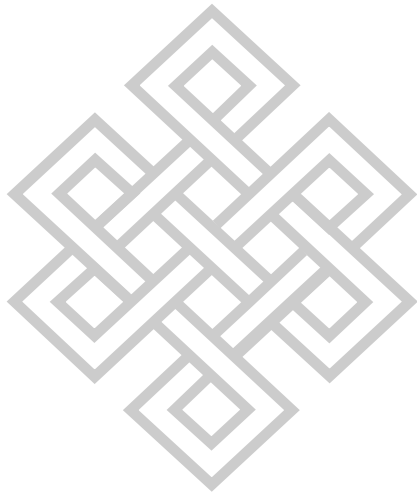


Spiritual Humanism: Practice



Practice notes from spiritual-humanism.com



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Practice notes from spiritual-humanism.com
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Introduction

What is spiritual humanism? How can a humanist who does not have any beliefs about the supernatural also be spiritual? What does practicing spiritual humanism look like? I created this booklet to offer my personal answers to these questions.

I am not selling the answers to all of life's questions. I am not selling the solutions to all of life's problems. I am not selling a worldview that is somehow better than other worldviews. I am simply sharing a perspective on ethics and spirituality that I happen to enjoy.

Agnosticism

I am agnostic about the supernatural. I do not deny the supernatural. I simply have no convincing evidence of the supernatural. Without evidence of the supernatural, I have no basis on which to form beliefs about the supernatural. Without beliefs about the supernatural, I cannot practice any spirituality that relies on beliefs about the supernatural. I need an approach to spirituality that does not involve any beliefs about the supernatural.

Spirituality

Drawing on ideas from the Dalai Lama's books *Ethics for a New Millennium* and *Beyond Religion*, I define ethics and spirituality in the following ways:

1. Ethics is my commitment to help reduce suffering and promote well-being for the benefit of all.
2. Spirituality is my commitment to cultivate personal qualities and values that improve my ability to reduce suffering and promote well-being.

My approach to ethics and spirituality is humanistic because it sets aside beliefs about the supernatural and focuses on life in this world, here and now. It searches for ways of responding to difficult conditions of human existence such as suffering, aging, and death. It adopts an attitude of thinking about how to live a worthwhile life, taking into account both what is important to me and what impact my life has on other people.

Buddhism

Practicing ethics and spirituality requires more than merely defining ethics and spirituality. I use ideas and practices from Buddhism to help me fulfill my ethical and spiritual commitments.

- I do my best to uphold 10 ethical guidelines taught by Buddhism.
- I study Buddhist teachings to cultivate a more compassionate worldview.
- I use Buddhist practices to calm my mind.

However, I do not limit myself to Buddhism. I supplement Buddhist teachings and practices with ideas from poems, religions, philosophies, and the sciences.

My approach to Buddhism is not typical. I camp at the edges of Buddhism. I have already decided not to grow angry or argue with anyone who says that I am not a Buddhist. I may indeed be so atypical that, for many people, I fall outside the borders of Buddhism.

What's In This Booklet?

This booklet provides a rough sketch of how I practice my ethics and

spirituality. It is an incomplete sketch. For example, I mention a few of the books that I have chosen to study, but I provide no review of the books. I also describe some of the mental training exercises I practice. However, my descriptions do not provide the background needed to deeply understand and master the exercises. My goal is simply to give a brief outline of my practice.

Fulfill My Ethical Commitments

10 Ethical Guidelines

Ethical guidelines are not rigid rules. They are flexible rules that need to be adapted to each specific situation. However, flexibility and adaptation does not mean that anything goes. The goal of reducing suffering and promoting well-being places limits on the flexibility and adaptation of ethical guidelines.

I do my best to uphold 10 ethical guidelines from Buddhist teachings.

1. Do not be idolatrous about any doctrine, theory, or ideology. All systems of thought are means of guidance, not absolute truths. ¹
2. Do not think the knowledge one possesses is absolute or changeless. Avoid narrow-mindedness and excessive attachment to specific views. Remain open to the views of others. ¹
3. Do not coerce or force others to adopt one's own views. Do not use authority, threat, money, propaganda, mandatory education, or any other means to coerce or force others to adopt one's own views. ¹
4. Do not engage in harmful speech. Do not engage in speech that is deceitful, hateful, judgmental, or destructive. Do not engage in speech that creates or worsens conflict. Instead, speak constructively and compassionately. Speak up for the fair treatment and safety of others, and make every effort to reconcile and resolve conflicts. ^{1,2}
5. Do not steal or possess anything that should belong to others. Respect the property others, and avoid exploiting others. ^{1,2}
6. Do not engage in sexual misconduct. Do not sexually harass, sexually abuse, or sexually assault others. Protect the physical and mental well-

being of sexual partners. Do not carelessly bring a new life into this world. ^{1,2}

7. Do not harm others. Do not injure, abuse, or kill others. ^{1,2}
8. Do not allow people to harm others. Use whatever methods are needed to stop people from harming others, but remember to care both for the people inflicting harm and for the people escaping harm. Always prefer the use of nonviolent methods. It is tragic when forceful methods are used. Mourn the use of forceful methods as though it were a funeral. ^{3,4}
9. Do not maintain anger or hatred. Learn to regulate one's emotions. Practice loving-kindness meditation, compassion, and dialogue to deeply understand others. ¹
10. Do not turn away from suffering. Do not avoid, ignore, or lose awareness of the suffering of others. Be alert for opportunities to share time, energy, and material resources with those in need. ¹

I am not perfect in upholding these guidelines. I sometimes make mistakes. I sometimes fall prey to temptations. I sometimes fail to live up to my own values. When I fall short of the guidelines, I ask forgiveness from anyone who was harmed and try to make amends. I quickly return to upholding the guidelines.

