

CHAPTER 9

THE LAW OF SACRED PRACTICE

Sacred Activists cannot begin to live from the depths of Divine Consciousness and act from the depths of Divine Wisdom and Compassion without first making the commitment to a daily spiritual discipline. The Jungian analyst Marion Woodman, a pioneer of the Divine Feminine, once said to me, “Continuing to do pioneering sacred work in a world as crazy and painful as ours without constantly grounding yourself in sacred practice would be like running into a forest fire dressed only in a paper tutu.”

When Mahatma Gandhi was asked what helped him persevere through decades of struggle and defeat, he said prayer and meditation were the keys to his survival. I once asked the Dalai Lama what gave him the strength to keep on working for the freedom of Tibet, and he replied, “I begin each day with three hours of meditation and visualization practices. It is they that give me what little calm and wisdom and persistence I have.” When I met Mother Teresa on one of her visits to England in the 1970s, I asked her where she found the faith to go on working day in, day out, with the ill and abandoned and dying. She replied, “Every morning, whether I am well or sick, I sit in silence before the Holy Sacrament. I find that

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adoration of the Holy Sacrament helps Jesus fill me with everything I will need for the day. And when at the end of the day I am empty, I know from long experience that the next day I will be filled again." I have met several people who knew Martin Luther King, Jr. They all told me that the foundation of his heroic work for peace and nonviolence was a profound prayer practice that kept him buoyant and full of energy through all the betrayals and defeats he endured. One person told me, "Martin was a man whose inner being was relentlessly sculpted by prayer; this is what gave him both the passion that kept flaming from him even in the midst of despair and the peace and humor he radiated even in the midst of the most harrowing circumstances."

One of the contemporary Sacred Activists I admire most is Julia Butterfly Hill. I sat on a panel with her once and she moved me deeply with her inner and outer beauty and the integrity that shone from her, like light from a diamond. When Julia was living in the towering redwood tree she called Luna to prevent it and the ancient forest around it from being cut down, she learned, she told me, not only how to meditate but also to connect "with the inner peace and strength of Luna herself, the strength and peace of the sacred force that lived inside her." It was through connecting with this force that she was able to stay calm and concentrated on her mission even in her most difficult moments. When I myself was enduring repeated death threats and harassment of all kinds after I left my guru, there were many months in which I could only find the strength to go on testifying in public to what had happened by saying the Hail Mary over and over again. It was in this time that I came to learn how impassioned and sincere prayer can fill you with a courage and energy beyond ordinary human capacity.

From my own experience of being a Sacred Activist, I have discovered that four kinds of sacred practice are essential for a joyful embodiment of Divine Love and Wisdom in action: cool practices, warm practices, prayer, and sacred body practices.

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COOL PRACTICES

Practices such as simple meditation, walking meditation, chanting, and saying the name of God peacefully in the heart help us keep calm and grounded and allow us to experience the transcendent peace of our inner divine being in the middle of the storms of our world. The Divine, as all mystics know, is calm, serene, and blissful in its essential Being. The cool practices enable you to stay connected to, and constantly be upheld by, this calm serenity and bliss. This is especially important for Sacred Activists with my kind of passionate, impetuous nature; the dark side of passion and impetuosity are anger, judgmental ferocity, and isolating self-righteousness. These, I have found, can be transformed only by constant immersion in the cool practices. Working with the cool practices steadies me, allows me to see clearly when I am succumbing to panic or fury, and gives me the kind of detachment and peace of spirit that are not natural to me but that I have begun to acquire through daily discipline.

I have found, too, that one of the potential drawbacks of caring passionately about the future of the planet is that it has often made me impatient: I am impatient by nature, as anyone who has met me knows all too well, and all my life have struggled with a kind of impatient imperiousness that demands immediate results. Nearly all the activists I have met suffer from a variation of this impatience, and I have sympathy for them. While such impatience can in certain circumstances get necessary things done quickly and efficiently, it can also sever you from the more peaceful and serene rhythms of authentic divine action and cause unnecessary suffering when things do not go well. This is of no use whatsoever in the rigorous conditions of the real world.

I spoke of this once with Bernard Kouchner, the co-founder of Doctors Without Borders, whose fiery temperament I recognized as like my own. When I described to him how much I needed the “cool” practices to counterbalance the passion and wildness that are natural to me, he laughed. “Without meditation I think I would have committed murder or suicide,” he said, “and that, I hope you agree, would have been a pity.”

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The transcendent realism of the I Ching expresses the power and truth of the cool practices in the commentary on Hexagram 52, “Gen: keeping still, mountain.” In the explanation of the hexagram we find this instruction: “keeping his back still so that he no longer feels his body.” The commentary tells us that this phrase signifies the end and the beginning of all movement. The back is named because in the back are located all the nerve fibers that mediate movement. If the movement is brought to a standstill, the ego with its restlessness disappears. The commentary adds “when a man has thus become calm, he may turn to the outside world. He no longer sees in it the struggle and tumult of individual beings, and therefore he has that true peace of mind which is needed for understanding the great laws of the universe and for acting in harmony with them. Whoever acts from these deep levels makes no mistakes.”

