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**Entering the Present Moment  
A Breakout Session Handout prepared by Ruth Krall**



## **Entering the Present Moment**

### **Introductory Comments**

Today's health care providers and today's spiritual teachers from many different faith and meditation traditions know that coming into the present moment - by paying attention to the in-breath and the out-breath - is one way to release the body's physical tension and to dis-connect or unplug the body-mind's disruptive internal experiences of anxiety and stress.<sup>ii</sup> Inside the mindful present moment, learning and healing can both occur.

While I/we can re-visit my/our past in memory and while I/we can visit the future in my/our imagination, it is impossible to do healing work in the past or in the future. Healing work is only possible in the present moment. Healing our painful life experiences and memories from the past, for example, can only be done in the wisdom and work of today's present moment.

The easiest way I know to access the wisdom of the present moment - and its calming energies – is to deliberately and self-consciously move my focus of attention into the present moment. In anxious moments – after I scan my environment to make certain I am safe – then I can deliberately direct my attention to my breathing.

For example, if I jump back from a curb to avoid being hit by a speeding out-of-control vehicle I will immediately know I narrowly escaped being physically harmed. After cursing the now departing car or truck, I can take a deep breath in – filling my lungs with oxygen and then slowly breathing out body wastes and toxins such as carbon dioxide.<sup>iii</sup> Three or four of these deliberate breaths and my body has begun to return to homeostasis – my pulse has returned to its normal rate; my blood pressure is returning to normal; my inner felt sense of an adrenalin surge has begun to disappear; my knees are no longer weak and rubbery; I am no longer shaking: I am now ready to cross the street and resume my day. In the future, I will be more watchful at street corners – at least for a short time.

This physiological process of arousal and relaxation happens to all of us hundreds of times a day – usually below the threshold of our awareness.

We get irritated at our spouse for not taking out the garbage; we get annoyed at the long check-out line at the grocery store; we yell at the dog when we trip over him with our arms full of dirty laundry; we get mad at our own self for making a dumb remark to a boss – and so forth. I am certain that everyone who reads this can write out a hundred pet peeves about thoroughly annoying human and animal behaviors. This is part of being human and even saints have bad days.

The itinerant prophet, Jesus, for example, had a major temper tantrum inside the temple at Jerusalem – kicking over tables, calling the animal sacrifice merchants a bunch of thieves. This was not a mellow, chilled-out holy and worshipful moment in his life.<sup>iv</sup> Think about somebody tackling the ushers on a Sunday morning – first grabbing and then tossing the offering baskets to the floor – scattering coins and checks and dollar bills everywhere. I promise you - the presiding minister or priest would be a very unhappy camper. Other church goers would be outraged. Police might be called. The ushers would most likely escort this person to the outside and tell her or him to never come back.

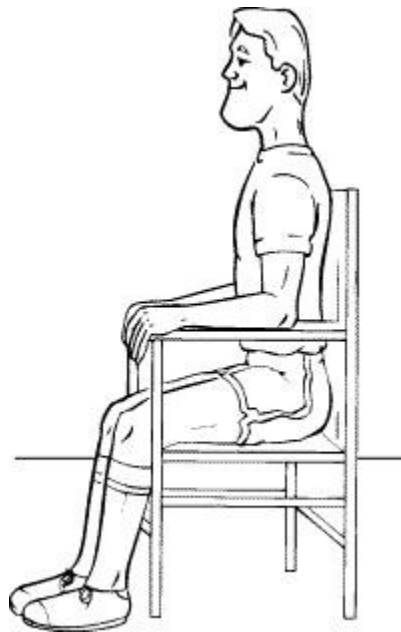
In this story, there was more than enough agitation to go around – touching everyone in proximity to Jesus' temper tantrum. Not a quiet moment is to be found. I imagine the merchants went home, kicked the dog, and swore at their wives and kids. Some bystanders were most certainly frightened by this interruption to their spiritual or religious desire to purchase a sacrificial animal. Some people in this ancient story were so angry that they began to plot Jesus' arrest and death.

