

COMPASSION WORKS FOR ALL

Dharma Friends

For people in real and imagined prisons | Issue 229 | Summer 2020

HOW TO BE MINDFUL DURING A GLOBAL PANDEMIC

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From **The Director**



Hello! It's been awhile since you've received a newsletter from us. For our regular readers, it's great to be with you again. And if you're reading our

publication for the first time, welcome!

Compassion Works for All is a nonprofit based in Little Rock, AR. Since 2005, we have made it our mission to bring healing and hope through mindfulness to people living in jails and prisons. We are an organization rooted in Buddhist teachings and philosophies but, as our name indicates, we are open to all! For those who have access to the internet, our website (compassionworksforall.org) has an entire page dedicated to meditation and mindfulness resources for people from all faiths, no faith, as well as "secular" and clinical information. If you do not have internet access but would like to read our resources, feel free to mail in a request. We hope you find this newsletter and the offerings of our organization beneficial and life-giving.

My name is Cory Jones. I have served as the Executive Director of CWFA since January of this year. I look forward to developing a relationship with as many of you as possible

through our correspondence. As our long-time readers know, we strongly encourage you to send us your artwork, poetry, essays, letters, comments, or anything else you might like to share. We have a team of volunteers ready to answer questions or requests that pour in from around the country and globe. If you'd like, we would also love to feature your submissions in an upcoming issue. This publication goes out to over 3,000 people in all 50 states and in 5 countries, and we'd be thrilled to share the things you send in.

This current issue is focused on breathing during the Coronavirus pandemic. In addition to concern for our physical well-being, we have all been forced to restructure routines, expectations, and relationships. Maintaining a deep sense of inward peace can be difficult under the best circumstances, but especially in these unstable times. My hope is that the pages of this issue will provide you with some tools and thoughts to guide you toward that state of inner peace which will overflow to the environment and people around you.