References

1. Thich Nhat Hanh (2020). *Interbeing, 4th Edition*. Berkeley, CA: Parallax Press. Fourteen precepts are listed on pages 179-183.
2. Hsing Yun (2010). *For All Living Beings*. Los Angeles, CA: Buddha's Light Publishing. Five precepts are listed on page 2.

3. *Commitments of the Bodhisattvas, 3rd Revised Edition* (2000). Edited by Constance Miller. Published by the Foundation for the Preservation of the Mahayana Tradition Education Services. Downloaded 04/06/2023 from <https://www.fpmtabc.org/download/ebook/bodhisattva-vows.pdf>. The precept I follow is an adaptation of the 45th branch vow found on page 30.

4. *Tao Te Ching*. Translated by Gia-fu Feng and Jane English (1972). New York, NY: Vintage Books. Page 33 says the following: "Weapons are instruments of fear; they are not tools of the wise. They use them only when there is no choice. Peace and quiet are dear to their hearts, And victory no cause for rejoicing. If you rejoice in victory, then you delight in killing; If you delight in killing, you cannot fulfill yourself. ...This means that war is conducted like a funeral. When many people are killed, they should be mourned in heartfelt sorrow. That is why a victory must be observed like a funeral."

Compassionate Acts

Buddhism teaches the practice of compassionate acts. Compassionate acts may be large or small, benefit many people or benefit a single person, require a lot of effort and money or be easily and freely given. Examples of compassionate acts include donating to a charity, volunteering for a group that helps others, comforting someone who is upset, listening to a person who needs to talk, offering words of encouragement to someone who is facing a difficult situation, and engaging in small acts of kindness during everyday life.

Whatever life presents to us, our response can be an expression of our compassion. Whether someone speaks truthfully to us or deceitfully, harshly or gently, we might respond with a loving mind. This is also an act of compassionate service.

– Sharon Salzberg ¹

Compassionate acts can reduce suffering and promote well-being. They are an important way for me to fulfill my ethical commitments.

Satisfaction of Basic Needs

Compassionate acts frequently help people satisfy their basic needs. People share similar basic needs.²⁻⁴

People need food and drink.

People need clothing and shelter.

People need physical and mental health.

People need safety from threats and dangers.

People need friendship and a sense of belonging.

People need to feel their lives are worthwhile.

When people's basic needs are not satisfied, they suffer. Other people want to avoid suffering, just as I do. When people's basic needs are satisfied, they experience happiness. Other people want to experience happiness, just as I do.

Elements of Compassion

Compassion has four elements.

1. **Being aware of suffering.** I cannot offer compassion if I am unaware of suffering. I cannot offer compassion if I turn away from suffering or ignore suffering.
2. **Wanting to help others alleviate their suffering.** I cannot offer compassion if I do not care that other people are suffering. The empathy that I experience when I observe other people suffer motivates me to at least try to alleviate their suffering.
3. **Learning how to help other people.** Helping other people requires me to learn about them. I need to learn when other people want my help and when they do not want my help. I need to learn how other people prefer to have their basic needs satisfied. I need to learn what abilities, strengths, and limitations other people possess. This process of learning never ends. There is always more to learn about other people.
4. **Taking action to alleviate the suffering of other people.** The actions I take to help alleviate a person's suffering can take many forms: being present, listening, comforting, encouraging, accompanying, helping, sharing, and giving. My actions to alleviate suffering are most effective when I behave naturally, as myself. Being my authentic self results in honest and trusting interactions that improve my ability to help.

References

1. Sharon Salzberg (2011). *Lovingkindness*. Boston, MA: Shambhala Publications. Kindle Edition. Quote taken from page 107.
2. Larry Litwack (2007). Basic Needs – A Retrospective. *International Journal of Reality Therapy*, 24: 28-30.
3. Mark Koltko-Rivera (2006). Rediscovering the Later Version of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs: Self-Transcendence and Opportunities for Theory, Research, and Unification. *Review of General Psychology*, 10: 302–317.
4. Roy Baumeister and Mark Leary (1995). The need to belong: Desire for interpersonal attachments as a fundamental human motivation. *Psychological Bulletin*, 117: 497-529.

Being Responsible

Being responsible means that I do what I can to help other people when an opportunity arises. It means that I am willing to help anyone who needs help.

Tenzin Gyatso, the 14th Dalai Lama of Tibet, talks about being responsible for helping others. He refers to it as “universal responsibility.”

To develop a sense of universal responsibility—of the universal dimension of our every act and of the equal right of all others to happiness and not to suffer—is to develop an attitude of mind whereby, when we see an opportunity to benefit others, we will take it in preference to merely looking after our own narrow interests. But though, of course, we care about what is beyond our scope, we accept it as part of nature and concern ourselves with doing what we can.

– Tenzin Gyatso ¹

A sense of responsibility toward all others also means that, both as individuals and as a society of individuals, we have a duty to care for each member of our society. This is true irrespective of their physical capacity or of their capacity for mental reflection. Just like ourselves, such people have a right to happiness and to avoid suffering. We must therefore avoid, at all costs, the urge to shut away those who are grievously afflicted as if they were a burden. The same goes for those who are diseased or marginalized. To push them away would be to heap suffering on suffering. If we ourselves were in the same condition, we would look to others for help. We need, therefore, to ensure that the sick and afflicted person never feels helpless, rejected, or unprotected.