To summarize: Intense emotional experiences affect our breathing patterns. This is the body's automatic internal process of self-regulation – and it helps the body regain its internal homeostasis.<sup>v</sup> Acute agitation and chronic stress interferes with the body's ability to normalize itself. Trauma, therefore, interferes with the body's stress regulatory mechanisms – of which the human breath is just one.

In addition, the phenomenon of interpersonal emotional contagion is usually at work in these interpersonal encounters. The experience of rage spreads; the experience of anxiety spreads; the experience of sadness spreads.<sup>vi</sup> So, too, however, can the experience of deep joy, contentment and happiness spread.

There are several ways to self-correct: The first is breath-work; the second is to become aware of our “should system”. The third is to learn to observe and to hear the monkey mind’s chatter and to self-correct it.

### **Self-Correct # One: Present-moment breath-work.**



**Step one:** Find a comfortable chair. Sit down and place your buttocks firmly but gently on the chair seat. Keep your back/spine straight. Put both feet sole-down on the floor. Uncross your arms and place your hands on your lap – palms up or palms down – or chair arms, whichever is most comfortable

**Step Two:** Bring your attention into the present moment.

**Step Three:** Observe your breath cycle. Do not change anything at all – just observe. See if you can locate the tiny pause at the end of the in-breath and the slightly longer pause at the end of the out-breath.

**Step four:** Learn a breath-work mantra by saying it out loud a few times: *I am breathing in. Pause. I am breathing out. Pause.* Obviously, you can’t do healing breath-work out loud. It is a very quiet internalized process of coordinating the thought *I am breathing in* with the act of breathing in.

**Step five:** Once you have a sense of your breath's cyclical rhythm, begin to breathe to the internalized mantra – now recited in your inner mind – a form of directed thinking. Since you can't be thinking *I am breathing in* at the same time you are thinking, *did I leave the stove burner on* – this is a method for beginning to gain control over random, intrusive, and/or unwanted thoughts.

**Note:** If (when) you find that your attention wanders or if (when) you find that intrusive thoughts occur, simply come back to the mantra. For a first time practice, give yourself the experience of ten or fifteen cycles of named in-breaths and out-breaths. Then do an inventory of your body's inner felt sense – what does your body feel like?<sup>vii</sup> Eastern philosophies – now translated into Western cultures – talk about the monkey mind – the mind that keeps interrupting and interfering with our attempts to focus. When the monkey mind starts its chatter, acknowledge its presence and return to counting breaths.<sup>viii</sup> I personally use a visual-kinesthetic image here – blowing away the unwanted thoughts like a small child blows away the seeds of a dandelion head on a warm sunny and breezy day – letting the seed tufts drift and float away while I return to paying attention to my breath cycle.

**Note:** At some point in the breathing cycle you may find yourself coughing. This is actually quite useful because you may be exercising parts of your lungs – the alveoli - that may not ordinarily get exercised.<sup>ix</sup>

**Note:** Doing mindful breath-work is to engage in a process of diaphragmatic breathing. To feel diaphragmatic breathing, put the palms of your hands, thumbs forward, over the place on your sides where your ribs end. Take an in-breath. Your belly should move – not your upper chest and shoulders. This is a process of following your breath – not pushing and tugging it. If you are a musician, for example with wind instruments or vocal music, you were taught to breathe with your diaphragm rather than your shoulders. In truth, we should all breathe this way.<sup>x</sup>

**Note:** I personally have learned to breathe in through my nose – with my tongue placed in the little groove behind my front two teeth. This has a secondary benefit of unclenching my jaw. I prefer breathing out with my lips only slightly apart. Over time I have learned to have a longer exhalation cycle than inhalation cycle. I routinely count my breath in and my

breath out. I think of this slightly elongated out-breath pause as *falling into the arms of the out-breath*. Physician Emmett Miller calls this a process of *deep healing*.

### **Self-Correct # Two: Engaging With the Internalized Should System**

Another very useful skill in quieting the body-mind-spirit is deliberate and mindful self-talk. One variation of this is seen in the new age movement's insistence upon self-affirmations. Hearing the mind say, *I am a total turd*, I can replace this with something like, *I am a unique individual and I am worthy of self-respect*.

