

The Practice of Presence: Meditations on Being Fully Present

Joan Halifax Roshi

Opening to Presence

No matter what kind of activities we engage in, our attitude of openness and inclusiveness is essential as a basis for our working with dying, death, caring, and grieving. We aspire to develop openness to situations as they are by practicing awareness, acceptance, and presence. We learn to relate to people and experiences without strategy or manipulation. We aspire to experience everything as totally as we can, not withdrawing from the vividness of any experience.

In opening to living and dying without defending ourselves, we liberate a tremendous amount of energy. When we let go of our reference points, we open ourselves to a new way of being and perceiving. This is the realm of not-knowing. Although it can be frightening to be this transparent to life, we now have the resources with which to welcome fear, to be present for it, and to transform it through our awareness. In this way we break the habitual patterns that we have used to defend ourselves against feeling fear. This is how we heal.

Simplicity and directness are doorways to this open state. Rather than continuing to use concepts to distance and protect ourselves from our experience, we relax into the present moment.

As we rest in the moment, ambitions, desires, aspirations also melt like a candle. We live with the continuum of spontaneity as our guide. There is nothing lacking, nowhere to go, nothing to do, nothing extra. Each moment is unique, and each thing

is unique, interacting with a continual pattern of change and interconnectedness.

This is an ordinary state. I call it “no big deal dharma,” simply everyday life. Enlightenment is not separate from our everyday life. It is nothing special. With this kind of open and spacious awareness, we are complete, and this moment is complete. There is nothing special to realize, no transcendent reality to achieve, nothing outside of what is unfolding in any given moment.

Contemplative practice is a completely natural activity. We can live in this straightforward way with an uncorrected state of mind. There is no need to edit our reality. Present, accepting, relaxed, and effortless, we can sit with things just as they are. Although it certainly helps to have become trained in this process through sitting meditation, we need not reserve a particular time or place, or produce a special state of mind, in order to do it. Nor do we have to force the experience on ourselves. When self-consciousness, effort, or unusual mental experiences arise, simply observe, accept, and let them go. Notice, relax, and let go. The mind of not-knowing is simple, straightforward, open, and fresh. This kind of mind is like clouds in the sky, water flowing, a light wind; nothing obstructs it.

Meditation: Setting the Field for Presence

In the practice that follows, we reconsider some of the basic truths in seeing reality directly and practicing presence. We take refuge in the awakened nature of all beings, the ocean of wisdom and compassion, and the interdependence of all creations. We also rededicate ourselves to helping free others from suffering. Then we relax with openness and acceptance.

Let your body settle and gently bring your attention to your breath. Relax and let yourself be aware of the flow of thoughts, feelings, and sensations without getting involved with them. Begin to calm the mind. When you find yourself clinging to thoughts, return to the breath, without feeling pressure. Relax and continue with this for a while.

Having settled into your body, please remember how precious this human life is. During this life you have encountered so much that has been helpful, including wonderful teachers, the possibility of having a spiritual life, and teachings that inspire and guide you. Many people have helped you, and you have had the joy of helping others. Although you have suffered, you have also had many moments in your life that have been good. Please appreciate the preciousness of your life, what you might be able to realize through it, and how you may be able to help others as well.

Now contemplate the truth of impermanence. Look at your mind. Every thought and feeling that you have ever had has changed in one way or another. Your body, too, is constantly changing. One day it will die. Buddha, Christ, Muhammad—all the great teachers of the past have died. Everything in the phenomenal world will change and one day, sooner or later, will cease to exist. Impermanence is real. Death is inevitable.

Now contemplate the truth of cause and effect. You yourself are a result of an endless chain of causes and effects involving your parents and an endless chain of ancestors stretching back through time. Before your human ancestors, there were animal and plant ancestors. And before the ancestors of ape and blue-

green algae, there were the elements. This chain of cause and effect is endless. Your relations are endless.

Consider the truth of suffering—birth, old age, sickness, death, getting what you do not want, not getting what you do want, and losing that which you cherish. So often you have felt that this or that will make you happy, will finally bring you peace. You might have worked very hard for these things—a good relationship, a nice house, a satisfying job. Yet sooner or later you will lose all these things. They themselves can also cause you to suffer. Consider the truth of ill-being.