– Tenzin Gyatso ²

It is worth emphasizing that “universal responsibility” does not mean helping every person on earth. I am not able satisfy every person’s basic needs. I am not able to comfort every person’s suffering. I am not able to protect every person from harm. It makes no sense for me to act in ways that drain all of my personal resources, leaving me in a state of suffering and unable to care either for myself or for others. Yet, though my ability to help is limited, I will do what I can to help a person in need when the opportunity arises regardless of who that person is.

References

1. Dali Lama (1999). *Ethics for the New Millennium*. New York: Riverhead Books. Quote taken from pages 162-163.
2. Dali Lama (1999). *Ethics for the New Millennium*. New York: Riverhead Books. Quote taken from page 169.

Study Buddhist and Other Teachings

Studying Wisely

Buddhist teachings helps me cultivate personal qualities and values that improve my ability to reduce suffering and promote well-being.

Hsing Yun, the founder of a Buddhist order called Fo Guang Shan, describes a three-step process for studying Buddhist teachings: ¹

1. Learn about a teaching.
2. Think about the teaching.
3. Apply the teaching in everyday life.

These three steps are repeated again and again as I learn new teachings or explore familiar teachings in greater depth or from a new perspective.

Hsing Yun also describes four reliances to keep in mind when studying Buddhist teachings.² Here is how I interpret the four reliances:

1. Rely on the teachings, not on the character of the teacher.
2. Rely on the meaning, not on the words.
3. Rely on practical consequences, not on conceptual debates.
4. Rely on wisdom, not on knowledge.

I try to follow this advice when I study Buddhist teachings.

References

1. Hsing Yun (2001). *Buddhism Pure and Simple*. Translated by Tom Graham. Trumbull, CT: Weatherhill. The three steps described on page 85.
2. Hsing Yun (2010). *For All Living Beings*. Translated by Robert Smitheram. Los Angeles, CA: Buddha's Light Publishing. The four reliances described on page 118.

Main Teachings (For Me)

Buddhism contains many teachings. People are free to study the teachings that make the most sense for their personalities, life experiences, and life circumstances.

Generally speaking, all Buddhist studies should be guided by the three trainings—morality, meditation, and wisdom. ...Beyond that, we have the freedom to choose which sutras or which techniques we may want to study. We also have the freedom to choose those teachers whom we feel will benefit us the most. In choosing one way over another, however, we should never allow ourselves to lose respect for other people who may have made decisions that are different from our own.

– Hsing Yun ¹

A few of the Buddhist teachings that I have chosen to study are listed below. I do not limit myself to the teachings mentioned below. However, I consider the teachings below to be important or “core” teachings in my ethical and spiritual practice.

Classic Teachings

Here are two classic Buddhist texts that I read periodically.

[Dhammapada](#) ²

[Mahsatipatthana Sutta](#) ³

Ethical Commitments

Here are three teachings that describe the ethical guidelines I try to uphold.

[The Five Precepts](#) ⁴

[The Fourteen Precepts of the Order of Interbeing](#) ⁵

[The Bodhisattva Vows](#) ⁶

I also read the following books to better understand my ethical commitments:

[For All Living Beings](#) ⁷

[Ethics for the New Millennium](#) ⁸

[Beyond Religion](#) ⁹

Spiritual Commitments

Below are three teachings that describe the personal qualities and values I try to cultivate.

[The Four Sublime States](#) ¹⁰ teach the personal qualities and values of:

- Loving-Kindness
- Compassion
- Sympathetic Joy
- Equanimity

[The Six Paramitas of Humanistic Buddhism](#) ¹¹ teach the personal qualities and values of:

- Generosity
- Ethics
- Patience
- Constant progress
- Concentration
- Wisdom

[The Eight Realizations of Great Beings](#) ¹² teach the personal qualities and values of:

- Everything is impermanent and interdependent
- Greed is a cause of suffering

Contentment is a source of happiness
Laziness leads to downfall
Study wisely, listen carefully
Being generous is important
Ethics fosters self-control
Being committed is important

Mental Training

Below are some books that have helped me with mental training.

[The Miracle of Mindfulness](#) ¹³

[The Heart of Understanding](#) ¹⁴

[Training the Mind and Cultivating Loving-Kindness](#) ¹⁵

[How to Expand Love](#) ¹⁶

[Mahasatipatthana Sutta](#) ¹⁷

References

1. Hsing Yun (2001). *Buddhism Pure and Simple*. Translated by Tom Graham. Trumbull, CT: Weatherhill. Quote taken from pages 86-87.
2. Dhammapada. A rendering by Thomas Byrom (1993). Boston, MA: Shambhala Publications (Pocket Classics).
3. Mahasatipatthana Sutta. Translated by Vipassana Research Institute (1996). Published by Vipassana Research Publications. Buy at Amazon. I also like the English version of the Mahasatipatthana Sutta translated by Ānandajoti Bhikkhu (2011), available at <https://www.ancient-buddhist-texts.net/English-Texts/Mindfulness/Mindfulness.pdf>.
4. Hsing Yun (2010). *For All Living Beings*. Los Angeles, CA: Buddha's Light Publishing. Five precepts are listed on page 2.