This skill works best when it is truthful. The inner soft self usually knows when we are lying to ourselves or to others. I believe the inner watcher is always on duty. It is paying attention. It has to be watchful and attentive. It regulates our body's survival functions – for example, our body temperature. When we cut ourselves, it sends out the clotting cells without our conscious mind's instructions. It watches over us while we sleep.

Clinical psychologist Albert Ellis led the way here in the middle of the past century. In his insistence that every human being was both mortal and fallible, he urged his students to pay attention to their thoughts and to their "should system." When I think, for example, *I should be* or *others should be*, I have moved out of reality-based thinking. I have moved into judgmental and/or wishful-magical thinking.



Popeye, perhaps, best exemplifies what Ellis was advocating, *I yam what I yam and that's all what I yam*. This kind of self-awareness and self-knowledge is worth its price in gold.

I think about this issue, for example, when I read news articles about abusive church employees – *they should know better*. The implication is

wishful or magical thinking: *if a person knows better, he will behave better*. That's a fallacy. If we give up this kind of should thinking, we will be much more able to deal with the reality of what this individual or that individual actually did – not with our ideas about what they should have done or should not have done.

I read somewhere that criminal sociopaths do know the difference between right and wrong – they just don't give a damn. I don't know that this is true but it feels right-on to me. Engaging in *they should have known better* mind-chatter is to engage in wishful thinking. What is essential is to know that they did what they actually did. It is their actual behavior which matters not the behavior they should have done or should not have done.

If they engaged in criminal behavior, then that is the is-ness of the situation. If they victimized us, then that is the is-ness of the situation. In my opinion, based on my healing work to date, we are better off situating our responses to life in what I call is-ness (that which actually is) rather than should-ness (that which we believe should have happened but didn't or should not have happened but did).

When I catch myself engaged in “shouding” thoughts (eg; *I am an absolute turd. At my age I should know better than to do what I just did.*), I now interrupt my thoughts and say, *what I actually did was mean-spirited. The reality is that I behaved in a very mean way*. This allows me to self-other correct: (1) to be accountable for my behavior to the other person and (2) to forgive myself and (3) to stop the cycle of negative self-talk, eg; *I am one clueless, mean, nasty person and I should not be allowed to live* is a way to perpetuate our abusiveness towards the self and others.

Engaging in “should talk” allows me to wallow in my guilt or my inner sense of shame. It can also give me a false sense of entitlement – to behave badly. It can make me feel superior to others who are less than I am. I find should talk to be totally immobilizing. It allows me to stay totally pissed at someone else and to become totally immobilized or unrealistically aroused by my inner emotions.

Recognizing that I am both fallible and mortal has been immensely self-correcting in my tendency towards deep personal shame and other blaming.

Recognizing that others are also fallible and mortal allows me to manage my angers and rages at anyone who doesn't do what I think he or she "should" do. I don't have to like these people and I don't need to forgive their inexcusable behavior. But recognizing that they are fallible and mortal – just as I am – this allows me to avoid the trap of demonizing them.

Over the years I've become convinced that a sense of "is-ness" is much more empowering than a sense of "should-ness." Secondly, since compassion is important to me both in the sense of having compassion for others and having compassion for myself, is-ness allows me to move there much more readily and easily. I remind myself, when I am self-aware enough to do this, that I am mortal and fallible and so is everyone else. I remind myself that what now is matters more than what should have been but wasn't.

For example, surviving a life-threatening car accident at age thirty, my gratitude for life is always present. I am here now! That is what matters. Whatever residual wounds remain, and they are consequential wounds, I am alive and I both can and will continue to learn how to manage these ancient trauma wounds so they don't dominate my ongoing life; so they don't control me; so that I can learn how to manage them and have a good life. When my body hurts, it does me absolutely no good to rant about the driver who drove up and off ramp and plowed into the car in which I was a passenger. It serves no earthly good to hope that he is in hell for eternity. Blaming and "shoulding" others is, I have found a short cut to personal misery and unhappiness.

Holding others accountable is, therefore, an altogether different set of skills than blaming or doing should-talk. In the survivor and advocacy movements we need to talk about this difference. Should talk and blaming behaviors help no one. On the other hand, learning how to compassionately hold others accountable for harmful behavior is an essential skill.