Namaste,

Cory
cory@compassionarkansas.org

MESSAGE FROM OUR FOUNDER

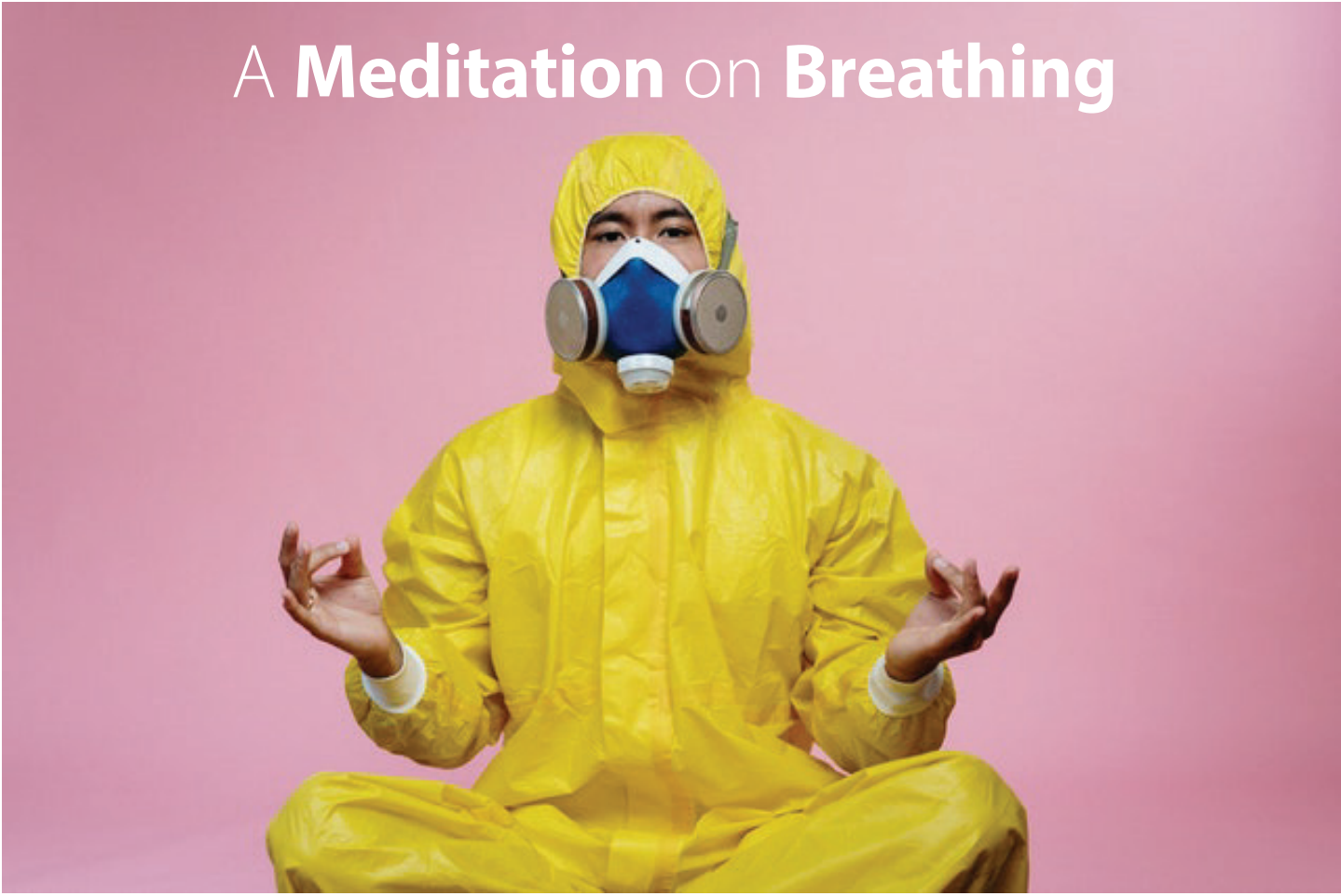
Kristopher Davis update

By Anna Cox

This is Anna sending my love to all of you. I have some sad news, however, that our long time Dharma Friends/Compassion Works for All supporter and letter writer, Kristopher Davis, is hospitalized after having had a stroke. Many of you know that Kristopher has been actively involved in sending you great compassion and words of wisdom for 20 years. Many of you received regular letters of healing and friendship during this time and I know he has been the lifesaving inspiration for many. If you wrote to him recently, I did not want you to worry if you don't hear back for a while. We will give you an update in the next newsletter. I know that your love and prayers and healing meditations will be the very best way to bring him back to us in good health. And all those meditations floating towards Kristopher will benefit all suffering beings all over our struggling planet.

Thank you.
I miss every one of you.

A Meditation on Breathing



By CORY JONES

The breath is central to a mindful life.

As you may know, the COVID-19 virus is a respiratory illness that coats the lungs with film making it difficult to get oxygen. In some people, the virus manifests as a simple cough or fever. But others require hospitalization, breathing treatments, and possibly ventilators to keep air passing in and out of the body.

Oxygen is the animating force of our lives. This is true biologically as well as spiritually. For example, in the book of Genesis, the Adam only came “alive” when the Creator breathed air into his nostrils. In Hinduism, Atman (“Self” or “Breath” in Sanskrit) causes our physical bodies to come alive and function for their intended purpose.

In fact, in many ancient religions,

the word for breath and god are often identical or similar.

Hazrat Inayat Khan, the great 20th century mystic, once wrote:

“Seen from this point of view one will realize that man has never been separated from God; that with every breath, man touches God. He is linked with God by the current of breath. Just like people drawing water from a well, the rope in their hands and the jug of water in the well. The jug has the water, but the rope is in the hand. In so far as our soul is in the spirit of God, it is the ray of the divine sun, while the other end of it is what we call breath.”

Breath is crucial for understanding your spiritual self.

Biologically, your breath is like a remote control for your mind. When you inhale through your nose, air passes through an olfactory system that connects your nostrils to your sinuses, your sinuses to your airways, and your airways to your lungs. But the olfactory system is also connected to nerves that pass directly into your brain’s limbic area, sometimes called the emotion center of the brain. These particular nerves are connected to a part of the limbic system called the hippocampus, which is where our brains store memories that we hold for safekeeping. This is why the sense of smell is the sense closest linked to memory. Its nerves are literally closer to the memories stored in your brain than any of the other four senses (hearing, taste, sight, and touch).

See **Breathing** on **Page 7**



Poetry

Awake my Dear

By **Hafiz**

Awake, my dear.

Be kind
to your sleeping heart.

Take it out
into the vast fields
of Light

And let it
breathe.