5. Thich Nhat Hanh (2020). *Interbeing, 4th Edition*. Berkeley, CA: Parallax Press. Fourteen precepts are listed on pages 179-183.
6. Zopa Rinpoche (2000). *The Bodhisattva Vows*. Compiled and translated by the students of the Amitabha Buddhist Center in Singapore. Published by Constance Miller, Foundation for the Preservation of the Mahayana Tradition Education Services, July 2000. Downloaded January 23, 2022 from <https://www.fpmtabc.org/download/ebook/bodhisattva-vows.pdf>. See vow 45 on page 30.
7. Hsing Yun (2010). *For All Living Beings*. Los Angeles, CA: Buddha's Light Publishing.
8. Dalai Lama (1999). *Ethics for the New Millennium*. New York, NY: Riverhead Books.
9. Dalai Lama (2011). *Beyond Religion*. New York, NY: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.
10. Nyanaponika Thera and Ñāṇamoli Thera (1998). *The Four Sublime States and the Practice of Loving Kindness (Metta)*. Kandy, Sri Lanka: Buddhist Publication Society, Pariyatti Editions.
11. Hsing Yun (2000). *Lotus in a Stream*. Translated by Tom Graham. New York, NY: Weatherhill. The six paramitas are described on pages 154-157.
12. Phap Hai (2021). *The Eight Realizations of Great Beings*. Plum Village Community of Engaged Buddhism. Berkeley, CA: Parallax Press.
13. Thich Nhat Hanh (1976). *The Miracle of Mindfulness*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press.

14. Thich Nhat Hanh (2009). *The Heart of Understanding*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press.
15. Chögyam Trungpa (2010). *Training the Mind and Cultivating Loving-Kindness*. Boston, MA: Shambhala Publications.
16. Dalai Lama (2005). *How to Exapnd Love*. New York, NY: Atria Books.
17. *Mahsatipatthana Sutta*. Translated by Vipassana Research Institute (1996). Published by Vipassana Research Publications. Buy at Amazon. I also like the English version of the Mahasatipatthana Sutta translated by Ānandajoti Bhikkhu (2011), available at <https://www.ancient-buddhist-texts.net/English-Texts/Mindfulness/Mindfulness.pdf>.

Modern Buddhist Teachers

In addition to traditional Buddhist teachings, I study the books of three modern Buddhist teachers. The first teacher is Tenzin Gyatso, the 14th Dalai Lama of Tibet. The second teacher is Hsing Yun, the founder of a Buddhist order called Fo Guang Shan. The third teacher is Thich Nhat Hahn, the founder of a Buddhist order called the Order of Interbeing.

Below is a list of books from these teachers that I keep on my bookshelf. All of these books are written for a general audience.

- [Beyond Religion](#) by the Dalai Lama
- [Ethics for the New Millennium](#) by the Dalai Lama
- [Buddhism Pure and Simple](#) by Hsing Yun
- [The Eight Realizations of Great Beings](#) by Phap Hai
- [For All Living Beings](#) by Hsing Yun
- [Lotus in a Stream](#) by Hsing Yun
- [Interbeing, 4th Edition](#) by Thich Nhat Hanh
- [The Miracle of Mindfulness](#) by Thich Nhat Hanh
- [The Heart of Understanding](#) by Thich Nhat Hanh
- [Training the Mind and Cultivating Loving-Kindness](#) by Chögyam Trungpa
- [How to Expand Love](#) by the Dalai Lama

Supplementary Readings

I supplement Buddhist teachings with ideas drawn from various poems, religions, philosophies, and sciences. However, supplementing Buddhist teachings simply reflects my personality. I do not think it is necessary to supplement Buddhist teachings in order to study Buddhist teachings.

Below are a few non-Buddhist books that I have found helpful. The first 9 books listed below are written for a general audience. The last 4 books are somewhat more academic books, but it is possible to glean useful ideas by reading the easier sections and skipping the harder sections of the books.

- [Tao Te Ching](#) translated by Gia-Fu Feng and Jane English
- [Chuang Tsu Inner Chapters](#) translated by Gia-Fu Feng and Jane English
- [Becoming More Fully Human](#) by William Murry
- [The Happiness Trap](#) by Russ Harris
- [Dialogue for Difficult Subjects](#) by Lisa Schirch and David Campt
- [Living With the Stars](#) by Karel Schrijver and Iris Schrijver
- [Nothing to Grasp](#) by Joan Tollifson
- [Living Realization](#) by Scott Kiloby
- [On Caring](#) by Milton Mayeroff
- [Pragmatic Fashions](#) by John Stuhr
- [The Specter of the Absurd](#) by Donald Crosby
- [The Art of Being a Healing Presence](#) by James Miller and Susan Cutshall
- [Existential Psychotherapy](#) by Irvin Yalom

Training My Mind: Compassion

Loving-Kindness Meditation

I can practice loving-kindness meditation any place and any time as long I do not need to focus on another activity such as work, driving, or operating dangerous equipment. I focus on the quality of meditation, not on the amount of time spent meditating.

What good practice really requires is a constant stream of effort: a sustained, persistent approach based on long-term commitment. For this reason, practicing properly, even for a short period of time, is the best way. The emphasis should be on quality rather than quantity.

– Dalai Lama ¹

Here are brief instructions for practicing loving-kindness meditation.

1. Cultivate loving-kindness for myself. Repeat the following phrases, genuinely wishing for the phrases to be realized in my life, and trying to generate the feelings of associated with the phrases.

May I be happy.