Nearly all of the mistakes I have made have been because I was too undisciplined to “act from these deep levels.” Over years of causing offense by my unchecked intensity, I have, I hope, begun to learn my lesson. The only criticism Father Bede ever gave me, which I have tried never to forget, was: “Sometimes, I expect you are ‘too much’ even for yourself. You will always need to practice peace. Remember that the flame of a candle can only burn and continue to burn so long as it is fed by wax or oil. That wax or oil is inner peace. That is why Saint Francis chose in his prayer to ask to be made an instrument of peace, and that is why perhaps the greatest gift of the Christ consciousness is, as Jesus promised us, the ‘peace beyond understanding.’”

WARM PRACTICES

Cool practices, while basic to the Path of Radical Embodiment, are not the only practices we need in the turmoil of the world; we must also know how to access the fire energies of the heart, Warm practices—such as Sufi heart practices, Hinayana Buddhist practices of Metta, loving-kindness to all beings, and passionate devotional

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chanting—are essential to keeping the heart center open and flowing with the passion of compassion. They enable the joyful energy of Divine Love to remain alive and vibrant in you through times of frustration, disappointment, defeat, and anguish.

If you practice the cool practices exclusively, you can become, as a Buddhist environmental activist once said to me, “too damn heavenly and serene to be of any earthly use.” The peace, serenity, and bliss that the cool practices provide can be used by the subtle ego as a drug to mask the agony of the world and the urgent need for action to remedy that agony. In our time, most seekers have fallen prey to this temptation, which, when you succumb to it, creates a false detachment from reality and a subtle arrogance. This is especially dangerous for Sacred Activists, who need to bring about within themselves a difficult Sacred Marriage of serenity and urgency, inner peace and passionately compassionate energy. For the work of the Birth, you need both sacred peace and sacred passion. You need to be able to integrate and unite, at ever greater and subtler depths, the essential peace of Divine Being with the essential radiant and holy passion of Divine Becoming, the transcendent Wisdom Serenity of the Father with the ever-flowing Love Fire of the Mother. Only such a Sacred Marriage can help you become more richly, wisely, and completely the conduit of the full Divine Consciousness, with access to both its serene detachment and its focused power. As Kabir wrote, “My father is the transcendent Absolute, and my mother is the embodied Godhead. I am their Divine child, dancing in the burning-ground of life with the Father’s peace and the Mother’s wild love.”

One of the limitations of the patriarchal religions and mystical systems is that, in their fear of “feminine” passion, they overstress the primacy of the cool practices. In my 20 years of experience as a spiritual teacher in the West, I have found that much New Age work has focused on the “cool” as well. In many cases this has led to what I can only call a “lopsided awakening,” one that, while it may put you in touch with Divine Being, with healing and sometimes transformative results, does not help you access the passion and intensity that you also need to fuel sacred action. Rumi was

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once asked what characterized a true lover of God; he replied, “The power of passion that comes from heartbreak and the peace of serenity that comes from surrender.” Tibetan master Nyoshul Khenpo expresses this union of peaceful wisdom and passionate compassion and the “skillful means” that are engendered by it in this way:

An effortless compassion can arise for all beings who have not realized their true nature. So limitless is it that if tears could express it, you would cry without end. Not only compassion, but tremendous skillful means can be born when you realize the nature of the mind. Also you are naturally liberated from all suffering and fear . . . If you were to speak of the joy and bliss that arises from this realization, it is said by the Buddhas that if you were to gather all the glory, enjoyment, pleasure, and happiness of the world and put it all together, it would not approach one tiny fraction of the bliss that you experience upon realizing the nature of mind.

The bliss that Nyoshul Khenpo is celebrating is what some mystics call the Great Bliss. Inspired by this Great Bliss that is a fusion of the dynamic opposites within the Divine itself, the Sacred Activist can endure and risk anything for the victory of compassion and justice in the world. Rumi calls this “the wine that keeps the warrior lucidly drunk and brave in the heat of battle.” If you want to experience what this fusion of sacred peace and sacred passion can make possible, watch the footage of Martin Luther King, Jr., delivering his great “I Have a Dream” speech on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial. King is in calm possession of his soul, rooted in his body, and utterly on fire with pure prophetic ecstasy and passion. This fusion of opposites enables him not only to deliver a message of transforming truth, but to be a living sign of its power.

Another crucial reason for doing the warm practices is that they allow you to keep your heart open when you are threatened

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by “compassion fatigue.” The world we have created out of our ignorance and greed is aflame with pain; it is very hard to remain open to this suffering without falling asleep or lapsing into denial. In developing the vision of Sacred Activism I have presented here, I have often had to face despair and fight the urge not to feel the reality of the Death in all its horror. While I need the cool practices constantly, I find I need the warm practices, too, to help me endure heartbreak long enough to discover the treasure of compassionate passion-energy hidden in its core.

As Rumi wrote: “Wherever you may be, in whatever situation or circumstance you may find yourself, strive always to be a lover, and a passionate lover. Once you possess your heart in love, you will always be a lover, in the tomb, at the Resurrection, and in Paradise forever. Sow wheat and wheat will grow; wheat will flourish in the fields, and bread will glow in the oven.”

Warm practices are what enable you to keep the bread of passionate compassion glowing in the oven of the heart.