Your past actions are like a shadow that follows you everywhere. Your future is also being laid down at this very moment. Consider that kindness and compassion give rise to good effects, and aggression and greed give rise to suffering. Do what you can to decrease suffering for yourself and others. Realize that you can purify your life by doing good for others and by atoning for the suffering you have caused yourself and others. You can transform this suffering into wisdom. Realize the truth of consequentiality.

Consider the great benefit of being free of suffering. Contemplate what it would be to live a life without fear. Know that deathless enlightenment is here at this very moment. Can you relax your grip on what you think is real and open your life to whatever arises? Can you see through the illusion of the past, present, and future? Can you let go of reference points of solidity, identity, and separateness? Can you relax and open to things as they are? Can you plunge into life at this very moment and accept and learn from all of it? Time runs like water through your fingers. Let confidence arise in the truth of the present moment. Be there for it.

Let yourself relax. Let your breath sweep your mind clear. Invite your body to settle. In this clear space allow yourself to explore the experience of seeing. Ask yourself, "Who is it that is seeing? Is it the eye that sees? Is it the mind that sees? Where is this mind that sees? Is it awareness that sees? Where is this awareness that sees?" The one who sees cannot be found, no matter where we look. The eye is simply how we see, not who sees. The mind cannot be found anywhere. Awareness and emptiness are inseparable. Relax as you experience this focused awareness, sense of inquiry, and presence.

Meditation: Open Presence

Practice being present for everything that you perceive. The mind can be compared to a clear mirror in which things come and go. All perceptions are appearances within the mind. The reflective quality of the mind is like that of a mirror. The basic nature of the mirror and the mind is not changed by what they reflect. The mind and the mirror are empty and clear. Without effort allow this calm and clear mind to be.

Rest in the intrinsic awareness of the mirror-mind. Let the reflections of appearances pass. Allow thoughts or feelings to liberate themselves. Notice them, relax, and let go.

The mind is perfect and complete as it is, even though we do not see it thus. Practice allowing things to be as they are, without making up stories about them. Be simple and direct. There is nowhere to go and nothing to do. Practice this simple, direct, pure, inclusive presence.

Now again relax completely, your awareness gently on your breath. Let the experience of openness and nongrasping arise. Be with this clear, still, open spaciousness. Relax and be still.

Imagine that you are gazing into an open sky. Be fully with this openness and spaciousness. Not grasping at any thought, merge the perceiver with this openness. Let yourself be pure awareness and clarity. The body very open, mixing the mind with space, please gaze into space, not grasping onto anything. Let all thoughts, feelings, and sensations pass through the field of the mind without grasping, rejecting, or analyzing. Return to spaciousness and the breath. Coming home to this spaciousness, each breath is a release. This outbreath is a surrender as you abide in this sense of spaciousness. Rest here for as long as you can.

Now bring your attention gently back to your whole body. Continue to gaze, holding on to nothing. Keep your gaze open, simple, with a sense of spaciousness and simplicity.

You can practice bringing the sense of spaciousness with you, wherever you are, whatever you're doing. Maintain a feeling of spaciousness and simplicity. If the mind begins to fixate, notice it and return to the breath. Also, let your awareness be in the eyes with a simple gaze of inclusivity and nongrasping.

Practice mixing your mind with the sky. Try to keep the sense of openness intact no matter what you are doing.

Allow thoughts to pass from the mind as the clouds move in the sky with nothing obstructing them. Practice being open, relaxed, and present for everything just as it is. Enjoy this uncorrected state of mind. Relaxing the mind and body, please remind yourself that there is nothing outside of this pure

awareness. Please then dedicate your heart and mind to helping others discover this path to freedom from suffering.

As the great Tibetan teacher Dudjom Rinpoche said: “This fresh awareness of the present moment that transcends all thoughts . . . is itself that Primordial Awareness which is self-originated pure presence or awareness. This is the direct introduction to one’s own nature. Whatever phenomena may manifest, all of them represent the potency of one’s own intrinsic awareness. Since there is nothing that goes beyond just this, one should continue in the state of this singular and unique awareness. Therefore, one must discover directly this unique state, and there exists nothing other than this.”