May I be healthy.

May I be safe.

May I be loved.

2. Cultivate loving-kindness for a person I love or care about. Repeat the following phrases, genuinely wishing for the phrases to be realized in the person's life, and trying to generate positive feelings for the person's well-being.

May you be happy.

May you be healthy.

May you be safe.

May you be loved.

3. Cultivate loving-kindness for a person with whom I have difficulties, conflicts, or negative interactions. Repeat the following phrases, genuinely wishing for the phrases to be realized in the person's life, and trying to generate positive feelings for the person's well-being.

May you be happy.

May you be healthy.

May you be safe.

May you be loved.

4. Cultivate loving-kindness for all people. Repeat the following phrases, genuinely wishing for the phrases to be realized in everyone's life, and trying to generate feelings of happiness for everyone's well-being.

May everyone be happy.

May everyone be healthy.

May everyone be safe.

May everyone be loved.

References

1. Dalai Lama (2011). *Beyond Religion*. New York, NY: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt. Quote taken from page 184.

Sending and Receiving

The practice of sending and receiving is called *tonglen* in Tibetan Buddhism. The word *tonglen* combines *tong*, which means sending out, with *len* which means receiving.

Practiced as a Meditation

Chögyam Trungpa teaches the practice of sending and receiving as a sitting meditation. Here is how he describes sending and receiving meditation in his book *Training the Mind & Cultivating Loving-Kindness*.

The practice of tonglen is quite straightforward; it is an actual sitting meditation practice. You give away your happiness, your pleasure, anything that feels good. All of that goes out with the outbreath. As you breathe in, you breathe in any resentments and problems, anything that feels bad. ...We do not first have to sort out our doctrinal definitions of goodness and evil. We simply breathe out any old good and breathe in any old bad.

– Chögyam Trungpa ¹

In order to promote goodness in the world, you give out everything good, the best that you have, and you breathe in other people's problems, their misery, their torment. You take in their pain on their behalf.

– Chögyam Trungpa ²

Practiced in Everyday Life

What Chögyam Trungpa teaches as a sitting meditation, I do my best to practice in everyday life. I do what I can to receive the suffering, anger, or

other negativity that people put into the world. I then do what I can to send out compassion, calmness, or other positivity to others in response. By practicing sending and receiving in everyday life, I become a source of compassion and positivity. I help bring compassion and positivity into the world.

By practicing sending and receiving in everyday life, I absorb suffering and negativity. I help remove suffering and negativity from the world.

Transformation of Motivations

For me, the practice of sending and receiving begins with a [transformation of motivations](#). My motivations are transformed by care. When I care for other people, I include them in my motivations. I still act in ways that result in positive outcomes for myself. However, I also consider how my actions affect other people. I am motivated to act in ways that result in positive outcomes both for myself and for other people.

Three signs of transformed motivations are:

- *Accommodation* – I tolerate small imperfections and mistakes made by other people.
- *Sacrifice* – I willingly give up something for the benefit of other people.
- *Forgiveness* – I ask forgiveness for my own mistakes and wrongdoings, and I forgive other people for their mistakes and wrongdoings. If I cannot forgive someone, then at least I do not harm that person.

Accommodation, sacrifice, and forgiveness all play a role in the practice of sending and receiving.

If I practice sending and receiving because I want to other people to experience well-being, then my actions are guided by “approach motivation.” Approach motivation means that my actions are driven by a desire to bring about positive goals or outcomes. Practicing sending and receiving out of approach motivation leads me to experience a greater sense of authenticity, psychological reward, and satisfaction.

If I practice sending and receiving because I feel obligated by duty, moral rules, or social expectations, then my actions are guided by “avoidance meditation.” Avoidance motivation means that my actions are driven by a desire to avoid negative experiences or negative outcomes (e.g., being criticized or ostracized by others). Practicing sending and receiving out of avoidance motivation leads me to experience a sense of coercion, resentment, and dissatisfaction.

No Expected Outcomes

You don't practice tonglen and then wait for the effect. You just do it and then drop it. You don't look for results. Whether it works or not, you just do it and drop it, do it and drop it. If it doesn't work, you take in, and if it works, you give out. So you do not possess anything. That is the whole idea. When anything comes out well, you give it away; if anything does not work out, you take it in.

– Chögyam Trungpa ³

I do not practice sending and receiving with the expectation that it will always result in beneficial outcomes.

I do not practice sending and receiving with the expectation that other people will act towards me in the same way.

I do not practice sending and receiving with the expectation that it will make

me popular or create friendships.

Instead, I practice sending and receiving to fulfill my ethical and spiritual commitments without expecting any specific outcomes.

References

1. Chögyam Trungpa (1993). *Training the Mind & Cultivating Loving-Kindness*. Boston, MA: Shambala Publications. Quote taken from page 26.
2. Chögyam Trungpa (1993). *Training the Mind & Cultivating Loving-Kindness*. Boston, MA: Shambala Publications. Quote taken from page 29.
3. Chögyam Trungpa (1993). *Training the Mind & Cultivating Loving-Kindness*. Boston, MA: Shambala Publications. Quote taken from page 32.

Finding Compassion in the Dark

Finding Compassion in the Dark is an exercise found in the book *ACT on life not on anger* by Georg Eifert, Matthew McKay, and John Forsyth.¹ The goal of the exercise is to cultivate a more compassionate mindset.

