

Healing Our Emotions: A Meditation

I had followed the practice of regular meditation for quite some time before I began intensive healing work. Meditation quickly became a crucial aspect of that healing work itself. During all phases of healing, our emotions whirl like a stream racing over rocks. The daily practice of simply following my breath and letting the emotions come and go, neither fearing nor rejecting whatever came up, became a source of both stability and insight.

When we are working intensively on healing from childhood sexual abuse, we experience many difficult emotions—pain, grief for our lost childhood, anger and rage at the perpetrator or perpetrators and those who enabled them, and the shame, guilt and isolation that are the inevitable legacy of abuse. We need to be able to experience those emotions fully without being engulfed by them. I found that regular meditation helped me do that. With regular practice, we can learn to recognize emotions as changing currents that flow through us, rather than identifying with them and remaining stuck in them.

It is equally important to water the seeds of joy and peace that exist within us. In shutting ourselves off from the negative emotions that we dared not feel fully as children, we compromised our capacity to feel the positive emotions, too. Meditation helped me to be aware of those seeds, nourish and celebrate them. Meditation helped me touch the positive as well as the negative, and to gradually shift the balance from negative to positive.

Why Meditate?

I believe that meditation offers some decisive benefits for persons who are healing the wounds childhood sexual abuse, benefits that contribute greatly to our *spiritual* healing.

- 1) Meditation is an excellent way to lessen stress, tension, anxiety, panic, and depression. It is physically, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually relaxing.
- 2) Many of us are caught up in a lot of “doing,” always busy with some activity. Meditation gives us a time to just “be.”
- 3) It helps calm and clear our mind, thus enabling us to see reality more clearly because we’re more focused.
- 4) Meditation helps us have greater insight into ourselves. For example, as abused children, many of us became very skilled at figuring out what other people wanted us to be, and doing that. But it became a habit, and we’ve lost track of who *we* are, apart from the wishes and desires of others. Meditation, paying attention to whatever arises, is one way to find out who we are. Over time, as we become clearer and more focused, it allows for greater insight into other people and into our life situations because we become more able to see things as they really are, free of preconceptions and expectations. We become more responsive and less reactive, with both ourselves and others.
- 5) As we gain experience with meditation, we develop a calm, stable center that grounds and supports us when difficult emotions storm around us, and provides a way to nourish more pleasant and healthy states of mind and heart.

- 6) It helps us show up and be fully present for our life.
- 7) It helps us open our hearts, which we may have had to shut down tightly to protect ourselves.
- 8) Meditation helps us get in touch directly and experientially with God, Spirit, Higher Consciousness, the Inner Self, the Higher Self—however you name the transcendent ground of who you are. We come to know the essential goodness at the deepest level of ourselves with the clarity and conviction that only unmediated experience can provide.
- 9) Meditation is deeply nourishing on many levels of our being. It is a gift of loving kindness to ourselves. It's something good we can do for ourselves, something that requires no special circumstances and doesn't cost anything. It feels good.
- 10) Many times, our having been abused, compounded by the ways in which we have reacted to it leaves our lives a tangle of conflicting experiences, emotions, and beliefs. In order to heal, we have to untangle the tangle, sort out the various strands of our lives. Meditation is one way to provide the emotional and mental space in which to do this necessary disentangling.
- 11) I found that meditation was an excellent complement to counseling. In counseling, we tell our stories as fully, as deeply as possible, bringing to the telling as much of the emotional content of those stories as we can. Then we step back from the experience to reflect on it, to discover its meanings, to make connections. In meditation, we are simply with our experience without reflection, allowing it to flow through us without any separation between us and our experience. The two reinforce each other.

The Basics: How To Begin a Meditation Practice

If you'd like to see whether you want to incorporate meditation into your healing and into your life, I'd suggest that you give it at least a month's "trial run." It isn't ever a "quick fix," and requires discipline and patience. Please be gentle with yourself. We don't meditate to perfect our meditation technique; we meditate to improve our lives. A month isn't long enough to establish a firm practice, but it is long enough for you to decide if meditation is something you want to continue with. There are several things it's helpful to consider at the outset:

- 1) Choose a consistent *time of day* to meditate. There isn't any one "right" time, but you should pick a time that you can be consistent with, particularly in the beginning. Many people like to meditate in the morning. That's definitely the best time for me, because I'm very much a morning person. I enjoy the freshness and quiet of the very early morning. Too, I can take the calmness and focus of meditation with me into the rest of my day. But what's important is to find the time that's best for *you*. Experiment.
- 2) Similarly, if possible, pick a consistent *place* in which to meditate. A consistent place and time will help you enter into a meditative state more easily. It should be quiet, a comfortable temperature, and free of interruptions. Many people like to have flowers, a statue or other religious symbol, or something else of personal significance in their meditation area. Although nice, that isn't necessary. Because I do quite a bit of my work at home, I have a study that is "my space." It's also where I meditate. A small table serves as an altar or shrine, on which I have a lovely wooden Buddha statue given me by my husband, and statues of Guan-Yin (a Buddhist

goddess of compassion, sometimes called the “female Buddha”) and Jizo Bodhisattva (the protector of women and children), a candle and a small meditation gong. However, I also meditate other places in the house, and sometimes out of doors.