Meditation: Presence in the Experience of Death and Life

Lie down on the floor and let the body be comfortable. Close your eyes, and relax deeply, letting the mind and body settle. Imagine that you have just died. The mind has opened to reveal what is underneath: immaculate and spacious non-dual presence. Stay in this relaxed, open, translucent state of consciousness. The waves of the mind have ceased, and in the stillness of the mind, luminosity arises.

Bring spaciousness, clear luminescence into your visual field. Visualize a dawn sky that is free of sunlight and moonlight. The sky is brilliant and clear, still and vast. Identify with this light. Not grasping at any thought. Merge the perceiver of this clear light with the clear light itself so there is simply pure awareness, clarity, and luminescent space. Abide in this nature of mind.

Allow yourself to relax deeper and deeper into silent spaciousness, free of thought, free of feeling. You have passed over. You are free. You have become space, bliss, luminosity, and clarity. Merge with this vision. Maintain it as long as you can. This is the nature of your mind, completely immaculate. It is who you really are.

Be with this for as long as you can and notice when thoughts, feelings, or sensations arise. Let them go. Let yourself be open, gazing, the body very open, mixing the mind with space. Do not attach to thoughts, feelings or sensations as they arise. Just let them pass, returning to spaciousness and the breath.

Stay in this spaciousness, in this relaxed, open, translucent, spacious, non-dual consciousness. Your mind is mixing with the empty sky. Abide in this nature of mind. This is the moment of death. Find this place, as you relax deeper and deeper into silence. Free of thoughts, free of feelings, just pure space and openness.

You have become space. You have become bliss, translucent space, clarity, and empty space. Let yourself merge with this vision. Maintain it as long as you possibly can. You are one with this original purity. Practice being this. It is there all of the time? This is the nature of your mind, its ground completely immaculate.

It appears to us when we fall asleep; it appears to us in states of deep practice; it appears to us when our mind has stopped in the course of our meditation practice. The mind has opened to reveal what is underneath, an immaculate and spacious presence. The waves of the mind have ceased and in the stillness of the mind you can look into its depths, and from the depths luminosity arises.

Rest for some time in this openness.

When you are ready, open your eyes and gaze into space. Keep your awareness in the eyes—gazing, relaxed, and open. Expand your awareness to include the breath. Let your mind mix this sense of spaciousness with ease and gentleness.

Bring your awareness to your body. Let your breath, your mind, your body, and space become one. Open to a sense of spaciousness and lightness in this body. Float in it, holding on to nothing. Mix your mind with spaciousness.

Imagine the sky. Your mind and the sky are not separate. They are radiant, clear, pure, original, unsullied, easy, vast, simple, luminous, infinite.

When you are ready, in this state of relaxed and open mind, easy embodiment, slowly sit up and observe what happens to your mind. Observe the horizon of your mind shifting as you change your position.

Can you keep the horizon big, or are you faced with a shrinking horizon? Notice what is happening. See if you can sustain the sense of spaciousness, of ease and of goodness, of simplicity as your posture changes. Stay in the rhythm of the breath; keep this practice of your breath steady and even.

Lift your gaze, if it is not already lifted, so that you are in this practice of transparency, an open, serene state, deeply accepting each moment, things as they are. There is nowhere to go, nothing to do.

Call yourself into this practice of coming home, into openness and presence, very relaxed yet concentrated, gentle vividness.

Everything is quite clear. Continue to gaze up, upholding yourself, able to be with each moment just as it is.

If the horizon begins to contract, see whether you can return to the spaciousness. Practice returning. Practice opening. Another contraction will set in. Learn to open spontaneously. Returning to the steadiness of the breath, sustain this openness.

You are completing this practice sustaining the openness and clarity. In this openness please bring to your awareness the aspiration that whatever you have learned may help other beings. Feel the shift in the mind ground when you focus on this aspiration. Let the world enter you.

© 2010 by Upaya Institute, www.upaya.org