I cannot quote the instructions for Finding Compassion in the Dark because the length of the quote would infringe on the authors' copyright. I therefore offer paraphrased instructions below. I encourage anyone who finds my instructions confusing or deficient to read the original instructions in Eifert, McKay, and Forsyth's book.

Please read all the instructions before attempting to do the exercise.

Paraphrased Instructions

Imagine you are standing in a field with many people. There is no light. It is perpetually dark—darker than the darkest night. No one can see each other because of the darkness.

At one edge of the field is tall cliff. The cliff represents people's most profound fears and sources of suffering. The cliff represents death, shame, failure, isolation, loss, helplessness, and vulnerability. No one can see the edge of the cliff in the darkness.

Now imagine that you and everyone else in the field are destined to live your entire lives in the dark field. Everyone must seek sustenance, love, companionship, and help while constantly avoiding the risk of the unseen cliff. This keeps everyone in a state of anxiety and uncertainty. Everyone faces the challenge of surviving without falling off the cliff into the abyss.

Everyone does their best to get through lives given the circumstances. They

cope with the circumstances in different ways. Some charge forward, while others hesitate even at the slightest step. Some form attachments, while others push others away to avoid being dragged toward the edge. Some surrender to their perceived fate, while others search for a way to pierce the darkness and light their way. Some request aid, while others find solace in assisting others. You, too, cope in your own way.

Next imagine someone you love living in the dark field. Imagine your loved one's fears and struggles as they try to satisfy their needs and avoid the cliff. What does your loved one fear? What does your loved one struggle with? Allow yourself to feel a desire to help your loved one while keeping in mind their fears and struggles.

Finally, imagine someone you dislike or someone who upsets you living in the field. This person is trying to survive while avoiding the cliff—just like you. Are this person's fears and struggles completely dissimilar to your own? Try to imagine living in the field from this person's perspective. What would it be like to experience this person's fears and struggles? When you imagine the fears and struggles of the person who you dislike or who upsets you, what thoughts and feelings arise within you? There is no need to analyze or criticize the thoughts and feelings that arise within you. Just notice them and let them go.

Reference

1. Georg Eifert, Matthew McKay, & John Forsyth (2006). *ACT on life not on anger*. Oakland, CA: New Harbinger Publications. Exercise instructions found on pages 84-85.

Training My Mind: Calmness

Observing My Mind

Meditation is to be aware of what is going on—in our bodies, in our feelings, in our minds, and in the world.

– Thich Nhat Hanh ¹

Calming my mind includes relaxation. However, calming my mind refers to a more long-term tendency to remain calm in various situations. It refers to a personal quality of being calm.

Calming my mind begins with observing my mind.

Acknowledge and Let Go

When I observe my mind, many thoughts and feelings spontaneously arise. This is natural. Human brains continually generate thoughts and feelings. These thoughts and feelings help people conduct their everyday lives.

What am I supposed to do with the thoughts and feelings that arise when I observe my mind? Thich Nhat Hanh offers some advice in his book *The Miracle of Mindfulness*.

So what exactly should you be doing concerning such thoughts and feelings? Simply acknowledge their presence. For example, when a feeling of sadness arises, immediately recognize it: "A feeling of sadness has just arisen in me." If there is a thought like, "It's late but the neighbors are surely making a lot of noise," recognize that the thought has arisen. If the thought continues to exist, continue to recognize it. If a different feeling or thought arises, recognize it in the same manner. The essential thing is not to let any feeling or thought arise without recognizing it in mindfulness, like a palace guard who is aware of every face that

passes through the front corridor.

– Thich Nhat Hanh ²

Whenever a wholesome thought arises, acknowledge it: "A wholesome thought has just arisen." And if an unwholesome thought arises, acknowledge it as well: "An unwholesome thought has just arisen." Don't dwell on it or try to get rid of it, however much you don't like it. To acknowledge is enough.

– Thich Nhat Hanh ³

This advice greatly simplifies the practice of observing my mind. It eliminates the effort of trying to suppress thoughts and feelings. It eliminates the need for deep analysis of thoughts and feelings. It eliminates the self-condemnation of criticizing or negatively evaluating thoughts and feelings.

How Often and How Long

I follow the Dalai Lama's advice when it comes to the practice of observing my mind.

What good practice really requires is a constant stream of effort: a sustained, persistent approach based on long-term commitment. For this reason, practicing properly, even for a short period of time, is the best way. The emphasis should be on quality rather than quantity.

– Dalai Lama ⁴

Any Time and Place (Almost)

I can observe my mind while lying down, sitting, standing, walking, or carrying out everyday activities. The [Mahasatipatthana Sutta](#), a classic Buddhist text, teaches that people can be aware of the experiences their

bodies regardless of what they doing.

Again, monks, a monk while he is walking, understands properly: "I am walking"; while he is standing, he understands properly: "I am standing"; while he is sitting, he understands properly: "I am sitting"; while he is lying down, he understands properly: "I am lying down." In whichever position he disposes his body, he understands it properly. Thus he dwells observing the body...

– Mahasatipatthana Sutta ⁵

Just as I can be aware of my body regardless of what I am doing, I can be aware of what arises in my mind regardless of what I am doing.

I do not need to wait for a special time, go to a special place, or sit in a special posture in order to observe my mind. I can observe my mind almost any time and any place. I can observe my mind while my body is in almost any posture. Of course, I do not observe my mind when engaged in activities that require a lot of concentration or in activities that are dangerous.