THE PRACTICE OF PRAYER

When I was a young, disillusioned Fellow of All Souls College, Oxford, I had the good luck to meet an old abbess of a cloistered order of nuns housed in the middle of the city. She was in her '80s, funny, joyful, and robust with the kind of formidable no-nonsense robustness that English women of a certain age and training are famous for. In meeting her, I felt I was meeting a being like Teresa of Avila, who combined the loftiest mystical ecstasies with a passion for eating partridge and a relish for the odd glass of wine or two. She took me under her shrewd and capacious wing, and we had many conversations whose essential wisdom has unfolded in me over the decades since her death. One conversation I remember particularly. We were standing at the great bay window in her room that looked out on one of the busiest streets in the city. It was a depressing February afternoon, gray and somber, and everyone in the street seemed sad.

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“Do you know what I would love to be able to give to every single person out there?” she asked me.

Wisely, I said I had no idea.

“Not just a belief in but an experience of the beauty and power of prayer. You know, as a young nun I used to think privately that prayer was grossly overrated, even though I had chosen to be a nun in a closed order devoted to prayer. There were years when, every time I knelt to pray, I would wonder, ‘Why on earth am I doing this? Am I only in here out of fear, out of a desire to escape the hurly-burly of the world?’”

The idea of a woman like her being intimidated by any kind of “hurly-burly” made me smile. She caught my smile and laughed.

“I know you see me as a kind of holy battle-axe, and I am. But the strength and force you love in me—and I know you do, otherwise you wouldn’t keep coming around—was not native to me. When I was young I was a frail, neurotic, overexcited little thing, easily depressed and a bother to myself. The slightest bad news from the outside world would make me call out to Jesus, ‘Take me now, Lord, I can’t stand any more of this madness.’ But over long years, a practice of prayer grew strong in me, and the weakness in me became fortified.”

I had never heard the word fortified used with such exuberance, and I smiled again.

She gave me one of her well-known piercing looks. “I chose the word ‘fortified’ carefully because that is what sustained prayer gives you—a kind of inner fort in which you can stand tall and from which you can withstand the ‘slings and arrows of outrageous fortune.’” Her two great passions in life were Jesus, whom she always referred to in the present tense as if she had just come from talking with him, and Shakespeare, whom, next to Jesus, she considered the greatest spiritual genius of humanity. Most of the saints she had little time for (“a querulous sin-obsessed bunch, most of them, if you ask me. Didn’t they know that God is joy?”).

I asked her what her long practice of prayer had given her. “Three things,” she replied immediately, “and they are linked.

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Strength, because when you develop the habit of prayer you tap into the strength of God. Certainty of the Divine Presence, because when you pray long and hard enough you come to know without a shadow of a doubt that the Great Love is always listening. Patience, because sometimes, being human, you pray for the wrong thing or for what would not be good for you, and the No! you get from God is also an answer that you have to accept and work with in deeper and more selfless prayer.”

She fell silent and I saw that her eyes, the blue of robins’ eggs, had filled with tears.

Then she turned to me and said, “Why on earth do you think the Blessed Virgin, whenever and wherever she appears, begs us to pray, to pray constantly and fervently, for everything we need to do the divine work and for the peace of the world?”

I said caustically, “Not knowing the Blessed Virgin personally, I have no idea.”

“Well, I do know the Blessed Virgin personally; if I didn’t by now, at 83, after 60 years of banging at her door, I’d be even more of a lunatic than I am. I’ll tell you why she asks us to pray. It sure as hell isn’t because she’s pious and wants to see everyone on their knees, with their hands folded sweetly, muttering half-understood words to cheer themselves up. The Virgin doesn’t give a fig for superficial formal piety. If she’s anything, she’s practical. She’s a woman and a mother, after all. She asks us to pray because it works. Over time, sustained, humble, passionate prayer can not only move mountains, it can make them dance and clap their hands.

“The Virgin is asking the whole world to pray because she knows what a terrible mess we have gotten ourselves into, and she knows that prayer can be a channel of the most overwhelming Divine Grace that even, at the two-minutes-before-midnight place we are in, can transform everything.

“The Virgin knows this, as everyone can come to know it, through personal experience. It was her power of prayer that made her humble and surrendered enough to ‘receive’ the Christ and birth him; it was the power of prayer that gave her the strength

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to endure what she had to bringing up a divine being in a world full of spiteful nutcases; it was the power of prayer that gave her the love to let him go about his mission and leave her protection when he had to; it was the power of prayer that held her and kept her standing through all the horror of the Crucifixion; it was the power of her prayer, what Leo X (one of my least favorite popes) called 'The Virgin's unimaginable intensity of prayer' that called down the flames of Pentecost. You don't think it was the disciples who called down those flames, do you? They were a pretty sorry bunch on the whole. Dear boy, the Virgin asks the world to pray because it is through the power of prayer that she, a humble Jewish woman, became, over time, one with the Motherhood of God, which is why, when the Divine Mother tries to wake us up to where we are and what we now need to be and do, she needs the Virgin as her 'foreign minister.'"

No one had ever spoken to me about prayer or the Virgin in such a way, and for once I was too moved and bewildered to speak. The abbess said, "And when are you going to take the power of prayer seriously? Reading the mystical classics is all well and good and having the odd experience is nice and dandy. But it is when you get down to the nitty-gritty of constant prayer that you are beginning the real work. Let us start right now."

