



PARENTS AND FRIENDS FOR



CHILDREN'S SURVIVAL

STOP THE MADNESS

FOR CHILDREN, FOR THEIR CHILDREN, FOR THEIR CHILDREN

AMERICANS ON THE MOVE

# Fellowship

July/August 1982

# TAKING HEART

## SPIRITUAL EXERCISES FOR SOCIAL ACTIVISTS



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To heal our society, our psyches must heal as well. The military, social and environmental dangers that threaten us do not come from sources outside the human heart; they are reflections of it, mirroring the fears, greeds and hostilities that separate us from ourselves and each other. For our sanity and our survival, therefore, it appears necessary to engage in spiritual as well as social change, to merge the inner with the outer paths. But how, in practical terms, do we go about this?

Haunted by the desperate needs of our time and beset, as many of us are, by more commitments than we can easily carry, we can wonder where to find the time and energy for spiritual disciplines. Few of us feel free to take to the cloister or the *zafu* to seek personal transformation.

Fortunately, we do not need to withdraw from the world, or spend long hours in solitary prayer or meditation, to begin to wake up to the spiritual power within us. The activities and encounters of our daily lives can serve as the occasion for that kind of discovery. I would like to share some simple exercises that can permit that to happen.

I often share these mental practices in the course of my workshops. Participants who have found them healing, energizing and easy to use in their daily activities have urged me to make them more widely available. I have been reluctant to put them in writing; they are best shared orally, in personal interaction. This is especially true of these forms of what I call "social mysticism," where the actual physical presence of fellow beings is used to help us break through to deeper levels of spiritual awareness.

The four exercises offered here—on death, compassion, mutual power and mutual recognition—happen to

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be adapted from the Buddhist tradition. As part of our planetary heritage, they belong to us all. No belief system is necessary, only a readiness to attend to the immediacy of one's own experiencing. They will be most useful if read slowly with a quiet mind (a few deep breaths help), and if put directly into practice in the presence of others.

### MEDITATION ON DEATH

Most spiritual paths begin with the recognition of the transiency of human life. Medieval Christians honored this in the mystery play of *Everyman*. Don Juan, the Yaqui sorcerer, taught that the enlightened warrior walks with death at his shoulder. To confront and accept the inevitability of our dying releases us from attachments, frees us to live boldly, alert and appreciative.

An initial meditation on the Buddhist path involves reflection on the two-fold fact that: "death is certain" and "the time of death, uncertain." In our world today, the thermonuclear bomb, serving in a sense as a spiritual teacher, does that meditation for us, for we all know now that we can die together at any moment, without warning. When we deliberately let the reality of that possibility surface in our consciousness, it can be painful, of course, but it also helps us rediscover some fundamental truths about life. It jolts us awake to life's vividness, its miraculous quality as something given unearned, heightening our awareness of its beauty and the uniqueness of each object, each being.

As an occasional practice in daily life: *Look at the person you encounter (stranger or friend). Let the realization arise in you that this person may die in a nuclear war. Keep breathing. Observe that face, unique, vulnerable ... those eyes still can see; they are not empty sockets ... the skin is still intact ... Become aware of your desire, as it arises, that this person be spared such suffering and horror, feel the strength of that desire ... keep breathing ... Let the possibility arise in your consciousness that this may be the person you happen to be with*

*when you die ... that face the last you see ... that hand the last you touch ... it might reach out to help you then, to comfort, to give water. Open to the feelings for this person that surface in you with the awareness of this possibility. Open to the levels of caring and connection it reveals in you.*

## BREATHING THROUGH

Our time assails us with painful information about threats to our future and the present suffering of our fellow beings. We hear and read of famine, torture, poisonous wastes, the arms race, animals and plants dying off. Out of self-protection, we all put up some degree of resistance to this information; there is fear that it might overwhelm us if we let it in, that we might shatter under its impact or be mired in despair. Many of us block our awareness of the pain of our world because our culture has conditioned us to expect instant solutions: "I don't think about nuclear war (or acid rain) because there is nothing I can do about it." With the value our society places on optimism, our contemplation of such fearful problems can cause us to feel isolated, and even a bit crazy. So we tend to close them out—and thereby go numb.