YOUR WORK **HERE**

Share your art, poetry, and/or essays with us. Send to:

Compassion Works for All
C/O Cory Jones
PO BOX 7708
Little Rock, AR 72217-7708

We will include submissions in all our future newsletters!

Yoga On The Inside

By Tanesha Forest

Try these mindful movement poses to open the chest and find your breath.

1. Modified Fish

Lie on your back.
Feet flat on the floor.
Knees bent.
Roll a blanket or pillow just below your
shoulder blades to open the chest.
Take 5 deep breaths.



2. Bind to open chest

Sit upright in a comfortable posture.
Interlock fingers behind your back.
Roll your shoulders away from the ears.
Look up slightly and press your chest
outward and upward.
Take 5 deep breaths.



3. Side Body Stretch (left arm)

Sit upright on the floor.
Slide your right hand out to
the side to support you.
Reach your left arm up and
then bend to the right.
Take 3 deep breaths.



4. Side Body Stretch (right arm)

Sit upright on the floor.
Slide your left hand out
to the side to support you.
Reach your right arm up and
then bend to the left.
Take 3 deep breaths.



Finding Silence **In the Noise**

By **Frankie Peters**

“In the stillness of the quiet, if we listen, we can hear the whisper of the heart giving strength to weakness, courage to fear, hope to despair.” -Howard Thurman

When asked to write an article for the Dharma Friends newsletter, I decided to share my experience of seeking silence in an increasingly noisy world. Silence has been my spiritual practice for some time now, and I teach a class to seniors on this topic for Lifequest of Arkansas.

Regardless of religious belief, political persuasion, ethnic identification, economic status or nationality, the need for quieting the mind in order to hear the heart's wisdom is universal. The human mind is a noisy place, at least mine is. But I have learned that we can find stillness and silence within with a little effort and practice. Within that silence, we find a connection to our best selves that brings peace, forgiveness and compassion for self and for others.

I have never been in prison, so I do not have direct experience in the environment in which most of you live. What I do know, I learned from men I met while a volunteer letter-writer for Compassion Works for All. As many of you know, CWFA was founded by Buddhist teacher and spiritual leader, Anna Cox, to serve those who are living in prisons throughout the world. Inspired by Anna's example, I began writing letters to people in prison sharing meditation techniques that Anna and others had taught me. My compassion grew as I learned about your lives inside, and your struggles to accept your past actions and your present

circumstances. I quickly found that many of the men I corresponded with had more to teach me about forgiveness and compassion than I had to teach them.

One such man is Elvis G., a lifer in the Florida penitentiary system. Elvis is a man in his late sixties who has been inside since his early twenties. When his letter to CWFA was passed along to me for a response, he was seeking companionship on the Buddhist path. He said that he had been unable to discuss the Dharma with anyone else in the prison because he was in solitary confinement. Nobody he encountered was interested in meditation or Buddhist teachings, but he did receive the Dharma Friends newsletter. After a couple of letters, I could tell that he was sincere and a dedicated practitioner already. I sensed that Elvis had much to teach me.

Elvis and I exchanged letters for several years and became friends due to our mutual interest in the Buddhist path and in training the mind to quiet incessant thinking. Through him I learned that prisons are very noisy places, especially in the general population. To focus your attention within is not only a big challenge but can even be dangerous. Your physical and mental well-being are threatened daily, and any sort of spiritual pursuit seems almost impossible. However, Elvis was able to progress steadily along his chosen path and had become a dedicated meditator.

He founded a prison sangha (community) by teaching several other men meditation techniques and working with the prison chaplain to get the necessary sanctions. Through meditation and dedication to the Dharma, Elvis forgave himself and found a well of compassion within that allowed him to have great compassion for others. I am very grateful to have stumbled into an unlikely friendship with this wise and compassionate fellow practitioner.

Here are some of the suggestions that Elvis, Anna, and other teachers have shared with me over the years to help train my mind to find silence within.

- Sit in a comfortable but upright position either cross-legged or in a chair with feet on the floor.
- Hands may rest on your knees or in your lap with thumbs touching and one palm resting in the other. Eyes may be closed or slightly open and unfocused, unless you find it helpful to gaze on a special object like a picture of a spiritual teacher.
- While a relaxed, upright posture is helpful, especially when you are first learning to find stillness, it becomes less important as your mind begins to quiet down.
- The key for me has been to use my breath as a focal point, either feeling the breath coming in and going out at the nostrils or feeling the rise and fall of the belly. This focus grounds you in your body and gives the mind something to do.

