

Breathing Through Pain (chapter from Radhule Weininger's book Heart Medicine)

Through sleepless nights, Sarah's mind ruminated with repetitive thoughts that were spinning like crazy fireflies. Old images of past turmoil intruded and intermingled with newer flashes of memory. She did not want her relationship with Judith to end in a train wreck. She felt completely helpless, exasperated, and exhausted. Then she remembered the "breathing-through" meditations.

Sometimes our suffering is so profound that we don't have words for it. Sometimes our distress is so visceral that we feel it permeating our body. Sometimes the very tender, early trauma burning at the core of our LRPP is so hot that we can hardly bear it. When that knot of suffering has been touched, staying with the pain is crucial, as we discussed in step 7; mindfulness, relaxation, concentration, and support help us to tolerate such intense experiences without escaping from them. Yet sometimes, when we feel acutely paralyzed or overwhelmingly hurt or stuck, it may all feel like too much to handle. In this instance, the practices I've found particularly helpful are the breathing-through meditations.

Breathing-through meditation can transform our suffering through gentleness and peacefulness. It is particularly helpful when we've been unable to find anything else that will help us in releasing our suffering. This is especially true when our pain seems unfixable and overwhelming. *Breathing through* means honoring our pain without trying to change it in any way. We allow ourselves to experience the feeling and to linger with its felt sense in our body. We may not be able to let go of the pain, but we can redirect the energy that fuels and irritates the wound and thereby increases our pain. All energy belongs to life, and we can channel it back to the larger stream of life energy by using our breath. Through this process, the immensity of the wound will slowly dissolve.

Foundational to this meditation is the understanding that we are not separate, isolated entities but rather integral and organic aspects to the web of life. As the deep ecology author Joanna Macy tells us, "We can open to the pain of the world (or our personal pain) in the confidence that it can neither shatter nor isolate us. . . . We are resilient patterns within a vaster web of knowing."¹ With breathing-through practice, we experience ourselves as an aspect of that bigger flow of life.

There are three parts to the Breathing through Pain Meditation. In the first step, we carefully attend to and relax into our breath. Then we become one with the sensation of breath. By doing so, we connect not only to breath but also to the interconnected flow of life itself. It is important to ground ourselves in this first stage of “being breath” while allowing breath to be part of the field and flow around us.

In the second step, we bring attention to the center of our chest. We notice what is happening in our heart and feel whatever pain is found there right now. We notice how our body is holding that pain and how we experience it. We notice our feelings, attend to those feelings, and feel our feelings, being fully present.

In the third step, we return and expand our awareness of the sensation of breath. We let the pain in our heart be as it is and allow ourselves to immerse totally into the sensation of breath. While sensing breath, we feel ourselves being carried along by the effortless flow of our body’s breathing. We pay more and more attention to breath flowing through. Then we come to attend gently to the pain in our heart. Finally, our attention returns to the sensation of breath as part of flow.

Throughout this practice, we let go of trying to “fix” ourselves or our pain. Instead, we let the breath of life flow through the pain. In this way, we gain a wider, wiser perspective. We abandon an ego-motivated position, which itself comes out of isolation. When ego governs our relationship with the world and our LRPP, our emphasis is on strengthening, aggrandizing, and justifying our separate sense of self. What is I, me, or mine is most important: the “I” who did or did not do something, the “me” who got snubbed by someone, or the “mine” that was taken away or denied. When we are in pain, we also tend to retract, contract, cut off, curl up in a ball, and separate ourselves from others. Pain that is trapped in isolation like that typically perpetuates itself. When we are stuck ruminating on our hurt feelings, that only makes things worse, like a snake biting its own tail. Pain in isolation is the very definition of suffering.

When we practice the Breathing through Pain Meditation, our pain is still there, but our suffering is less. With this practice, we connect to a wider perspective. We feel our feelings as we surrender into the web of life. Having grounded ourselves in interconnectedness, we experience the flow of life energy. We expand our awareness, letting our heart rest in its natural state.

Sarah was lying there awake, unable to sleep, with too many crazy thoughts running through her head. Feeling tortured inside, she thought of this guided meditation. She was angry with Judith and with herself. Sarah hated herself for being so mute, so trapped, and so helpless. Judith's overly educated, psychologically-minded words and lack of common sense really annoyed Sarah. Nothing in her felt like she could respond skillfully to a person like Judith. At the same time, she felt some tenderness for Judith in her subtle and wise spirituality, her profound yoga teachings, and her vision for the world. How could she hold those contradictory feelings of admiration and disdain? Sarah was not one who could easily handle ambivalent feelings; she liked her world in black and white. Such ambivalence made her angry, wanting to shut down and build a wall around herself.