Clearly, the distressing data must be dealt with if we are to respond and survive. But how to do this without falling apart? In my own struggle with despair, it seemed at first that I must either block out the terrible information or be shattered by it. I wondered if there was not a third alternative to going numb or going crazy. The practice of "breathing through" helped me find it.

Basic to most spiritual traditions, as well as to the systems view of the world, is the recognition that we are not separate, isolated entities, but integral and organic parts of the vast web of life. As such, we are like neurons in a neural net, through which flow currents of awareness of what is happening to us, as a species and as a planet. In that context, the pain we feel for our world is a living testimony to our interconnectedness with it. If we deny this pain, we become like blocked and atrophied neurons, deprived of life's flow and weakening the larger body in which we take being. But if we let it move through us, we affirm our belonging; our collective awareness increases. We can open to the pain of the world in confidence that it can neither shatter nor isolate us, for we are not objects that can break. We are resilient patterns within a vaster web of knowing.

Because we have been conditioned to view ourselves as separate, competitive and therefore fragile entities, it takes practice to relearn this kind of resilience. A good way to begin is by practicing simple openness, as in the exercise of "breathing through," adapted from an ancient Buddhist meditation for the development of compassion.

*Relax. Center on your breathing ... visualize your breath as a stream flowing up through your nose, down through windpipe, lungs. Take it down through your lungs and, picturing a hole in the bottom of your heart, visualize the breath-stream passing through your heart and out through that hole to reconnect with the larger web of life around you. Let the breath-stream, as it passes through you, appear as one loop within that vast web,*

*connecting you with it ... keep breathing ...*

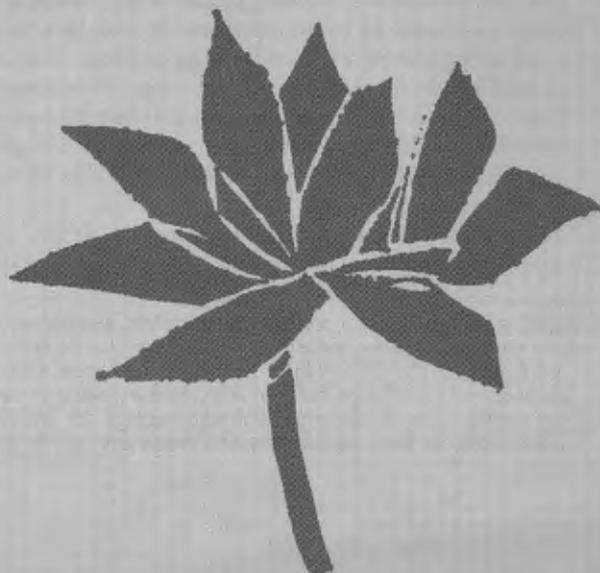
*Now open your awareness to the suffering that is present in the world. Drop for now all defenses and open to your knowledge of that suffering. Let it come as concretely as you can ... concrete images of your fellow being in pain and need, in fear and isolation, in prisons, hospitals, tenements, hunger camps ... no need to strain for these images, they are present to you by virtue of our interexistence. Relax and just let them surface, breathe them in ... the vast and countless hardships of our fellow humans, and of our animal brothers and sisters as well, as they swim the seas and fly the air of this ailing planet. Breathe in that pain like a dark stream, up through your nose, down through your trachea, lungs and heart, and out again into the world net ... you are asked to do nothing for now, but let it pass through your heart ... keep breathing ... be sure that stream flows through and out again; don't hang on to the pain ... surrender it for now to the healing resources of life's vast web ...*

*With Shantideva, the Buddhist saint, we can say, "Let all sorrows ripen in me." We help them ripen by passing them through our hearts ... making good rich compost out of all that grief ... so we can learn from it, enhancing our larger, collective knowing ...*