See **Noise** on **Page 7**

Noise

Continued from Page 6

- When thoughts arise, gently bring your mind back to your breath.
- I started meditation by setting a timer for five minutes, and I struggled for quite some time to stay focused on my breath for even that short a time. Gradually, I could sit for extended periods, but I still set a timer for 20 minutes most sessions.

At first, I was determined to find the “right way” to meditate. I wanted to achieve perfection! But meditation is not about achieving anything. It is not about being a better person. It is not about finding nirvana or enlightenment. It is not about doing anything really—it is about simply being. It is an effective tool for training the mind to relax, to slow down, to let stillness and silence become dominant. One teacher said to me,

“Drop the story you have told yourself about your life. You are not your story. You are not your thoughts.”

We are all more than the sum of our experiences. Each of us has a deeper self, a buddhanature, that we only come to know when we find a way to drop out of our heads and into our hearts.

When we learn to listen to our deeper selves, we find a wellspring of compassion and love. My teachers also taught me that we must begin with compassion for ourselves. I think this is particularly difficult for those who have been judged harshly all their lives by parents, teachers, and other authority figures. We believe we are

bad or wrong or flawed beyond redemption. Overcoming a lifetime of negative thinking about yourself is not an easy task. Forgiving yourself is not easy, especially when others have not forgiven you. But with practice, with perseverance, with patience, it is possible.

So, when thoughts arise and you catch your mind wandering, be kind. Our minds never actually stop thinking because that’s what the mind does. But focusing on your breath always brings you into the present moment. And the more you practice dropping out of the thinking mind, the more peaceful you will become within. The more the thoughts are silenced, the more you will find your true wisdom and compassion within. In the book entitled, *Silence: The Power of Quiet in a World Full of Noise*, Buddhist monk and author, Thich Nhat Hanh, writes:

“To fully experience this life as a human being, we all need to connect with our desire to realize something larger than our individual selves. This can be motivation enough to change our ways so we can find relief from the noise that fills our heads.”

All the world’s great religions recognize the need for silence and contemplation in our spiritual journey. So, whether you are Christian or Buddhist, Jewish or Muslim, agnostic or atheist, you will benefit from finding your path to silence within. You will come to know the love and compassion that resides within you. Your heart will soften, and your innate wisdom will arise.

May you all find your path to wisdom, to compassion for self and others, to the peace that passes all understanding. May you all find silence within the noise that is life.

Breathing

Continued from Page 3

Because of this, your brain pauses just a bit when you attempt to smell something. It searches its memory bank for familiar smells that give context to where you are in space and time. In that pause, your brain comes to a singular focus, creating a sense of peace and calm.

But research has shown that even if you smell nothing, inhaling through the nose still activates this part of your brain, causing it to slow down and focus on the present environment. That’s why we tell each other to take a deep breath before we perform a challenging task, or to help us calm down when our emotions start to get away from us. A deep, cleansing breath recenters the mind and tethers us back into the present moment.

So, together, let’s try it.

- Pause here. Inhale through the nose. Exhale through the nose.
- Inhale again. Let it fill up your chest and go all the way down into your belly. Feel your belly fill up like a balloon.
- Let your exhale last just as long as the inhale.
- Inhale again. Place your hand on your chest and feel the air as it rushes in to give life to your body.
- Exhale. And focus on the air all the way to the very end of your breath.
- Do this three or four more times and then let your breath return to normal.
- Now pause. Notice how you feel. Sense the connection between your mind and your body.

With one last deep breath, give thanks for the air that animates us and brings us to life!

Bulletin Board

Write To Us!

Ask Tim

Tim answers letters asking for help with those things that we know you cannot do in prison. Tim looks up resources, but there are a few things he cannot do: Tim is not qualified to counsel about personal and/or relationship problems. Money or 'things' will never be given to any writer. We will not provide addresses of individuals in the free world to anyone. We cannot provide information obtained from Facebook or other social media websites.

Request Topics

Let us know what topics you'd like to read about. Whether you're brand new to mindfulness and meditation or a seasoned pro, let us know what piques your interest and it might be featured in a future newsletter.

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