharma in www.opendharma.org)

~ **Feeling-tone (*vedana*)**

Usually translated as “feeling” or “feeling-tone,” the word *vedana* is a subtle, quick and tricky aspect of human experience. It is the way we take in experience, the way sights, sounds, smells, tastes, physical sensations, and thoughts get immediately filtered as pleasant, unpleasant, or neither. A subjective response called *vedana* gets mixed into the experience. We don't just see color, we automatically see a color we like, or don't like, or don't care about—a color that is good, bad or unimportant. We may even be surprised if another person experiences the same color differently.

This filtered reaction called *vedana* has deep roots in hidden “survival strategies,” the ways we blindly try to manipulate the world with aggression, seduction, and shutting down or ignoring.

~ Our practice is to give attention to pleasant feelings without desperately trying to make them last when they go away.

~ Our practice is also to give attention to unpleasant feelings without struggling to get rid of them when they come.

~ We can also learn to give attention to neutral feelings without being bored or restless.

~ Notice how feeling-tone affects and is influenced by experience of the environment, physical sensations, thoughts, and moods. An unnoticed unpleasant vedana that persists for half an hour can create a bad mood that lasts all day. Conversely, a good mood can make us more likely to give our attention to experiences with pleasant vedana, to notice what we like, to think optimistically, etc.

Letting various vedana come and go by themselves and simply staying aware of them without getting caught up in them, we weaken the forces of greed, hatred, and delusion that are the causes of all suffering.

Our practice then leads directly to an abiding happiness and peace.

(instructions facilitated by Open Dharma in www.opendharma.org)

~ **One-pointed concentration**

Returning attention again and again to a fixed, relatively unchanging object sharpens and strengthens our ability to pay close attention to life.

With concentration on seeing, the object is visual, and the practice is to see while being awake to the fact that seeing is taking place.

- 1) Choose an object that you like or love: a photograph of a loved one; a beautiful stone, dried flower, or leaf; a candle; a piece of jewelry....nothing too large. Stay with the same object in each sitting.
- 2) Place your object far enough away so that the neck is not strained.
- 3) Rest the eyes while seeing: practice relaxation whenever tension in the body-mind becomes noticeable. If there is pressure on the eyes, unusual visual effects, such as seeing colors or losing focus, may occur. Blinking the eyes helps. Notice how little effort is needed for vision to "happen."
- 4) Neither fight with nor entertain any images that seem to appear in the object.
- 5) Sometimes it can be useful to pinpoint the vision on a tiny detail of the object.
- 6) Beginning meditators may notice that their power of concentration, or energy to keep returning to "just seeing," runs out after ten or twenty minutes. In that case, take a mental break, while maintaining physical stillness. After a few minutes, begin again the practice of continually returning the attention to simple seeing.

(instructions facilitated by Open Dharma in www.opendharma.org)

~ **Thought games**

Continuing to relax into the back of the body, we can also explore the world of thought. Sometimes we feel spacious and curious enough to investigate this slippery, powerful phenomenon. Sometimes we may want to investigate thought because the mind is so busy.

As we gain skillfulness in this realm, we can see that thoughts are weightless. Yet when thoughts take over, they can be heavy enough to bring people to kill themselves or others.

Generally, we can continue with relaxing and receiving experience as it comes through us. Open to sound, body sensation and the sense of space around us, we can also allow spaciousness to include thoughts as just one more kind of movement.

It may be helpful sometimes to say very simply in the mind, “thought,” when we notice that thinking has taken over. We can then connect with a more direct part of our experience for a few moments (such as weight or the movement of the breath) or just return to a sense of spaciousness and playfulness.

Letting thoughts pass through, and seeing how often they are just habitual reactions, we can sense that they are not “ours,” not important, not a problem. Then we will be able to recognize the helpful and inspired thoughts that do pop up every once in a while: they have a very different quality from the usual.

Occasionally, we can experiment playfully with thought to learn to live wisely with this tool. Here are some questioning games we can play with:

Investigating: What is a thought? What is it made of? Is image a thought? What about the memory of smell?

Counting: In 60 seconds, how many thoughts pass through the mind? (Sometimes playing this game makes thoughts stop; sometimes we find that there are too many layers of thought to capture....)

Tracing back: When we catch ourselves in the midst of a train of thought, we can attempt to trace it back to the starting point. It is interesting that even when we space out, there is something that records the thoughts, and we can sometimes access that recording. What we often find is that a sound or unpleasant sensation may have knocked us out of the present moment into reverie.

Emotional tone: When particular thoughts recur again and again, we may need to notice what emotion is fueling them. Then we can be with the emotion more directly.

Fantasy: Sometimes when a cycle of thinking repeats many times, we could try doing the opposite of what we think we are supposed to do: we could let the fantasy happen fully, without guilt. Our very resistance (often in the form of shame, guilt, or judgment) is what keeps the fantasy alive.

“Feeling” the thoughts: When the mind is relatively loving and quiet, we could try to sense thoughts in a different way. We could try to “feel” them, in a way that is more subtle than emotional feeling. If thoughts are ducks swimming on the water of the mind, then we try to feel how the legs are moving underneath the water.

Aha!: Notice and feel the quality of the many moments when we suddenly realize we have been lost in thinking. Every once in a while, we can let ourselves drop down into that deeper awareness that is already going on, already at ease with the fact that the thinking mind has spaced out.

(instructions facilitated by Open Dharma in www.opendharma.org)

~ **Fluid awareness**

Up to now, we have been making deliberate effort to return our attention again and again to the sensations of the breath. This strong effort is necessary to overcome our equally strong habit of being easily distracted and lost in thoughts.

However, once we are able to remain relatively calm and focused on the breath, we can see what happens if we let go of making any effort to direct our attention anywhere. Instead of choosing to return to the breath, we can let our awareness be "choice-less." We can let whatever is predominant in our experience come and go while we simply stay aware of it.

Our attention might remain on the breath. Or it might go from one thing to another: first the breath, then a sound, another sensation, a thought, back to the breath, and so on, in succession.

As long as we remain undistracted, we will be vividly aware of each of these changing experiences.

We may then get the sense that they are happening all by themselves.

This is a powerful insight that can free us from the habit of trying to control things. It can help us drop the fear and insecurity that make us feel separate from life and allow us to experience instead a profound connection with all things. We can come to see life as a kind of magical unfolding of experiences.

Whenever you get distracted or "spaced-out" during this exercise, simply regain alertness by focusing on the sensations of the breath.

(instructions facilitated by Open Dharma in www.opendharma.org)

~ **The five precepts**

The five precepts guide us to live well, with gentle respect for ourselves and for others, whether the spiritual life is young and fragile or mature and sturdy.

A literal translation of the precepts is

- ~ I take upon myself the path of learning to refrain from harming living beings.
- ~ I take upon myself the path of learning to refrain from taking what is not given.
- ~ I take upon myself the path of learning to refrain from misusing sensual pleasure.
- ~ I take upon myself the path of learning to refrain from speaking carelessly, wrongly or harmfully.
- ~ I take upon myself the path of learning to refrain from the state of carelessness and indolence caused by alcohol and drugs.

In addition to letting go of harmful tendencies, the precepts can also inspire us to cultivate beneficial qualities

- ~ Protectiveness of all living beings
- ~ Generosity of heart, mind and action
- ~ Gentle wakefulness in sensual and sexual life
- ~ Skilful, kind speech
- ~ Clear, alert states of mind

(instructions facilitated by Open Dharma in www.opendharma.org)