Calming down my irritation or rage at others for not being and doing what they "should be" and "should do", I can ask my inner wisdom about what I need to do to order my own life, to live in interpersonal safety, and be compassionate with others. I, to speak personally, would much rather celebrate life and experience joy than to continuously re-enact my personal liturgy of being pissed at life and my wounds. This is a choice I can actually



make in the present moment. My morning mantra – prayer if you will – is to thank the spirit of life for my life. Becoming awake and aware – that I am still alive when I “should have” died at age 30 – brings a swell of gratitude to life for my life. Do I do this perfectly? NO! It is a daily work of paying attention and working intentionality to become aware and to fill my days with gratitude. There are definitely days when I am not grateful and days when I do not experience joy. But/and I keep working at it.

Gratitude for life and for breath has become a daily spiritual practice for me. It heads the list of my annual New Year’s resolutions and has done so for many years: celebrate life; celebrate breath.

Sometimes the answer to my questions about life and my experiences of human relatedness is that specific others are toxic to me – for whatever reason – and I need to move as far away as possible from interacting with them.<sup>xi</sup> In other situations, I discover that I need to confront someone and to hold them accountable in real time for the harm they have done and are doing. In still other situations, I may decide to work for wholeness inside the relationship – no matter how difficult that work might be. I will, however, never willingly and knowingly give my consent to abusiveness inside the human commons. New age spiritual teacher and poet Mark Nepo’s advice – and I paraphrase – is that in situations of human betrayal, we need to get the self to a safe place and only after we are safe can we do the needed psychological, emotional, and spiritual work of healing that needs to be done.<sup>xii</sup>

### **Self-Correct # Three: Listening to the Monkey Mind**

This skill involves learning how to self-correct the mind’s misconceptions; how to deconstruct its hostilities towards the self and towards the other.

I want to be more explicit here. Individuals who have a history of trauma often play and re-play the trauma in their minds. This is a quite different process than creating a truthful and healing narrative of what individuals experienced. The former narrative re-traumatizes; the second is essential healing work.

Let me try to re-create a bit of inner monkey mind chatter:

*# 1: The asshole who did this to me deserves to spend major time in hell. I hope someone rapes him someday so he knows what he did to me. If I had the brains, the money, and the skill, I would just take him down and bury him at sea. I would make him suffer just like he made me suffer.*

Becoming aware of the violence of these deeply personal – and usually unspoken - thoughts, I am appalled.

*# 2: I may create vast dramas of violation and revenge in my mind – usually just before I fall asleep – in which I am violated or destroyed. These narratives may come associated with night terrors. These narratives begin spontaneously without me paying attention. The stuff of their construction permeates our culture with its violent media.*

Becoming aware of these spontaneous thoughts and fantasies, I know this is not what I want at all.

Years ago in a workshop for the Institute of Noetic Sciences, anthropologist-new spiritual teacher Angeles Arrien taught us a simple way of managing these intense, intrusive, and often traumatic inner dramas. I have used it since then. It provides me with a way of seeking and restoring my inner equilibrium. It is not magic – it won't cure all ills. But I will pass it along.

Becoming aware of these intensely negative inner fantasy narratives which usually involve violence, I pause to hear my inner voice and then I speak to it – out loud if I can and quietly if I can't: *That is a narrative that never needs to happen. This is a fantasy that never needs to become real.* Usually this direct intervention places a roadblock. If I am in a place where I can do this safely, I begin to count the in-breath and the out-breath – restoring the body-self to wholeness and to equilibrium.

New age spiritual teacher Lynn Andrews in her book *Medicine Woman*<sup>xiii</sup> has the Native American shaman-teacher Agnes Whistling Elk offer a spiritual teaching about fear – and I have found this to be immensely helpful in dealing with the monkey mind. Agnes, at one point, when Lynn is overwhelmed by fear at what might happen to her, says, and I paraphrase from memory, *stop calling your fears, Lynn. Stop making space for them. Your enemy will hear you calling him.*

When I am most afraid – without a visible reason - inside the monkey mind, I hear this wisdom and I begin to self-talk: *stop calling your fears; stop calling your enemies to your side*. As I do this, I mentally construct a strong medicine shield to protect me from others' desires to harm me. I also scan the external world to see if there is something realistic to be afraid of and if there is something in real time and space I can do and need to do to protect myself. The question is simple: did my watching mind notice something dangerous in my environment and seek to get my attention or is this the monkey mind engaging in malicious mischief?