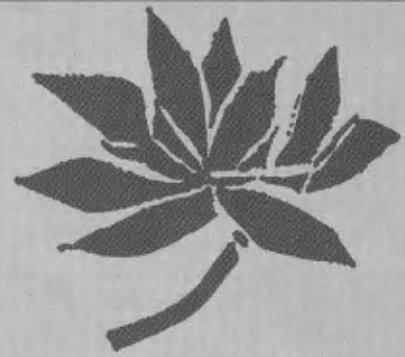
*If you experience an ache in the chest, a pressure within the rib case, that is all right. The heart that breaks open can contain the whole universe. Your heart is that large. Trust it. Keep breathing.*

This guided meditation serves to introduce the process of breathing through, which, once experienced, becomes useful in daily life in the many situations that confront us with painful information. By breathing through the bad news, rather than bracing ourselves against it, we can let it strengthen our sense of belonging in the larger web of being. It helps us remain alert and open, whether reading the newspaper, receiving criticism, or simply being present to a person who suffers.

For activists working for peace and justice, and those dealing most directly with the griefs of our time, the practice helps prevent burnout. Reminding us of the collective nature of both our problems and our power, it offers a healing measure of humility. It can also save us from self-righteousness. For when we can take in our world's pain, accepting it as the price of our caring, we can let it inform our acts without needing to inflict it as a punishment on others who are, at the moment, less involved.



## THE GREAT BALL OF MERIT



Compassion, which is grief in the grief of others, is but one side of the coin. The other side is joy in the joy of others—which in Buddhism is called *muditha*. To the extent that we allow ourselves to identify with the sufferings of other beings, we can identify with their strengths as well. This is very important for our own sense of adequacy and resilience, because we face a time of great challenge that demands of us more commitment, endurance and courage than we can ever dredge up out of our individual supply. We can learn to draw on the other neurons in the net, and to view them, in a grateful and celebrative fashion, as so much “money in the bank.”

The concept here resembles the Christian notion of grace. Recognizing our own limitations, we cease to rely solely on individual strength and open up to the power that is beyond us and can flow through us. The Buddhist “Ball of Merit” is useful in helping us see that this power or grace is not dependent upon belief in God, but operates as well through our fellow beings. In so doing, it lets us connect with each other more fully and appreciatively than we usually do. It is most helpful to those of us who have been socialized in a competitive society, based on a win-lose notion of power. “The more you have, the less I have.” Conditioned by that patriarchal paradigm of power, we can fall prey to the stupidity of viewing the strengths or good fortune of others as a sign of our own inadequacy or deprivation. The Great Ball of Merit is a healthy corrective to envy. It brings us home, with a vast sense of ease, to our capacity for mutual enjoyment.

The practice takes two forms. The one closer to the ancient Buddhist meditation is this:

*Relax and close your eyes, relax into your breathing. Open your awareness to the fellow beings who share with you this planet-time ... in this room ... this neighborhood ... this town ... open to all those in this country ... and in other lands ... let your awareness encompass all beings living now in your world. Opening now to all time as well, let your awareness encompass all beings who ever lived ... of all races and creeds and walks of life, rich, poor, kings and beggars, saints and sinners ... like successive mountain ranges, the vast vistas of these fellow beings present themselves to your mind's eye ... Now open yourself to the knowledge that in each of these innumerable lives some act of merit was performed. No matter how stunted or deprived the life, there was a gesture of generosity, a gift of love, an act of valor or self-sacrifice ... on the battlefield or workplace, hospital or home ... from each of these beings in their endless multitudes arose actions of courage, kindness, of teaching and healing. Let yourself see these manifold and immeasurable acts of merit ... as they arise in the vistas of your inner eye, sweep them together ... sweep them into a pile in front of you ... use your hands ... pile them up ... pile them into a heap ... pat them into a ball. It is the Great Ball of Merit ... hold it and weigh it in your hands ... rejoice in it, knowing that no act of goodness is ever lost. It remains ever and always a present resource ... a resource for the transformation of life ... and now, with jubilation and gratitude, you turn that great ball ... turn it over ... over ... into the healing of our world.*