References

1. Thich Nhat Hanh (1987). *Being Peace*. Berkeley, CA: Parallax Press. Quote taken from page 14.
2. Thich Nhat Hanh (1976). *The Miracle of Mindfulness*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press. Quote taken from page 38.
3. Thich Nhat Hanh (1976). *The Miracle of Mindfulness*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press. Quote taken from page 39.
4. Dalai Lama (2011). *Beyond Religion*. New York, NY: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt. Quote taken from page 184.

5. Mahasatipatthana Sutta. Translated by Vipassana Research Institute (1996). Published by Vipassana Research Publications. [Buy at Amazon](#). I also like the English version of the Mahasatipatthana Sutta translated by Ānandajoti Bhikkhu (2011), available at <https://www.ancient-buddhist-texts.net/English-Texts/Mindfulness/Mindfulness.pdf>. Quote taken from page 16 of Ānandajoti Bhikkhu's translation, which is found on page 7 of the Vipassana Reserch Institute's translation.

Quiet Breathing Meditation

The [Mahasatipatthana Sutta](#), a classic Buddhist text that teaches many forms of mental training, describes a simple breathing meditation.

While breathing in long,
he knows “I am breathing in long”,
or, while breathing out long,
he knows “I am breathing out long”,
or, while breathing in short,
he knows “I am breathing in short”,
or, while breathing out short,
he knows “I am breathing out short”.
Experiencing the whole body
I will breathe in, like this he trains,
experiencing the whole body
I will breathe out, like this he trains;

– Mahasatipatthana Sutta ¹

Thich Nhat Hanh refers to this meditation as Quiet Breathing. He describes Quiet Breathing meditation in his books *Peace is Every Step* and *The Miracle of Mindfulness*.

The first exercise is very simple. As you breathe in, you say to yourself, “Breathing in, I know that I am breathing in.” And as you breathe out, say, “Breathing out, I know that I am breathing out.” Just that. You recognize your in-breath as an in-breath and your out-breath as an out-breath. You don’t even need to recite the whole sentence; you can use just two words: “In” and “Out.” This technique can help you keep your mind on your breath. As you practice, your breath will become peaceful and gentle, and your mind and body will also become peaceful and gentle. This is not a

difficult exercise. In just a few minutes you can realize the fruit of meditation.

– Thich Nhat Hahn²

During Quiet Breathing meditation, thoughts and feelings spontaneously arise in my mind. There is no need to suppress these thoughts and feelings. There is no need to analyze them or criticize them. Simply acknowledge them and let them go. If a thought or feeling persists, simply acknowledge it persists and let it go.

While Quiet Breathing meditation can help me relax, it plays an important role in helping me observe my mind. Becoming an observer of my mind allows me to be more aware of what arises in my mind. Becoming an observer of my mind allows me to be less reactive to what arises in my mind—to not react in an immediate or “knee-jerk” fashion to thoughts and feelings when they appear. Quiet Breathing meditation cultivates relaxation, openness, and non-reactivity.

References

1. Mahasatipatthana Sutta. Translated by Vipassana Research Institute (1996). Published by Vipassana Research Publications. [Buy at Amazon](#). I also like the English version of the Mahasatipatthana Sutta translated by Ānandajoti Bhikkhu (2011), available at <https://www.ancient-buddhist-texts.net/English-Texts/Mindfulness/Mindfulness.pdf>. Quote taken from pages 17-18 of Ānandajoti Bhikkhu's translation, which is found on page 5 of the Vipassana Research Institute's translation.
2. Thich Nhat Hanh (1991). *Peace is Every Step*. Published in 1995 by Rider, an imprint of Ebury Publishing. First published in the USA in 1991 by Bantam, an imprint of Random House. Quote taken from pages 8-9.

Defusion Exercises

The concepts of “fusion” and “defusion” come from a form of psychological therapy known as Acceptance and Commitment Therapy. Russ Harris’ book [The Happiness Trap](#)¹ provides a good introduction to Acceptance and Commitment Therapy. It is written for a general audience and contains instructions for various exercises that people can do on their own.

Fusion and Defusion

When I fuse with my thoughts, it seems that:

- Thoughts are reality—what I'm thinking is actually happening, here and now.
- Thoughts are the truth—I automatically and completely believe them.
- Thoughts are important—I take them seriously and give them my full attention.
- Thoughts are orders—I automatically obey them.
- Thoughts are wise—I assume they know best, and I follow their advice.

In contrast, when I defuse my thoughts, it seems that:

- Thoughts are not reality—they are merely images, sounds, and words in my mind.
- Thoughts may or may not be true—I don’t automatically believe them.
- Thoughts may or may not be important—I pay attention only if they’re helpful.
- Thoughts are definitely not orders—I don’t have to obey them.
- Thoughts may or may not be wise—I don’t blindly follow their advice.

When I defuse my thoughts, I am less likely to have automatic “knee-jerk”

reactions to my thoughts. I often end up regretting my automatic “knee-jerk” reactions. Defusion lets me step back and consider whether or not I want to act on a thought. I can more carefully choose my actions. The same applies for fusion and defusion with feelings.

Defusion Exercises

Below are instructions for two defusion exercises in Russ Harris’ book [The Happiness Trap](#). I use both of these exercises in my personal practice.

The first defusion exercise is Naming My Stories.