She fell on her knees. "Come on, big boy, get on your knees. You're not going to let me kneel here all alone, are you?"

"My God, you're ruthless," I said.

"Yes, I am," she said softly, delighted. "I'm an ill old woman and I don't have much time and I want to see you safe before I go. You have so many gifts but you lack the humility to ask for what you need and the faith to believe that prayer can over time have results. And without that humility and that faith everything you try and do will be half-assed."

I joined her on my knees skeptically, a little put out by the accuracy of her diagnosis. We prayed silently together for 20 minutes. For the first 15 I felt annoyed and impatient. Then quite suddenly a wave of joy and peace swept over me and seemed to possess not only my mind and heart but my body too. It was an

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astonishing experience and one that permanently altered what little I had known and understood about prayer.

“You see?” she said, rubbing my cheek.

“Yes, I see. I’m so sorry—”

She cut me short with a wild laugh.

“Oh, for God’s sake, don’t be sorry. Don’t be sorry you didn’t know; be glad—no, be wild with joy—that you are beginning to. Now I have to go. One of my nuns has been making quite a fuss about nothing, and I have to give her quite a severe dressing down, which I might enjoy rather too much, if I don’t restrain myself.”

All the teachers of all the traditions I have studied with have told me, in their own way, what the abbess told me. Rumi wrote: “Prayer is not just for the set times of kneeling and bowing; the real challenge of prayer is to prolong that state of absorption always, to keep the heart in a constant fire of adoration, whether you are asleep or awake, writing or reading. In all circumstances and every situation, see that you never wander from God’s hand. What is said in the Koran, ‘they continue at their prayers,’ should also describe you . . . Don’t ever be too proud or too afraid to present your needs to God; never, for one moment, be without remembrance of Him. The remembrance of God is force, power, strength, and endurance; it is feathers and wings to the bird of the spirit.”

It was when I came to my own Dark Night of the soul during the years after leaving my guru that I experienced the power of prayer at a level and intensity I had never known. When you come to extreme suffering, your mind can be too invaded by anguish to allow you to meditate and your heart too full of fear and horror to do any of the warm practices more than perfunctorily. In fact, one of the characteristics of the Dark Night, as Saint John of the Cross and the Sufi mystics remind us, is that your previous inner experiences of the Divine may no longer be available to you and the spiritual practices you have lived your inner life by may no longer work. This has, of course, a divine purpose and meaning—to drive you deeper and deeper into surrender and ever more accurate and unsparring knowledge of your own helplessness without the direct

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constant grace of God. Jesus did not meditate in the Garden of Gethsemane; he sweated blood and wept and prayed; anyone who comes to his own Gethsemane will find that in that harrowing garden, prayer will be his deepest support.

When I saw Thuksey Rinpoche in that last summer in Ladakh when he was dying from diabetes, I noticed that he was in a constant state of prayer; whenever he was not teaching, or exhausting himself encouraging and cajoling us, he would immediately pick up his rosary and chant in his sonorous bass voice, "Om mani padme hum." When Bede was enduring the long agony of his last illness, he would pray for hours on end, sometimes silently and sometimes out loud, the Jesus Prayer that he had loved and used all his life: "Lord Jesus Christ have mercy on me." On my last visit to Istanbul, I met an old and holy Sufi woman who had just been diagnosed with terminal bone cancer. I asked her how she could remain so happy and concentrated. "It is simple," she said. "I don't do any complicated practices any more. The pain is too great. I just say at every moment, inwardly, 'La ilaha il Allah,' there is no other God but God. It is only now that I am beginning to understand just how deep a grace streams to us through those divine syllables." And she broke down and wept, not tears of pain, but tears of abandoned gratitude.

Sometimes when I speak to Sacred Activists of the power of prayer, they look at me a little askance, as if to say, "You may think it works for you, but I frankly do not believe it." Even when I speak about the extensive modern research that shows that prayer can have observable and extraordinary effects over long distances, they look skeptical. Many have been "burned" by the hypocritical and sometimes hysterical piety of the traditions they are fleeing from. If I can persuade them to try prayer, and try it sincerely, they often write to me: "Thank God I trusted you enough to begin to pray. I cannot begin to describe what strength I have derived from it."

A couple of years ago I spoke to a group of AIDS volunteers going to Darfur. I said to them, "What you are going to see and feel will make most kinds of meditation hard to sustain. If you can choose a short, simple prayer and keep saying it in your heart

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whatever you are witnessing and going through, I swear to you that will be of more help than you can imagine now.”

One of the volunteers, a beautiful green-eyed French woman, came up to me and said contemptuously, “Do you really believe saying a few syllables over and over again will help me bear what I will have to bear?”

“Yes, I do,” I said.

“Have you ever had to pick up the bloody pieces of a child exploded by a bomb or cradle a five-year-old girl after she has been gang-raped?”

“No,” I said, “but I have come to some terrible dark places and in those I have found prayer has been as essential to my survival as breathing.” She looked at me as if I had slapped her, then stalked off.