- 3) It’s important to maintain a regular practice, especially when you first begin meditating. If you do find yourself in a situation in which you have to choose between skipping your meditation and doing it at a different time and/or place than usual, then do it. As your practice becomes more firmly established, this is easier to do.
- 4) Your *clothing* should be comfortable, non-binding, and comfortable in the temperature of the room. If you tend to get chilly, keep a shawl handy to drape over your shoulders. It’s traditional to remove your shoes, but I regard that as a matter of personal preference. Special clothing isn’t at all necessary.
- 5) There has been a lot written about the proper *posture* for meditation. The basic point is that you need to find a position in which you are relaxed yet alert, comfortable enough that you aren’t distracted by your body yet not so comfortable that you fall asleep. Your spine should be straight but relaxed, and your position stable. Sitting cross-legged on the floor or on a cushion has a long and time-honored history, especially the “full lotus” and “half lotus” positions. I never could get my legs to cooperate with either, and I certainly can’t now. I usually use a “back chair” or “posture chair,” that backless chair with a seat for the buttocks and support for the knees. A straight chair that allows you to place both feet flat on the floor with your legs uncrossed works nicely. You might want to experiment with lying on your back on a yoga or exercise mat. In this position, it’s usually better to take the pressure off your lower back by bending your knees while keeping your feet flat on the floor.
- 6) Close your *eyes* if you’re at ease doing so, or allow them to focus softly in front of you. You can place your *hands* in your lap, one on top of the other, or palms-up or palms-down on your knees. If you’re accustomed to praying with your hands folded, you may find this is a good thing to do with them when you meditate. If you’re lying on your back, let them rest at your sides, palms up. A very gentle *half-smile* will help relax the three hundred plus muscles in your face and is refreshing.
- 7) *How long* you meditate at a time is very much an individual decision. If you have never meditated before, and especially if you’re tense and anxious, ten minutes is enough to start with. This is definitely a situation in which it’s better to finish wanting more than to become tense and fidgety because you set your goal too high. It’s good to use a timer that has a fairly quiet ring so that you don’t have to glance at a clock and so that you aren’t jarred out of meditation. I’ve discovered that setting the time on my microwave oven in the kitchen works well because of the distance. A timer that rings and then shuts off automatically avoids your having to do anything about it immediately. Eventually, many meditation teachers recommend twenty minutes, once or twice daily. As with time and place, if you have to choose between meditating for a shorter time and not meditating at all, go for the shorter time.

Again, I encourage you to experiment and find what works for *you*. Give anything you try enough time to evaluate it fairly, and then if it isn’t right for you, try something else.

After working with some of the guided meditations in Thich Nhat Hanh's *The Blooming of a Lotus* (Beacon Press, 1993), I wrote the following meditation that focuses on the negative emotions that were the most common for me in the healing process, and on the positive seeds that I most wished to cultivate. It was first published in *The Mindfulness Bell: Journal of the International Order of Interbeing*, in the Spring of 1999. I include the meditation here with gratitude to the Leslie Carter Rawls, editor of *The Mindfulness Bell*, for her support.

Although I have included the emotions, both positive and negative, that were the most relevant for me, please experiment and tailor this meditation to your own needs. For a few minutes, simply follow your breathing. Don't try to control or change it; just be aware of it. Let yourself settle and become quiet. You don't have to "do" anything to bring this about. Remember that muddy water will settle if you just allow it to sit. No amount of stirring will make it settle! Don't worry if quiet doesn't seem to happen. One of the reasons for using a guided meditation is that it oftentimes makes it easier to achieve stillness and calm when you're troubled.

The structure of the meditation on negative emotions encourages and facilitates awareness of the feeling, first of all. "Smiling" to those feelings is an act of acceptance, of allowing. Doing so may seem strange at first, but stick with it. Many of us have survived by pushing negative feelings out of our awareness (consciously or unconsciously) in order to avoid being overwhelmed by them. We can be thankful for our capacity to do so, because it did help us to survive. But in order to heal, we need to bring those feelings into awareness and let them go. As we become more able to gently invite these feelings into our awareness, their energy lessens. Having become aware of and accepted the feeling, we recognize its sources and release it, allowing it to move through us. The dynamic is one of awareness, acceptance, acknowledgment of sources, and release. Meditation in this way is no "quick fix," but over time and with patience, we can transform our relationship to even the most uncomfortable feelings.

With the positive emotions, the structure is one of awareness and welcoming, awareness of sources, and welcoming again.

