



NALANDA INSTITUTE  
Certificate Program  
in Contemplative  
Psychotherapy

### **Giving and Taking on the Breath**

Find a quiet space, unplug from the world, and settle into a comfortable posture. Begin to clear your energy and mind by exhaling a long, complete sigh. Then let your next breath enter your lungs with as little effort as possible, and take that fresh breath as the start of a kinder, gentler breath-rhythm. Assure yourself that it's safe right now to focus on nothing but your breathing body-mind, and take the more relaxed rhythm of breath, centered at your heart, as a tether to reign in your wild or tired mind. As you breathe, imagine you're recalling all the energy and awareness you've put out into the world to get what you want or avoid what you fear, and gathering it back into you to rest on the rhythmic breath at your heart. If you start getting drowsy or dull, take some of that freshly gathered energy and awareness and breathe them into your clouding or fatigue to uplift your mind, firmly but gently returning your focus to the rhythmic breath at your heart. By alternately settling and uplifting, a breath at a time, you'll gradually find yourself shifting into a calmer, clearer, more balanced state of mind.

Now let your centered mind diffuse through your whole body with the fresh oxygen from your breath, awakening every tissue and cell until your body feels less dense and more fluid, light and clear, like a big, person-shaped lung or bubble of breath and life. As you continue to balance any restlessness and heaviness you feel in your body, open your mindfulness to the raw feel of sensation, and seek balance by letting go of attachment to comfort and fearlessly embracing any distress. Next tune into your primal mind, balancing and centering yourself by diving below or between the surface waves of positive and negative thoughts or images, into the primal clarity and spaciousness of your deeper mind. From that space of deep clarity and calm, scan all the layers of your mind/body process, from the bedrock of your physical form and the undercurrents of sensation to the pure stream of consciousness that is your prime mind, finally opening your awareness to include the surface waves and reflections of mental content: positive, neutral and negative. Keep trying to ride the pure flow of deep mindfulness and, from within that flow, try to accept the whole range and scope of your body-mind while staying centered in a balanced space of clarity and calm.

Now that you're more centered within your own body-mind, turn your awareness again to your environment, focusing on your relationships with others in the world.

Begin by calling up the image of yourself as a traumatized child or frightened animal, and try to approach yourself from your inner adult: the wise caring place of your centered clarity and calm. Now take in the full scope of your present suffering—whatever physical, emotional or existential obstacles may overwhelm you now—and breathe in full awareness of them as temporary conditions which can be overcome with wisdom and care. Mixing that awareness of your sense of being overwhelmed with the objective empathy and confidence of your adult mind, take the relief you feel at recognizing your full capacity to help yourself or get reliable help and channel it into mature nurturing love and self-care, giving it to your inner child on the out-breath. See your inner child receive that love and care with a sense of relief, safety and hope, and gradually grow more secure, cheerful and involved.

Now do the same with the suffering that has burdened your inner child through the years, back to childhood, eventually including the burdens you inherited from past generations and humanity as a whole, not to mention the limits of the nature we all inherited from our evolutionary ancestors back to the dawn of life. As you breathe in awareness of the past burdens and limits that have weighed you down and mix them with clear realization of your full potential now, channel your growing confidence, insight and empathy into intimate, cherishing love and self-care, breathing these out to your inner child and cornered animal.

When you begin to see the child and animal within you grow to feel safer, warmer and more open, finally turn to take on any burdens you can anticipate facing in the future, including the distant future of the next generation. Here again, breathe in awareness of the challenges you expect may come of negative causes and conditions within and around you, apply the full light and power of your clarity and calm to taking these on, and breathe out an optimistic vision for the future based on your growing ability to mobilize your full capacity and reach out to others.

Now that you've begun by taking on your own burdens, invite your secure inner child back into your heart and call up the image of the one other person you find it easiest and most natural to love. Invite the mind of that person to inhabit your image and go through the process of breathing in full awareness of his or her suffering and breathing out love, care and help. Do this gradually as you did with

yourself, starting with present suffering, then past suffering and finally future suffering, taking care and giving love one problem, one breath at a time. As you practice, monitor your own personal reactions and any internal resistances to getting more engaged, patiently bringing self-awareness and self-care to each block as it comes so your capacity can grow naturally without your forcing it.

When you're able to go through this exercise with your dearest other, expand the scope of your practice one person at a time, first working through loved ones, then strangers (by locality, background, walk of life), and finally take on the people who challenge you, starting from the least threatening and ending with the most. To complement this systematic exercise of gradual expansion, it helps to focus part or all of some meditation sessions on recent social interactions that have been stressful, confusing or upsetting. These "special cases" provide the best raw material to deepen practice, since they alert you to your traumatic reactions and blocks to empathy better than any generic exercise can.

This meditation script "Giving and Taking on the Breath" is from Loizzo, J. (2012). *Sustainable happiness: The mind science of well-being, altruism and inspiration* (pp. 184–186). New York, NY: Routledge.