Three months later I got a letter from her from Darfur: “I didn’t like you or what you said or the way you said it. But I came to such an abyss of despair and such a depth of exhaustion that one night, slightly drunk and at the end of my last rope, I thought, well, hell, why don’t I just try praying? I don’t know if there is any God or, if there is any God, that he or she or it is listening anymore, but maybe just talking to myself in the dark will keep me from jumping out the window. So I started to say the only prayer I knew—the Hail Mary. I had been regularly beaten by sadistic nuns at one of those convent boarding schools with hard beds and peeling white walls that smell perpetually of stale laundry and soap; at first I rebelled and deliberately mixed up the words and thought myself an idiot. But I continued. I don’t know why I continued, but I did. Perhaps I was at last desperate enough to at least want to believe in something. Perhaps, too, my pride had been broken enough to begin in me the kind of ‘humility’ you described, which frankly nauseated me at the time.

“Nothing miraculous happened; I am clearly not Bernadette. But after half an hour I felt peaceful and actually able to get some rest. I had not slept for more than an hour or two for months, it seemed. The things you see here could keep you from sleep for a lifetime. But that night, I slept until morning. And when I awoke I

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found myself saying, 'Hail Mary, full of grace', and for the first time I broke into tears. When you are a nurse dealing all the time with atrocity, you can't help hardening your heart. Your heart turns to black stone. The words of that silly old prayer—as I had always thought it—and the tears they evoked in me beyond my will cracked open the black stone my heart had become. Since then, shamefacedly and amazed at myself, I have found myself using it often every day, even singing it sometimes (God, you should hear my singing). I shall never become a Christian or 'pious,' and I'm still not sure who 'Mary' is. What I am increasingly sure of, though—despite everything my well-honed Sorbonne-trained mind tells me—is that there is Something, some great mysterious Love that is listening, and listening—God knows why—to me, to me personally, or listening in me. I don't know anything really, but I trust now and I find I am able to work more calmly and without the rage and despair that so exhausted me. So I suppose I have to say to you, thank you. Thank you for being so annoying and imprinting some of your passion on my heart, despite my 'better judgment.'"

Of all the letters I have received from activists in the field, this is the one I treasure the most.

Prayer is an inexhaustible subject, but there are two things in particular I want to add in the context of Sacred Activism. The first is that I have found praying together with others is even more powerful than praying alone; one of my dreams is to set up prayer circles everywhere for Sacred Activists to pray for peace, for the hearts of the powerful to be opened, for quick and brave legislation on the environment, for a revolution in energy policy, for the awakening of the human heart to the agony of animals, and for the strength to go on being Sacred Activists in a world where progress often arrives painfully slow and soaked in ambiguity or blood.

The other kind of prayer that I find sustains my hope is what in the Catholic Church is known as intercessory prayer—prayer that intercedes for the healing or well-being of others. Because I have felt its effects when it has been prayed for me, and because I

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have known its power in the lives of those I have prayed for, I find myself using it more and more, and with more and more simple faith. Father Bede once said to me, “Not one prayer is ever wasted; not one loving thought sent in faith toward another human being is ever useless. When you know that, you know that you can always be of help.”

There are a few beings on the earth, I believe, who have reached such a humble level of union with God that what they will in prayer is granted, because what they will and what the Divine wills is the same. I feel that Father Bede in his last years was often in such a surrendered and empowered state. Because of my experience of him and the grace his love and prayers for me keep streaming into my life, I believe that one of the greatest powers an increasingly divinized humanity will have is the power to work what are now called, probably inaccurately, “miracles” through the power of prayer. This is one of the holiest and most practical reasons for striving to make as much progress on the Path of Radical Embodiment as you can. Just imagine what a growing number of Sacred Activists acting humbly within the world and infused with such a grace of power could make possible.

There is an old Jewish myth that claims that the world is allowed to keep going because of the righteousness and selfless prayer of 36 men and women. Every Sacred Activist who has truly seen what is now at stake and what is now possible should try to find the courage to pray perhaps the most dangerous and transforming prayer of all—to join and swell their company. As an old Hasidic rabbi who loved this story once said to me in Jerusalem, “I think, my dear Andrew, that in the world as it is now, God probably needs a lot more than 36 to keep us going. What about 36,000?”

What about 36,000 indeed!

SACRED BODY PRACTICES

In *The Supramental Manifestation*, Sri Aurobindo writes: “In the spiritual tradition the body has been regarded as an obstacle incapable of spiritualization or transmutation and a heavy weight holding the soul to earthly nature and preventing its ascent either to spiritual fulfillment in the Supreme or to the dissolution of its individual being in the Supreme. But while this conception of the role of the body in our destiny is suitable enough for a *sadhana* [discipline] that sees earth only as a field of the ignorance and the earth-life a preparation for a saving withdrawal . . . it is insufficient for one which conceives of a divine life on earth and liberation of earth-nature itself as part of a total purpose of the embodiment of the spirit here. If a total transformation of the being is our aim, a transformation of the body must be an indispensable part of it; without that no full divine life is possible.”

Later in the same work, Sri Aurobindo describes, from the depths of his own experience, what such a transformed body would be and feel like:

The body could become a revealing vessel of a supreme beauty and bliss, casting the light of the spirit radiating from it as a lamp reflects and diffuses the luminosity of its indwelling flame, carrying in itself the beatitude of the spirit, its joy of the seeing mind, its joy of life and spiritual happiness, the joy of matter released into a spiritual consciousness and thrilled with a constant ecstasy.