As we can learn from modern science and picture in the holographic model of reality, our lives interpenetrate. In the fluid tapestry of space-time, there is at root no distinction between self and other. The acts and intentions of others are like seeds that can germinate and bear fruit through our own lives, as we take them into awareness and dedicate, or “turn over,” that awareness to our empowerment. Thoreau, Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Dorothy Day, and the nameless heroes and heroines of our own day, all can be part of our Ball of Merit, on which we can draw for inspiration and endurance. Other traditions feature notions similar to this, such as the “cloud of witnesses” of which St. Paul spoke, or the Treasury of Merit in the Catholic Church.

The second, more workaday, version of the Ball of Merit meditation helps us open to the powers of others. It is in direct contrast to the commonly accepted, patriarchal notion of power as something personally owned and exerted over others. The exercise prepares us to bring expectant attention to our encounters with other beings, to view them with fresh openness and curiosity as to how they can enhance our Ball of Merit. We can play this inner game with someone opposite us on the bus or across the bargaining table. It is especially useful when dealing with a person with whom we may be in conflict.

*What does this person add to my Great Ball of Merit? What gifts of intellect can enrich our common store? What reserves of stubborn endurance can she or he offer? What flights of fancy or powers of love lurk behind those eyes? What kindness or courage hides in those lips, what healing in those hands?*

*Then, as with the breathing-through exercise, we open ourselves to the presence of these strengths, inhaling our awareness of them. As our awareness grows, we experience our gratitude for them and our capacity to enhance and partake ...*

Often we let our perceptions of the powers of others make us feel inadequate. Alongside an eloquent colleague, we can feel inarticulate; in the presence of an athlete we can feel weak and clumsy. In the process, we can come to resent both ourself and the other person. In the light of the Great Ball of Merit, however, the gifts and good fortunes of others appear not as judgments, put-downs or competing challenges, but as resources we can honor and take pleasure in. We can learn to play detective, spying out treasures for the enhancement of life from even the unlikeliest material. Like air and sun and water, they form part of our common good.

In addition to releasing us from the mental cramp of envy, this spiritual practice—or game—offers two other rewards. One is pleasure in our own acuity, as our merit-detecting ability improves. The second is the response of others, who—while totally ignorant of the game we are playing—sense something in our manner that invites them to move more openly into the person they can be.

## LEARNING TO SEE EACH OTHER

This exercise is derived from the Buddhist practice of the Brahmaviharas; it is also known as the Four Abodes of the Buddha, which are lovingkindness, compassion, joy in the joy of others, and equanimity. Adapted for use in a social context, it helps us to see each other more truly and experience the depths of our interconnections.

In workshops, I offer this as a guided meditation, with participants sitting in pairs facing each other. At its close, I encourage them to proceed to use it, or any portion they like, as they go about the business of their daily lives. It is an excellent antidote to boredom, when our eye falls on another person, say on the subway. It charges that idle movement with beauty and discovery. It also is useful when dealing with people whom we are tempted to dislike or disregard; it breaks open our accustomed ways of viewing them. When used like this, as a meditation-in-action, one does not, of course, gaze long and deeply into the other's eyes, as in the guided exercise. A seemingly casual glance is enough.