Feeling torn up inside, Sarah's stomach was so upset that she could not eat at all. How could she find her way out of her maze of turmoil? She did not want to do formal mindfulness meditation. Wise books, with their overly simple advice and fake prescriptions, annoyed her right now. But with the Breathing through Pain Meditation, she sensed maybe she could find a way through.

Sarah listened to a guided version of this meditation developed by my husband and collaborator, Michael Kearney, MD.

Breathing through Pain Meditation

15–20 minutes

- Let your awareness descend into your body, right down to the ground, right down to the earth element.
- With a quiet, attentive mind, simply be present within your body as you allow your awareness to rise up and fill the whole space of your body right up to the top of your head.
- Now allow your awareness to drop deeper into the sensations of breath, allowing your awareness to become one with the sensations of the breath stream. Allow yourself to be carried in the flow of the breath stream: breath stream flowing in with the inhale, breath stream flowing through with the exhale. Allow your awareness to be carried in this effortless flow, like a particle awakened in the stream.

- As the breath stream continues to flow through, I invite you to bring your attention to the center of your chest, in the area of your heart. Allow your awareness to drop down into this area. Notice how you are feeling in your heart right now, and notice whatever pain is in your heart. There may be a tightness, an ache, a sense of spaciousness, or numbness.
- Just notice how this feels.
- For just a few moments, allow yourself to merge with your suffering . . .
- If you find yourself getting carried away by thoughts, by the narrative of what this is all about, relax, release, return.
- Now, I invite you to let this be, just as it is, and bring your attention back to the effortless flow of your breath, the effortless flow of the breath stream. Back to the breath stream that flows in with the inhale and flows through with the exhale.
- And I invite you to open the cave of your heart to the breath stream.
- With the exhale, allow the breath stream to wash through and around your heart, carrying in its flow the pain or whatever is there.
- All you have to do is to let go to the breath stream, let go to the flowing through of the breath stream that is washing through, that is carrying all life in its effortless flow.
- There is so much to do that you don't have to do. You don't have to move the clouds in the sky, you don't have to make the rivers move or the honeybees find their favorite pollen flowers.
- All you have to do is to allow a sense of flow to happen.
- The choice is yours: you can hold on tight, or you can let go; you can release your pain, or the energy of your pain, to the breath stream, to the always effortless flowing through of the breath stream.
- Let go to the breath stream that is flowing in and flowing through, carrying all into the deeper stream, for the sake of all beings, into the deeper stream.
- May all beings be happy, may all beings be safe, may all beings be free, and may I become what I need to become to allow this to happen.

Listening to the guided meditation, Sarah began to breathe. Slowly, she was able to relax her body. As she joined the felt sense of her breath, as she “became” breath, she began to feel more spaciousness and relieved.

The voice in the guided meditation asked how her heart was feeling. Sarah felt as if a hand were pressing down on her heart, contracting it, pinning her to the ground. Underneath her frustration and anger, she realized, there was a profound heartache. The voice guided her to return back to the sensation of breath, encouraging her to abandon herself to her breath, to surrender to the vast and limitless flow of life that was streaming through her profoundly wounded heart. The flow of breath and life was washing through her, taking the energy of contraction, frustration, and disdain that she felt for Judith with it, into the vast field of life. “Let it be, let it go,” she murmured to herself. For a moment, Sarah felt grateful that there was something even bigger than the might of her strong boiling frustration with Judith. Even though Sarah knew that it would take a long time to work out this conflict, she was relieved that there was a moment of reprieve because she trusted this would eventually lead to freedom.

This teaching of turning toward our suffering and feeling it in our hearts is paradoxical. By turning toward, opening to, feeling with, and then letting go of our pain, we are brought back into connection, into relationship, and ultimately back into an open, living system. This changes everything. Our pain may still be there, and we may still experience it as uncomfortable. But through this meditation, like a pinch of salt in a great river, the pain loses its potency. If we stay present to what we are feeling, if we breathe through it in this way, we release our pain from its self-reinforcing loop. What was once painful is now available as energy to support our life. Expanding meditation to rest on a foundation of the field of awareness itself still, luminous, and always present—allows us to go beyond a personal view, even beyond thought and time. An alternative “field awareness” version of the Breathing through Pain Meditation helped me a great deal when my ancient LRPP became triggered by national and international events—elections, injustice, climate change, systemic racism, and more.