Perhaps the most important clue to the embodiment and integration of mystical consciousness with all aspects of life and sacred action is to understand, revere, and celebrate the inherent sacredness of your body. Knowing that your body is sacred leads to several interlinked initiations in the heart of ordinary existence; it makes you grateful for the blessing of being alive, conscious that all life is the glowing manifestation of spirit, aware of the holiness of other sentient beings, and more alert to the divine splendor of creation.

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These interlinked initiations in turn lead to an inward transformation that over time comes to reflect itself in every thought and action. Being conscious of the sacredness of the body slowly turns the whole of life into an experience of feast and celebration; every walk or meal or deep sleep or joy at a flower becomes a form of praise and prayer. Being conscious of the holiness of the bodies of other sentient beings makes you instinctively more sensitive and protective toward them and breeds what Buddha called “a loving harmlessness” in the core of your being. To see, know, and feel, through understanding the sacredness of your own body, the sacredness of the entire creation—from the gazelle to the gray whale to the Himalayas—awakens a passion for God in all forms of life and a practical resolution to do everything in your power to protect Nature.

In a deep sense, our contemporary crisis is a crisis of the body. Our inability to bless our own holiness, to see the infinite beauty of our own and others’ bodies, and to see what Blake called “a world in a grain of sand” has blinded us to the Light that lives in each of our cells and in each being and thing that surrounds us.

For a Sacred Activist, committed to embodying Wisdom and Love in action, sacred body practices such as yoga, tai chi, and qi gong are, I have found, essential for three reasons: it is impossible to sustain the intensity of service required of us if we do not have strong, healthy bodies; the experience of living both a personal and a collective Dark Night is fierce on both the mind and body, and if the physical body is not kept in optimum health and strength it may buckle under the pressures it will endure; and it is impossible to embody the Birth without working hard and joyfully to make your physical being as supple as possible to the divine energies that descend and those they awaken in you.

Most of the Sacred Activists I know have the same trouble in being attentive to their bodies as I have had and still have. This is because, as Sacred Activists, we inherit both the old spiritual dismissals of the body and the tendencies of most activists in general to believe that paying attention to their bodies is narcissistic and self-indulgent, something they have no time for in their urgent

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and righteous passion to get things done. This is perhaps the main reason why Sacred Activists everywhere suffer from so much stress, exhaustion, and burnout and why many of our decisions lack the wisdom and maturity they would have if they radiated from grounded health and not nervous anxiety.

After I returned from my father's deathbed with the vision of the Christ inside me, I flung myself into my teaching with a passion and urgency that came from seeing what was at stake. I was so consumed by what I felt I had to communicate that I neglected my body and came near, on several occasions, to physical collapse. It wasn't only that I was treating my body as an annoyance; it was also that the passion I so wanted to express, because it was not as embodied as it could be, exhausted and riled me and sometimes offended others.

A great friend and master yoga teacher, Karuna Erickson, came up after a Rumi class I gave and said to me, "You are not in your body. Your passion will burn you up if you do not ground it in your body. Sometimes when I watch you give yourself so totally to what you are trying to say without being rooted in your body, I think that if you don't have a serious physical discipline soon, you will die." I love Karuna, and I knew she was telling me the truth. I had been wondering for a while why I felt so burned out and sometimes so dissociated from the people I was addressing. Now I understood that if I wasn't looking after my body I would always live on the edge of burning out, and if I wasn't more grounded and embodied, a certain human warmth and tenderness would be lacking in both what I said and the way I said it.

Karuna's frankness deepened my admiration for her and I became her pupil, as she had been mine. Over the next five years, working quietly and secretly, mostly in her community in Nelson, British Columbia, Karuna and I evolved together what we called Heart Yoga—a practice for Sacred Activists that marries traditional asanas with meditation and visualization and conscious invocation of the Divine Light into the body.

Karuna and I have taught hundreds of Sacred Activists since then and the feedback has been humbling in its fervor and

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gratitude. One activist for animal rights wrote to me, “I had been doing yoga for years but sporadically and without much enthusiasm. What your and Karuna’s return of yoga to its mystical origins and your conscious union of yoga with simple mystical exercises has opened up for me is a joy and peace that I have never experienced before in the body and a supple subtle strength that now permeates everything I do. I find I not only have more energy for my work but more *joy* in it.”

The other spiritual physical discipline I especially love, and pursue myself, is sacred dance. I have loved to dance ever since I was a small child, when, my mother tells me, I used to dance all the time, sometimes imitating the intricate hand gestures of the Indian goddesses, rather to the embarrassment of my policeman father. All through my 20s and 30s I would dance whenever the occasion arose—at tea dances on Fire Island with my best friend, Chris, and in a series of nightclubs in Paris and New York. One of the things that attracted me so deeply to Rumi was that he, too, loved to express his joy and realization in dancing—to the scandal of the staid Islamic authorities of Konya. Rumi knew that the whole universe and every atom in it is dancing around the Secret Sun of the Beloved, and the dance he evolved with his teacher, Shams, was later formulated more precisely by his son, Sultan Valad. This “dance of the dervishes,” as it is popularly known, is for me the most sublime form of sacred dance ever created.

I have tried traditional dervish “whirling,” but I am too clumsy and uncoordinated to perform it with any kind of grace. Fifteen years ago I met the great modern pioneer of sacred dance Gabrielle Roth; we became dear friends fast, and I was moved and impressed both by the austere radiance of her presence and by the subtle spiritual power of her work.