## **Summary**

These three self-correct tools are useful ways we can work with trauma in our lives. If we begin to study our responses with as much objectivity as we can muster, we slowly begin to create a way out of the enchanted forest of traumatic experience. We slowly begin to sweep the debris out of our lives so that we can become accessible to healing. At times, we may decide we need help in doing this work and we search for an informed therapist. In my own life – in very troubled and troubling times, I have found therapy to be essential. At other times, I can use informed self-talk to help myself. It is a balancing act.

Having truthful, compassionate, and loving friends helps too. They can help provide us with a container for re-experiencing life as a blessing rather than as a curse. They can help us rebuild our trust in other people and in life itself.

NOTE: If you are under medical care for a chronic or acute respiratory disorder, check with him or her before beginning to do these exercises.

NOTE: If you are currently engaged in psychotherapy for trauma, check in with your therapist before beginning to do these exercises.

iEndnotes

Source: <http://www.whats-your-sign.com/symbolic-dandelion-meanings.html>

ii Guarneri, M. op. cit., p. 31.

*Even the simplest breath work exercises produce instant results. Breathing controls our autonomic nervous system. When we take a deep breath in, heart rates increase, and when we exhale, our heart rate decreases. However, if we breathe in a cyclical rhythm, our autonomic system stabilizes (p. 31).*

iii Wikipedia, *Breathing*: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Breathing>

iv Wikipedia, *Cleansing the Temple*: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cleansing\\_of\\_the\\_Temple](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cleansing_of_the_Temple)

v Wikipedia, Homeostasis: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Homeostasis>: see also Wikipedia, The Autonomic Nervous System: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Autonomic\\_nervous\\_system](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Autonomic_nervous_system)

vi Barsade, S. (Undated). *Faster than a Speeding Text: "Emotional Contagion" at Work*. Retrieve from <https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/the-science-work/201410/faster-speeding-text-emotional-contagion-work>

vii *What Is a Felt Sense?* Good Therapy.org.  
<http://www.goodtherapy.org/blog/psychpedia/felt-sense>

viii There are numerous ways to work with your breath: Some physicians and psychologists recommend counting. In-breath to a count of five, pause, out-breath to a count of five, pause, and so forth. I am reminded of clinical psychologist Sheldon Kopp – a clinician's clinician – who wrote that he could never get past two. There are many days when that's describes my personal reality. My always-present, mischief-making monkey mind kicks in before three. His advice in this kind of situation: *keep returning to one*. For someone who is a compulsive – maybe even an obsessive competitor (if only with myself) *returning to one feels like failure*. I don't need to do that to myself. I don't need, therefore, to shame myself in attempting to enter the quiet of the present moment. Berating oneself is another tool of the monkey mind to keep us from focusing and moving into the present moment. See Kopp, S. (1977). *Back to One: A Practical Guide for Psychotherapists*. Palo Alto, CA: Science and Behavior Books.

ix Alveoli of the lungs. <http://hyperphysics.phy-astr.gsu.edu/hbase/ptens2.html>

x In her memoir, *Stand Up Straight and Sing*, the American opera star, Jessye Norman devotes an entire chapter of her book to the importance of doing proper breath work. Norman, J. (2014). *Stand Up Straight and Sing: The Inner Voice; the Making of a Singer*. New York, NY: Houghton-Mifflin.

xi LeShan, L. (1994). *Cancer as a Turning Point: A Handbook for People with Cancer, Their Families, and Health Professionals*. New York, NY: Plume Press.

xii Nepo, M. (2016). *The One Life We're Given: Finding the Wisdom that Waits in Your Heart*. New York, NY: Atria Books.

xiii Andrews, L. (2006). *Medicine Woman*. New York, NY: Tarcher-Perigree-Penguin Press.