As the wording of the meditation suggests, repeat the phrases to yourself while breathing in and out, so that the phrases "ride" gently on the breath. Particularly if you're having trouble focusing and staying centered, repeating the word softly aloud can be helpful. Thus, on the inhalation, you would think or say "Aware of the feeling of joy in me, I breathe in." On the exhalation, "Smiling to the feeling of joy in me, I breathe out." And so on. It may seem awkward initially, but it will become familiar and comforting. As your practice grows stronger, you may want to simply think or say "Aware of the feeling of joy in me" while inhaling, without verbalizing that you are inhaling. It isn't at all important for you to do this meditation the exact way I do it. Just experiment and find what works best for you.

I usually used three repetitions of the four lines for each emotion, concentrating on shame for three repetitions, then guilt for three, and so on. I always concluded with the positive emotions I wanted to nourish so that I took that part of the experience with me at the end of my meditation. Sometimes, I worked with only one or two of the negative emotions, if those were the ones that were most prominent. I don't recommend working with the negative emotions without also including the positive ones in your meditation. It's always helpful to encourage qualities such as joyfulness, contentment, and compassion.

“Dry Spells”

Everyone who meditates for any length of time will encounter droughts, times when the practice seems to go stale and nothing feels as if it’s working. I’ve found a few tactics helpful when I find myself facing a meditation drought. The first thing I try is to simply continue with my practice, without making any changes. As often as not, the dry spell will pass in a reasonable length of time. If it doesn’t, modify what you’re doing. Meditate at a different time or in a different place. If you have favorite calming, centering music, play it softly in the background. Another approach is to reduce the duration of your practice. If you’ve been meditating twenty minutes at a time, try ten. You might try dividing a single practice period into two shorter ones. Most meditation teachers advise not stopping meditating in the face of a dry spell, and in general, I agree. However, if you’ve tried everything else, and you’re becoming increasingly frustrated, take a brief break. Don’t skip more than a few days—you don’t want to get completely out of the habit. But a short break can invigorate your practice and you will return to it eager for the quality of that experience.

The guided meditation follows. It is my hope that it will benefit you as it has me.

Aware of the feeling of **shame** in me
I breathe in.

Smiling to the feeling of shame in me
I breathe out.

Aware of the sources of **shame** in me
I breathe in.

Releasing the feeling of shame in me,
I breathe out.

Aware of the feeling of **regret** in me
I breathe in.

Smiling to the feeling of regret in me
I breathe out.

Aware of the sources of **regret** in me
I breathe in.

Releasing the feeling of regret in me,
I breathe out.

Aware of the feeling of **guilt** in me
I breathe in.

Smiling to the feeling of guilt in me
I breathe out.

Aware of the sources of **guilt** in me
I breathe in.

Releasing the feeling of guilt in me,
I breathe out.

Aware of the feeling of **sadness** in me
I breathe in.

Smiling to the feeling of sadness in me
I breathe out.

Aware of the sources of **sadness** in me
I breathe in.

Releasing the feeling of sadness in me,
I breathe out.

Aware of the feeling of **grief** in me
I breathe in.

Smiling to the feeling of grief in me
I breathe out.

Aware of the sources of **grief** in me
I breathe in.

Releasing the feeling of grief in me,
I breathe out.

Aware of the feeling of **joy** in me
I breathe in.

Smiling to the feeling of joy in me
I breathe out.

Aware of the sources of **joy** in me
I breathe in.

Welcoming the feeling of joy in me,
I breathe out.

Aware of the feeling of **peace** in me
I breathe in.

Smiling to the feeling of peace in me
I breathe out.

Aware of the sources of **peace** in me
I breathe in.

Welcoming the feeling of peace in me,
I breathe out.

Aware of the feeling of **anger** in me
I breathe in.

Smiling to the feeling of anger in me
I breathe out.

Aware of the sources of **anger** in me
I breathe in.

Releasing the feeling of anger in me,
I breathe out.

Aware of the feeling of **contentment** in me
I breathe in.

Smiling to the feeling of contentment in me
I breathe out.

Aware of the sources of **contentment** in me
I breathe in.

Welcoming the feeling of contentment in me,
I breathe out.

Aware of the feeling of **calmness** in me
I breathe in.

Smiling to the feeling of calmness in me
I breathe out.

Aware of the sources of **calmness** in me
I breathe in.

Welcoming the feeling of calmness in me,
I breathe out.

Aware of the feeling of **compassion** in me
I breathe in.

Smiling to the feeling of compassion in me
I breathe out.

Aware of the sources of **compassion** in me
I breathe in.

Welcoming the feeling of compassion in me,
I breathe out.

Aware of the feeling of **healing** in me
I breathe in.

Smiling to the feeling of healing in me
I breathe out.

Aware of the sources of **healing** in me
I breathe in.

Welcoming the feeling of healing in me,
I breathe out.