By working with Karuna and Gabrielle I have immeasurably deepened both my respect for and my enjoyment of my body, and although I still have to remind myself not to neglect it, I am far more contentedly embodied at 56 than I ever was in my youth. And over time this new physical joy in myself—and the strength that comes with it—has made my whole style of teaching warmer

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and more intimate, as well as giving me the stamina to keep up the schedule my activism in the world demands. I find, too, that as my realization of the One Consciousness deepens through grace, I can sustain states of peace and bliss longer and feel them more richly and intimately in my body, and that although I am far from the glorious ideal that Sri Aurobindo describes, I know now that it is not a poetic fantasy but a reality that continued work on my mystical and physical development will continue to unfold in me.

So to all Sacred Activists I would say—please don't wait as I did to plunge into a sacred physical discipline. If neither yoga nor sacred dance attracts you, there are a host of others to choose from—perhaps the greatest gift of the New Age is the plethora of different forms of sacred body practice it has brought within every seeker's reach. Make a commitment to find which one, or which combination, fits you, then stick to it. You are not being selfish in giving attention to your body in this way; in fact, you are preparing it for greater and greater openness to divine joy and peace and, eventually, for a subtler divinization. Through an increasingly divinized body the light of Divine Grace can stream far more effectively, as sun can pass more purely and powerfully through clean glass.

If you combine cool and warm practice with a disciplined prayer and sacred body practice, what you will create for yourself is an holistic and integrated way of aligning yourself constantly with the birthing energies of the One; you will be feeding yourself more and more strength and joy and opening yourself up more and more to the empowering grace of the Divine.

IN PRACTICE

Now I would like to offer one practice that I love from each category of sacred practice.

A Cool Practice: The Chanting of Om

Chanting is one of the most effective and exhilarating ways of raising your entire being into receptivity and joy. All the major mystical traditions have used it: ancient Hindu rishis developed intricate chants to embody mantras in waves of transformative sacred sound; Sufi mystics have set passages from the Koran or love poems by Rumi or Hafiz to chant-like melodies that exalt both listener and singer; many Christian monastic orders—notably, of course, the Carmelites, Cistercians, and Benedictines—have kept alive the tradition of Gregorian chant and its power to open the whole psyche to the vibratory peace of the Infinite.

You don't have to have a strong singing voice or any musical talent to discover the power of chanting for yourself. You can derive a great deal of comfort and inspiration from chanting in simple ways that have strength, beauty, and dignity.

Sit in your chosen place and, as always, dedicate the practice you are about to do to the liberation of all sentient beings. Then meditate silently on the divine significance of the sacred syllable *om*. Here's how it was defined in ancient India, in a passage from the Chandogya Upanishad:

This [om] is the essence of essences, the highest, the eighth
rung,
Venerated above all that human beings hold holy.
Om is the self of all. . . .
With the word *om* we say "I agree"
And with *om* we fulfill desires.
With *om*, we recite, we give direction,
We sing aloud the honor of that Word
The key to the three kinds of knowledge.

A similar passage is found in the Mandukya Upanishad:

The mantram [om] is the bow, the aspirant
Is the arrow, and the Lord the target.

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Now draw the bowstring of meditation
And hitting the target be one with him.

As Lama Govinda tells us in his *Foundatons of Tibetan Mysticism*, “The sound-values of *om* and their symbolic interpretation [in the Upanishads] are described in the following manner: ‘O’ is a combination of ‘A’ and ‘U’; the whole syllable . . . consists of three elements . . . A-U-M. Since *om* is the expression of the highest faculty of consciousness, these three elements are explained accordingly as three planes of consciousness: ‘A’ as the waking consciousness (*jagrat*), ‘U’ as the dream-consciousness (*svapna*), and ‘M’ as the consciousness during deep sleep (*turiya*) on the fourth plane, beyond words and concepts—the consciousness of the fourth dimension.”

When you come to chant *om*, then, believe and know that you are chanting the most sacred syllable, one that corresponds to the most intimate and holy sound of the cosmos. Believe and know that you are chanting at once the sound of your own inmost Divine Consciousness, the sound that the entire creation is always resonating to, and the sound that the Godhead makes as it creates reality. A sweet old Hindu priest in Tanjore once told me, before we chanted *om* together in the twilight in one of the halls of the Shiva temple, “Always remember that when you chant *om* you are yourself one vibrating note of the always-silent and always-sounding *om* sounding *om* back to Itself. If you chant in this all-embracing way, you will very soon come to have an experience of nonduality.” The truth of what I was told on that evening has been revealed to me in many subsequent meditations; it will undoubtedly be revealed to you if you approach this practice with sincerity, knowledge, and real devotion.

Let us return to the actual practice now. When you have spent a few minutes meditating on the sacred significance of *om*, slowly begin to chant it. Use one of the lower notes in your vocal register; *om* should never be chanted too high, because that diminishes its power. Find and hold a note not too far away from the natural note your speaking voice makes when it is speaking tenderly and raptly.

