

Find a quiet space and please make yourself comfortable. Relaxing in a chair or lying down is just fine. Gently close your eyes, if you wish.

Take a few moments and notice the sounds around you. Notice the thoughts coming and going. Bring a gentle attention to all this and simply let it be.

Now bring your attention to your breath.

Watch the coming and going of your breath for a moment or two. Notice wherever you experience it, through your nose, in your chest, or in your belly. This is not about a right and wrong way to breathe. It's just breathing.

When we think of the word compassion, we often think of it as an expression of great love. It's something Mother Teresa, the Dalai Lama, and all the saints and spiritual leaders of world religions, have had a deep capacity for. It is difficult to see ourselves as having the same capacity for this all embracing, open hearted response to pain and suffering, isn't it? We can feel when it is not present, and we can also be curious about how to have more compassion in our lives.

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One way to nurture our capacity for compassion is to develop our ability to feel empathy for others. Empathy is the feeling we have when we are moved by another's pain as if it were our own. When nothing is in the way, we somehow know the other's pain and can notice that judgments and blame seem to drop away.

As we gently touch into other people's suffering, our compassion grows. This is not to say that we are actually taking on the other person's stuff. That is not what is meant here. We can see, understand, and sense what the other is going through without becoming enmeshed. Our hearts can embrace others in their suffering, as well as their joy.

Empathy with others allows compassion to grow. We can learn to embrace life in all its circumstances, when we have a compassionate heart. It can be helpful to use visualization practices to encourage this ability for empathic response. Here's a visualization practice that can be helpful. Take a few moments to simply focus your awareness on your breath.

Allow the thought or image of a person you know who is having a difficult time in their life, to arise. Perhaps he or she has a family member in the military, has lost someone dear to them, is seriously ill, or has been laid off.

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You can also do this work empathizing with an animal you care about. Do whichever is easier for you.

Bring the image or thought of that person, or animal, into your heart. Imagine yourself in their shoes, in their life.

If you can't think of anyone you know who is having a hard time right now, allow the image of any person to arise in a situation that you imagine would be difficult, and imagine yourself in their shoes. We don't have to know a person personally to feel empathy. We can touch another's pain anytime we are willing to open our hearts.

If you are working with a person, take a few moments to explore what it might be like for them, going to work, being with young children, being in the hospital, or getting up in the morning. If it's an animal you are connecting with, allow the image of their situation to arise. Be aware of what's going on physically, as you do this work. Notice any tightening, or relaxing as you move through this imagined experience.

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Notice what happens. Take time to explore the situation you are in. Gently, allow yourself to come back to your own experience. Allow that person or animal's image to gently fade away. Notice what's happening now. Has there been a shift in your feelings? Is there more work to do? You can do this visualization on your own, anytime you feel that it would be helpful.

Whenever we are able to expand our understanding to include empathy for another person's pain, or an animal in pain, it opens the possibility for us to be more aware of what is, more open to life as it is, with more honesty, courage and compassion for all of it.

When we are curious about another's personal history, we also nurture our understanding and compassion. This is especially important when we are angry with someone. Whenever we meet an angry, mean, greedy, or insensitive person, it can be helpful to imagine how they got that way. No one is miserable to others without having been treated poorly themselves.

Let's explore a simple way to expand our ability to feel compassion for someone we are holding outside of our heart. Allow the image or thought to arise, of a person you are afraid of, or of a person for whom you are holding angry feelings. This can be a political figure, someone who cut you off on the highway, or someone at work, or in your family. Anyone you are afraid of or upset with will do. Notice what goes on inside, when you think of this person, without pushing away, or adding judgment or blame, towards your self or the other. Holding that image or thought, be with whatever you experience for a few moments.

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Compassion Meditation

By Padme Nina Livingstone

Now, allow a curiosity to arise about this person's background. What could have happened in their life to make them behave this way with others? What might have happened when he or she was a child? A teenager? This morning? Adding whatever you do know about this person's background, use your imagination, and curiosity to expand the picture. Notice what comes up, without judging or blaming. Be with your experience for a while.

What happens now, if you try to place the thought of this person, or their image, in your heart? Is there still some resistance? Has there been a shift in your feelings?

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It can be helpful to do this work whenever you have been caught up in anger or fear. Over time, the mind will more easily include an expanded, more compassionate understanding of others, and your self, and there will be less anger or fear.

Now, gently let go of the image or thought of the person you have been working with. Please bring your awareness back to the present. Before we continue with the next and final experience of this talk, we will allow the mind to quiet down, and simply return your focus to the breath for a few moments. Notice what is happening. Our hearts will only really be able to open to others as much as we can allow love to flow through us. When loving energy is flowing, compassion is its natural expression.

We will now focus our awareness on nurturing compassion for ourselves.

Allow the thought or image to arise, of a time when you behaved in a way you wish you hadn't. Be gentle with yourself and try to trust whatever comes up. Simply be with it. Notice feelings, behaviors, without adding blame or judgment to the interaction, or memory. Now, allow a non-judgmental curiosity to arise about what might have happened in your life- to you or perhaps was witnessed by you, that might have influenced you to behave in this manner. Give this some time, no pushing, wonder about it all. Allow images or thoughts to fill out what you know about your personal history that might help you understand your life with more compassion. Stay with this experience for a while.

Gently return your awareness to the present.

Has there been a shift in your feelings or thoughts about the incident? Perhaps a lightening of the heart? Is there still more work to do? If there's still judgment, can that be noticed without making more judgment?

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***Let's Not Call It Meditation:
Practical Guidance for People
Who Think They Can't Sit Still and
Quiet the Mind***

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We are opening our door to compassion when we become aware of ourselves, and our interconnection with others without judgment, without blame. When we have expanded our ability to have empathy for the pain and suffering of others, and embrace ourselves with the same compassion we share with others, we have found a more peaceful, compassionate way of being. It is no different than any Saint or Spiritual Master's way of being.

The experience of Compassion is not a special gift for some and not for others. It is a natural, open response to life; to embracing ourselves and others when there is nothing in the way, no assumptions, no judgment, and no blame.

Some of us need to work hard to open our hearts. There have been so many painful experiences, that we have shielded our hearts, unconsciously believing we are protecting ourselves from more pain. The problem is that we are also shielding from feeling love and joy. Our desire to feel again must include the willingness to experience pain again, once our hearts are more open. It comes together- the joy and the pain.

***"Bring the image or
thought of that person, or
animal, into your heart."***

The three meditations we have used can be helpful to practice on your own, often. Each one leads us through the pain we ordinarily experience, into a different perspective with a fresh, new experience of our mind and our heart.

With our hearts and minds open, we are truly alive, and we are ready to receive and give to whatever comes our way. Please find this out for yourself. Thank you.



About Padme Livingstone

Padme Nina Livingstone is the Director of A Quieter Place: Practical Meditation for Living Your Life. She has a B.S. in Human Services and extensive experience with awareness meditation, self-inquiry, parenting, relationship skills, energy work, caregiving, and bereavement. As a meditation teacher and author, Padme has spent much of her life untangling her own confusion, while finding balance around her physical, mental, emotional and spiritual life. After more than 36 years of meditation and self-inquiry, and over 18 years of energy healing work, Padme discusses meditation, relationships, and energy healing using accessible, practical language with people who want to feel less stress, and enjoy more peace, clarity, compassion, curiosity, honesty, and gratitude. For more information, visit her website at www.aquieterplace.com