The guided, group form goes like this:

*Sit in pairs. Face each other. Stay silent. Take a couple of deep breaths, centering yourself and exhaling tension. Look into each other's eyes. If you feel discomfort or an urge to laugh or look away, just note that embarrassment with patience and gentleness toward yourself and come back, when you can, to your partner's eyes. You may never see this person again: the opportunity to behold the uniqueness of this particular human being is given to you now.*

*As you look into this being's eyes, let yourself become aware of the powers that are there ... open yourself to awareness of the gifts and strengths and the potentialities in this being ... Behind those eyes are unmeasured reserves of ingenuity and endurance, wit and wisdom. There are gifts there, of which this person her/himself is unaware. Consider what these untapped powers can do for the healing of our planet and the relishing of our common life ... As you consider that, let yourself become aware of your desire that this person be free from fear. Let yourself experience how much you want this being to be free from anger ... and free from greed ... and free from sorrow ... and the causes of suffering. Know that what you are now experiencing is the great lovingkindness. It is good for building a world.*

*Now, as you look into those eyes, let yourself become aware of the pain that is there. There are sorrows accumulated in that life's journey ... There are failures and losses, griefs and disappointments beyond the telling. Let yourself open to them, open to that pain ... to hurts that this person may never have shared with another being. What you are now experiencing is the great compassion. It is good for the healing of our world.*

*As you look into those eyes, open to the thought of how good it would be to make common cause ... consider how ready you might be to work together ... to take risks in a joint venture ... imagine the zest of that, the excitement and laughter of engaging together on a common project ... acting boldly and trusting each other. As you open to that possibility, what you open to is the great*

*wealth: the pleasure in each other's powers, the joy in each other's joy.*

*Lastly, let your awareness drop deep, deep within you like a stone, sinking below the level of what words or acts can express ... breathe deeply and quietly ... open your consciousness to the deep web of relationship that underlies and interweaves all experience, all knowing. It is the web of life in which you have taken being and in which you are supported. Out of that vast web you cannot fall ... no stupidity or failure, no personal inadequacy, can ever sever you from that living web. For that is what you are ... and what has brought you into being ... feel the assurance of that knowledge. Feel the great peace ... rest in it. Out of that great peace, we can venture everything. We can trust. We can act.*

In doing this exercise we realize that we do not have to be particularly noble or saintlike in order to wake up to the power of our oneness with other beings. In our time, that simple awakening is the gift the bomb holds for us.

For all its horror and stupidity, the Bomb is also the manifestation of an awesome spiritual truth—the truth about the hell we create for ourselves when we cease to learn how to love. Saints, mystics and prophets throughout the ages saw that law; now *all* can see it and none can escape its consequences. So we are caught now in a narrow place where we realize that Moses, Lao-Tzu, the Buddha, Jesus and our own inner hearts were right all along; and we are as scared and frantic as cornered rats, and as dangerous. But the Bomb, if we let it, can turn that narrow cul-de-sac into a birth canal, pressing and pushing us through the dark pain of it, until we are delivered into ... what? Love seems too weak a word. It is, as St. Paul said, "the glory that shall be revealed in us." It stirs in us now.

For us to regard the Bomb (or the dying seas, the poisoned air) as a monstrous injustice to us would suggest that we never took seriously the injunction to love. Perhaps we thought all along that Gautama and Jesus were kidding; or their teachings meant only for saints. But now we see, as an awful revelation, that we are *all* called to be saints—not good necessarily, or pious or devout—but saints in the sense of just loving each other. One wonders what terrors this knowledge must hold that we fight it so, and flee from it in such pain. Can it be that the Bomb, by which we can extinguish all life, can tell us this? Can force us to face the terrors of love? Can be the occasion for our birth?

It is in that possibility that we can take heart. Even in confusion and fear, with all our fatigues and petty faults, we can let that awareness work in and through our lives. Such simple exercises as those offered here can help us do that, and to begin to see ourselves and each other with fresh eyes.

Let me close with the same suggestion that closes our workshops. It is a practice that is corollary to the earlier death meditation, where we recognize that the person we meet may die in a nuclear war. Look at the next person you see. It may be lover, child, co-worker, postman, or your own face in the mirror. Regard him or her with the recognition that:

*This person before me may be instrumental in saving us from nuclear war. In this person are gifts for the healing of our planet. In him/her are powers that can redound to the joy of all beings.* □