

Three Guided Meditations

Adapted from “The Wise Heart” by Jack Kornfield

Here are three guided meditations that you may find helpful. If you are struggling to keep your Winter Feast commitment, maybe having something new will help you. If you are doing fine, you can save these for some future time. The first meditation is on sound. Noise in prison is a real issue for meditators. This meditation takes a different approach by actually focusing on the sound and bringing it carefully and deliberately into one’s awareness.

Meditation 1: The River of Sound and Sky-like Mind

Sit comfortably and at ease. Close your eyes. Let your body be at rest and your breathing be natural. Begin to listen to the play of sounds around you. Notice those that are loud or soft, far and near. Notice how sounds arise and vanish on their own, leaving no trace. After you have listened for a few minutes, let yourself sense, feel, or imagine that your mind is not limited to your head. Sense that your mind is expanding to be open like the sky—clear, vast like space. Feel that your mind extends outward beyond the most distant sounds. Imagine there are no boundaries to your mind, no inside or outside. Let the awareness of your mind extend in every direction like the open sky.

Relax in this openness and just listen. Now every sound you hear—people, slamming doors, wind, the count whistle, as well as soft and subtle sounds—will arise and pass away like a cloud in the open space of your own mind. Let the sounds come and go, whether loud or soft, far or near, let them be clouds in the vast sky of your own awareness, appearing and disappearing without resistance. As you rest in this open awareness for a time, notice how thoughts and feelings also arise and vanish like sounds in the open space of mind. Let the thoughts and feelings come and go without struggle or resistance. Pleasant and unpleasant thoughts, pictures, words, joys, and sorrows—let them all come and go like clouds in the clear sky of mind.

Then, in this spacious awareness also notice how you experience the body. The mind is not in the body. The body sensations float and change in the open sky of mind. The breath breathes itself; it moves like a breeze. If you observe carefully, the body is not solid. It reveals itself as areas of hardness and softness, pressure and tingling, warm and cool sensation, all floating in the space of awareness.

Relax. Rest in this openness. Let sensations float and change. Allow thoughts and images, feelings and sounds to come and go like clouds in the clear, open space of awareness. As you do, pay attention to the consciousness itself. Notice how the open space of awareness is clear, transparent, timeless, and without conflict—allowing for all things but not limited by them. This is your own true nature. Rest in it. Trust it. It is home.

The second meditation is on letting go of old stuff, “baggage”—not because you should, but because you will be lighter without it. But don’t approach this meditation like it’s a charm or incantation that can make your sorrows and heavy moods disappear. What you are practicing in this meditation is willingness, willingness to release, willingness to put down your story. Some grievances can be “let go” without too much struggle. Others, like those you have been holding on to for years or which have wounded you deeply, will take time. You have practiced “holding on” with great diligence and

perseverance! Letting go will take practice too, but once you see the difference it makes in how you feel, it will become easier and easier. Be gentle and don't try to force it. If the meditation doesn't seem to be working, you might want to let that grievance be and try the meditation again in a few months.

Meditation 2: Letting Go

Letting go does not mean losing the knowledge we have gained from the past. The knowledge of the past stays with us. To let go is simply to release any images and emotions, grudges and fears, clings and disappointments that bind our spirit. Like emptying a cup, letting go leaves us free to receive, refreshed, sensitive and awake.

To practice letting go, let yourself sit comfortably and quietly. Bring a kind, gentle attention to your body and breath. Relax into the ground of the present for several minutes.

Now bring into awareness any story, situation, feelings, and reactions that it is time to let go of. Name them gently (betrayal, sadness, anxiety, etc.) and allow them the space to be, to float without resistance, held in a heart of compassion. Continue to breathe. Feel the unhappiness that comes from holding on. Ask yourself, "Do I have to continue to replay this story? Do I have to hold on to these feelings? Is it time to let this go?" The heart will know. Ask yourself if it is indeed wise to release this holding. Feel the benefit, the ease that will come from letting this go.

Now begin to say to yourself, "Let go, let go," gently, over and over. Soften the body and heart and let any feelings that arise drain out of you like water draining out of a tub. Let the images go, the beliefs, the self-righteousness, the unworthiness. Let it all go. Feel the space that comes as you let go, how the heart releases and the body opens.

Now direct the mind to envision the future where this circumstance has been released. Sense the freedom, the innocence, the ease that this letting go can bring. Say to yourself "Let go" several more times. Sit quietly and notice if the feelings return. Each time they return, breathe softly as if to bow to them, and say kindly, "I've let you go."

The images and feelings may come back many times (many many times), yet as you continue to practice, they will eventually fade. Gradually the mind will come to trust the space of letting go. Gradually the heart will be easy and you will be free.

The third meditation is on equanimity and peace. The dictionary defines equanimity as "mental calmness, composure, and evenness of temper, especially in a difficult situation." Equanimity in this meditation is viewed as an approach to life itself. You will recognize the pattern of this meditation from the loving kindness meditation, beginning with the self or those you care for most, and gradually expanding to include more and more beings. You can use this pattern of meditation with any kind wish or sentiment you want.

Meditation 3: on equanimity and peace

To cultivate the qualities of equanimity and peace, sit in a comfortable posture with your eyes closed. Bring a soft attention to your breath until your body and mind are calm. Reflect for a moment on the

benefit of a mind that has balance and equanimity. Sense what a gift it can be to bring a peaceful heart to the world around you. Let yourself feel an inner sense of balance and ease. Then with each breath begin gently repeating such phrases as:

Breathing in, I calm my body ... Breathing out, I calm my mind ... May I be balanced ... May I be at peace.

Stay with these phrases until you feel quiet in your body and mind. Then broaden the sense of calm into a spacious equanimity. Acknowledge that all created things arise and pass away: joys, sorrows, pleasant and painful events, people, buildings, animals, nations, even whole civilizations. Let yourself rest in the midst of them.

May I learn to see the arising and passing of all things with equanimity and balance.

May I be open and balanced and peaceful.

When you have established a sense of equanimity and peace, begin to picture, one at a time, your loved ones. Carefully recite the same sample phrases:

May you learn to see the arising and passing of all things with equanimity and balance.

May you be open and balanced and peaceful.

Let the image of each loved one be surrounded with peace. Continue as best you can, breathing gently, patiently wishing peace, repeating the phrases no matter what arises.

As the quality of equanimity and peace grows you can gradually expand the meditation to include others. Start with your benefactors, those who have cared for you. Picture each person in turn, reciting inwardly the same phrases, offering a blessing of peace as you continue. Then gradually expand the circle of the meditation to include friends, neighbors, neutral people, animals, all beings, the earth.

May you learn to see the arising and passing of all things with equanimity and balance.

May you be open and balanced and peaceful.

Finally, you can include the difficult people in your life, even those that you might consider your enemies, wishing that they too find equanimity and peace.

As you reflect on each person, it is traditional to acknowledge that all beings are heirs to the consequences of their own actions. Their lives arise and pass away according to the deeds created by them. We can deeply care for them, but in the end we cannot act for them nor let go for them nor love for them. If it is helpful in freeing the heart, you can recite:

Your happiness and suffering depend on your actions and not on my wishes for you.

Reflecting with wisdom on beings and their deeds, you can now picture each one and return to these simple phrases:

May you learn to see the arising and passing of all things with equanimity and balance.

May you be open and balanced and peaceful.

Continue this practice as long and as often as you wish, breathing and resting the heart in natural great peace.