Identify your mind’s favorite stories, then give them names, such as the “loser!” story, or the “my life sucks!” story, or the “I can’t do it!” story. Often there will be several variations on a theme. For example, the “nobody likes me” story may show up as “I’m boring,” the “I’m undesirable” story as “I’m fat,” and the “I’m inadequate” story as “I’m stupid.” When your stories show up, acknowledge them by name. For example, you could say to yourself, “Ah yes. I recognize this. That old favorite, the I’m a failure story.” Or “Aha! Here comes the I can’t cope story.” Once you’ve acknowledged a story, that’s it—just let it be. You don’t have to challenge it or push it away, nor do you have to give it much attention. Simply let it come and go as it pleases, while you channel your energy into doing something you value.

– Russ Harris ²

Naming my stories lets me take a step back from habitual thoughts or feelings that have proven unhelpful in my life. Taking a step back puts some mental distance between me and the habitual thoughts or feelings. The habitual thoughts or feelings still arise, but I do not have fuse with them or immediately react to them.

The second defusion exercise is Thanking My Mind.

When your mind starts coming up with those same old stories, simply thank it. You could say to yourself (silently) things such as, “Thank you, Mind! How very informative!” or “Thanks for sharing!” or “Is that right? How fascinating!” or simply, “Thanks, Mind!” When thanking your mind, don’t do it sarcastically or aggressively. Do it with warmth and humor and with a genuine appreciation for the amazing storytelling ability of your mind.

– Russ Harris ³

I prefer to thank my brain for the thoughts and feelings it generates. I find it easier to thank a physical part of my body rather than thanking a more abstract concept like my mind. I also believe that my brain generates my thoughts and feelings.

So, for example, I may thank my brain for a thought by silently saying, “Thanks for that thought. I know you trying to help me in your own way. I appreciate you looking out for me. But I don’t think that thought will be helpful in this situation. I am not going to act on that thought. But thanks again for trying to help me.” It may sound silly, but I have found this exercise works for me.

Other defusion exercises that I sometimes practice are Demons on a Boat ⁴ and Leaves on a Stream.⁵ Remember, these are just a few examples of defusion exercises. People interested in learning more about defusion exercises might want to explore Russ Harris’ book [The Happiness Trap](#) and Steven Hayes and Spencer Smith’s book [Get Out of Your Mind and Into Your Life](#).

References

1. Russ Harris (2011). *The Happiness Trap*. Boston, MA: Trumpet Books.

Fusion and defusion described on pages 39-41.

2. Russ Harris (2011). *The Happiness Trap*. Boston, MA: Trumpet Books. Defusion exercise found on page 44.
3. Russ Harris (2011). *The Happiness Trap*. Boston, MA: Trumpet Books. Defusion exercise found on page 51.
4. Russ Harris (2011). *The Happiness Trap*. Boston, MA: Trumpet Books. Defusion exercise found on pages 76-77.
5. Steven Hayes and Spencer Smith (2005). *Get Out of Your Mind and Into Your Life*. Oakland, CA: New Harbinger Publications. Defusion exercise found on pages 76-77.

Relaxation Exercises

I am more likely to get angry or upset when my body is tense. I am less likely to get angry or upset when my body is relaxed. Learning to relax my body helps my mind remain calm.

A Simple Relaxation Exercise

I frequently use a simple relaxation exercise involving deep breaths.

When I notice that my body is tense, I take a deep breath in, then let my body relax during the exhale. During the exhale I try to let all my muscles release their tension. I let all my muscles go limp (or as limp as practical if I am engaged in an activity). I mentally check to determine if I am still tense. If I am still tense, then I repeat the deep breath relaxation exercise.

One or two deep breaths is usually enough to relax my body. If I need to repeat the deep breath relaxation exercise more than two times, I take a few normal breaths before taking another deep breath. Too many deep breaths in a row can result in hyperventilation.

Listening to Mantras

Buddhist mantras are sounds, words, or phrases that are repeatedly recited as part of meditation or rituals. The repetition of mantras helps people focus on the meanings or the spiritual qualities associated with the mantras.

I treat listening to mantras as a relaxation exercise. That is, I enjoy listening to mantras in the same way that I enjoy listening to other music. I find it relaxing.

Here are a few performances of mantras that I happen to find relaxing:

- [Usnisa Vijaya Dharani performed by Tinna Tinh](#)
- [Heart Sutra – Japanese Version performed by Tinna Tinh](#)
- [Usnisa Vijaya Dharani performed by Tinna Tinh](#)
- [Taytha Om Bekanze Bekanze performed by Tinna Tinh](#)
- [Bekan Mantra performed by Drukmo Gyal](#)
- [Mantra of Manjushri performed by Lama Tenzin Sangpo and Margot Reisinger](#)
- [Teyata Om Bekanze Bekanze performed by Deva Premal](#)
- [Medicine Buddha performed by Maneesh de Moor](#)
- [Yamantaka performed by the Gyuto Monks](#)
- [Mahakala performed by the Gyuto Monks](#)

Other Relaxation Exercises

There are many other relaxation exercises. People might want to try a number of relaxation exercises in order to discover which exercises work best for them. Here are a few resources to begin learning more about relaxation exercises:

- [Relaxation \(pdf\)](#)
- [Relaxation and Relaxation Exercises \(pdf\)](#)
- [Quick Relaxation Strategies \(pdf\)](#)
- [Relaxation Techniques \(pdf\)](#)

- [The Relaxation and Stress Reduction Workbook \(book\)](#)
- [How To Implement Effective Relaxation Techniques \(book\)](#)

There is nothing in this life but mist,
and we will only be alive
but for a short little while.

– Aisling's Song, from the
movie *The Secret of Kells*