In my work as a psychotherapist and in my meditation groups, I noticed a sharp rise in feelings of upset and alienation, when society as a whole does not feel safe. My clients then complain of insomnia, headaches, hopelessness, and rising anxiety. Many of my clients who are first responders, firefighters, nurses, doctors, therapists, and teachers feel highly stressed and burned-out in times of crisis. I felt how much tension I was holding in my body, how tight my heart clenched, how glued to the news I was, and how distracted I had become. It was hard to hold on to traces of inner peace. Growing up in postwar Germany, I was terrified about threats to our democracy, remembering well the stories of Nazi Germany and oppression. I recalled being a

teenager in the 1970s, when news about Nazi horrors were first publicly disseminated in Germany. Now I felt the same shame and hopelessness about exposing racism and inequality in my new country. As Elie Wiesel said, “The good Germans [those who did not kill] may not be guilty, but they are responsible.”² I carry that responsibility now as a white American, and I take it seriously.

When we feel stuck with our pain, especially when the suffering is happening on a catastrophic scale, it helps to widen our perspective even further. The following adaptation of the Breathing through Pain Meditation helps with this kind of overwhelming distress.

Field Awareness Breathing-Through Meditation

20–25 minutes

- Let yourself settle into your meditation posture.
- Set your intention: that your practice will benefit an interconnected sea of beings. You are practicing not only for yourself but for all beings—humans, animals, the earth, and beyond.
- Invite wise ones to support you, and let those beings look upon you with kindness and support.
- Remember your innate potential for wakefulness, compassion, and wisdom. This is often called your “essential nature.”
- Invite the quality of the Big Trust, which is grounded in resting our faith in the awareness, the mystery, the sacred dimension of life—that life always unfolds in the right way.
- Let your awareness descend into your body and feel your body as a whole.
- With a quiet mind, with an attentive mind, simply be present within your body as you allow your awareness to rise up and fill the whole space of your body.
- Then imagine that awareness is not limited to your body, that it is all around you, within your body, around your body, everywhere.
- Allow your personal sense of self, your thoughts and preferences, to melt into this field of awareness, into its spaciousness, luminosity, stillness, and sense of knowing.
- Affirm awareness itself as your foundation, as the space you practice from, as a space you can trust.

- Now notice breath arising naturally from this vast space of awareness, from within and around your body, everywhere.
- Feel the sensation of the rising breath, the sensation of the falling breath, and breath falling back into the field of awareness within and around you.
- Feel breath very distinctly; attend to every instant of the sensation and movement of breath.
- Now allow your awareness to drop deeper into the sensations of breath, allowing your awareness to become one with the sensations of the breath stream. Allow yourself to be carried in the flow of the breath stream—the breath stream flowing in with the in-breath, breath stream flowing through with the out-breath—and allow your awareness to be carried in this effortless flow, like a particle awakened in the stream.
- All arising out of and falling back into the vast field of awareness.
- As the breath stream continues to arise from the field of awareness, as the breath stream continues to flow through, I invite you to bring your attention to the center of your chest in the area of your heart.
- Allow your awareness to drop down into this area. Notice how you are feeling in your heart right now, and notice whatever suffering is in your heart.
- There may be a constriction, a tightness, an ache, a sense of vibration, or a numbness.
- Just notice how this feels and how these feelings are held within the vast stream of alive awareness-breath.
- For a few moments, allow your attention to drop into this and feel the feeling of what it's like—for just a few moments, allow yourself to merge with your suffering.
- If you find yourself getting carried away by thoughts, relax, release, return to the sensation of breath.
- Now, I invite you to let this be, just as it is, and bring your attention back to the effortless flow of the breath, the effortless flow of the breath stream ascending from the vast field of awareness from which breath and everything arises, back to the breath stream that flows in with the in-breath and flows through with the out-breath.
- I invite you to open to the breath stream, letting it flow in with the in-breath, and letting it flow down and through with the out-breath.
- I invite you to open the cave of your heart to the breath stream.

- With the out-breath, allow the breath stream to wash through and around your heart, carrying in its flow the suffering, your suffering, the suffering of others, the suffering of all beings, the suffering of the earth.
- All you have to do is to let go to the breath stream, to let go to the flowing through of the breath stream that is washing through, that is carrying all life in its effortless flow.
- All you have to do is to allow this to happen.
- Let go to the breath stream that is flowing in and through, carrying all into the deeper stream, into the deeper stream of limitless, boundless awareness, for the sake of all beings, into the deeper stream.
- May all beings be happy, may all beings be safe, may all beings be free, and may I become what I need to become to allow this to happen.

When I felt so deeply unsettled in my reactions to the suffering of the world, practicing this meditation helped me ground myself in body and breath. What helps me here is what I call the “Big Trust.” The regular kind of trust is grounded in our life experience and in having had a secure upbringing that allowed us to have a basic sense of trust in others and in life. When we did not have this secure kind of upbringing, one that allowed us to have our family as our emotional foundation, or when we experienced highly traumatic events or catastrophes later in life, then our basic normal trust can be undermined. So developing the Big Trust is crucial for developing a foundation on which we build our life. I was increasingly grateful to remember my home in the timeless, formless, nonconceptual field of awareness, and to be reminded of the Big Trust that life would somehow wisely arise in an interconnected and unfolding way. I felt the stream of breath and awareness flowing through like a gentle river. Then I felt the deep pain in my heart. I saw images of children in concentration camps in striped suits; mountains of eyeglasses taken from people who had been incinerated; families at the US border desperately sticking their hands through cages; inept old white men perpetuating the misery; George Floyd begging to breathe under the policeman’s knee on his neck; the grin of the policeman; impoverished, drug-infested neighborhoods; the eight-year-old boy I once evaluated in a big San Francisco hospital who was already a drug runner for his uncle. Tears welled up. The little girl in me, who knew suffering very well, was grieving for all of us. It was as if the river ran through me, with faces of children and old people, my face, the faces of koalas burning up in Australia’s wildfires. The river was flowing and flowing, always changing, as alive awareness.

After this meditation practice, I felt lighter. Even though the outside situation had not changed, I was now in a different place inside. I no longer felt so alone, isolated, and burdened. I felt the support and spaciousness of the bigger flow of life, the field of awareness, that which is always there, permeating everything. I felt held in a subtle, comforting way. At the same time, in no way do I want to invite a spiritual bypass by helping to avoid uncomfortable feelings through spiritual practice, nor do I want to be complicit in undermining important outrage and fight for justice by pacifying people with calming practices. Rather, I want to support the reader to stand on stronger footing so that they if so desired, can become more effective activists.

Over my years of practice, I have learned that the “outer” and the “inner” influence and condition each other. I have learned to understand that, due to reasons unknown to us, situations in our lives turn out better when we address them from a calmer, more balanced place. I have come to trust this mysterious process. This insight, cultivated in these two breathing-through practices, allows me to continue my engagement with the world from a lighter place.

One might wonder if breathing-through meditation could be the wrong medicine for someone who already feels overwhelmed by pain. After all, the prescription is to open, to allow in, and to be with what already feels like too much. But when we resist or try to contain pain, it only intensifies and becomes an even greater threat. It is crucial for us to be aware that, in moments of deep pain, we’re presented with a choice: we can either be open to our experience, even though it may be painful, or we avoid and hide from ourselves and our experience, thereby seriously impeding our life energy. People who choose, as their general stance, to avoid anything that feels risky, difficult, or painful often experience a vague sort of lethargy or depression, which, at times, can show up as mysterious physical symptoms.

Conversely, by choosing to be open to and experience pain while surrendering everything to the flowing-through, the permeability, and the constant transformation and renewal of all life, we find ourselves empowered rather than weakened. At first, our pain may feel more intense than it did before. But after a while, we may notice a subtle yet significant change: the intensity of our suffering has lost its sting, and we are more awake, alive, and connected. The pain at the heart of our LRPPs, of our inner isolation, is lessened when we connect to the web of life, to the field of awareness, to God, or to whatever we call the Great Mystery.

¹ Joanna Macy, *World as Lover, World as Self: Courage for Global Justice and Ecological Renewal* (Berkeley, CA: Parallax Press, 2003).]

² Elie Wiesel, *The Night Trilogy* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2008)

© Radhule Weininger (do not reprint or distribute without permission of the author)