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Don't vary the note as you chant *om* again and again. Try to always sound the *om* with the same amount of breath and vocal power. You will find that if you do, the repetition of the same sonorous pitch and sound will calm your whole being and make it receptive to joy. It will also encourage a kind of selflessness that makes the cosmic dimensions of *om* more accessible; if you are concentrating even slightly on how you sound or on the "beauty" of the chant, your self-consciousness will dilute its transformative power.

Om should be chanted in three parts (A-U-M), as Lama Govinda explains, with equal time given to each part. Traditionally, *ah* is chanted in the region of the navel, *oo* in the sternum, and *mm* in the throat.

When you come to chant the last syllable, *mm*, with closed lips, you will become aware of how millions of cells have been awakened in your body by the sacred syllable. After each chanted *om*, savor the ringing silence that follows and the way your whole being resonates with it. At the end of the practice session, chant four long slow *oms*, directing your intention to each of the four directions of the universe and saying silently:

By the power of this *om* may all creatures to the east of me be liberated.

By the power of this *om* may all creatures to the west be liberated.

By the power of this *om* may all creatures to the south be liberated.

By the power of this *om* may all creatures to the north be liberated.

As the last sacred act of the practice, believe and know that your chanting of *om* during the session has transformed your entire body, speech, mind, and heart into an *om*, silently sounding together with the *om* of the universe and radiating Divine Light throughout the cosmos. Rest in the great joy and peace that this recognition brings.

A Warm Practice: Tonglen (Giving and Receiving)

The heart practice that I most recommend for Sacred Activists is the one I have used every day since I was taught it by Thuksey Rinpoche in Ladakh. Tonglen—the practice of giving and receiving—is one of Tibetan Buddhism’s most precious gifts to the world. It is a very holy and powerful practice that can help anyone stay open to, and expand, his or her innate tendency to be compassionate. The great mystics of all traditions remind us that at the core of our nature lies a divine capacity for love. Tonglen helps us discover, sustain, expand, and develop this capacity until it becomes the ruling force of our whole being. It can help you learn how strong your own inner power of love and compassion really is and then how transformative and healing it can be, both for you and for others.

The guiding principle of tonglen is simple: in the course of the practice, you take on the pain, terror, and sadness of others and then give out all peace, all love, all help, all possible forms of healing. As you breathe in, you breathe in all suffering; as you breathe out, you breathe out all peace.

There is nothing to fear; the pain, terror, and sadness you take on in this practice will not destroy you. On the contrary, by determining calmly and consciously to take on the sufferings of others, you will wear away your attachment to your false self, the false self that is the source of all our aggression, illusion, and ignorance and that protects itself by self-absorbed hardheartedness and denial. By constantly intending to embrace and transmute the pain of others, you will be constantly wearing away everything in you that considers you alone, separate, or uninvolved, and so you will be uncovering ever more clearly your true divine nature. Every time you do this practice with a sincere intention to help another person who is in pain, you will also be offering up your own separate false self for transformation and so taking a step toward your own liberation from illusion. The greatest mystics of all traditions remind us that progress along the Path is best gauged by growth in selflessness and humility. As a Tibetan mystic, Shantideva, wrote:

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The childish work for their own benefit
The Buddhas work for the benefit of others
Just look at the difference between them!

You will find, as I have, that if you make the practice of Tonglen your own, you will experience the depths of your own compassion and innate generosity. You will come to realize that far from being too fragile to bear the pain of the world—one of the most effective fictions of the false self—you are in fact far better able than you ever imagined to confront what is really happening in the world, and far more powerful an agent of healing than you ever suspected.

Before you begin to do the practice of Tonglen itself, I advise you to follow the Tibetan mystics' advice and sit for five or ten minutes in calm silence. The calmer and more inwardly peaceful you are, the stronger you will feel when it comes to confronting your own or others' suffering.

I find it very powerful at the beginning of Tonglen practice to imagine that I am staring out across a still and sunlit ocean or up into the boundless blue depths of a spring sky. Doing this, I find, immediately expands my mind and makes it more spacious. I also find it helpful to pray to all those awakened beings, such as Jesus, Rumi, and the Buddha, who have made the practice of compassion the core of their message: I pray to them all to come and help me claim, live, and enact the truth of the Divine Compassion within me and within all beings.

Now, with mind and heart composed, begin the practice of giving and taking by doing Tonglen on yourself. One highly effective way of doing this is to practice seated before a large mirror in which you can see yourself clearly. Let the person in the mirror—let's call him or her A—be your biological self, with all its sadness, doubts, fears, and difficulties; let the person gazing into the mirror—B—be your eternal self already free, already liberated, whose essence is spacious and all-embracing love.

Gaze now with the eyes of your eternal free self at what I call "the wreck in the mirror." Gaze without fear or shame and see

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clearly in A's face all of A's loneliness, worry, panic, and grief. Note everything calmly, compassionately, and without judgment. Remind yourself that the biological self is the *reflection*, in the mirror of life, of a far more powerful and spacious *eternal self* who cannot be destroyed or broken. Allow the beauty of this knowledge to infuse your whole being with joy and faith.

Now imagine that all the fears and desolations your biological self is harboring issue from the stomach of your image in the mirror in the form of a ball of hot, black, grimy smoke. Clearly visualize this ball of thickly swirling black smoke. Then, as you breathe in, breathe the black ball into the fully open heart center of your eternal self and imagine it dissolving away completely there, as smoke would in a cloudless shining blue sky. Then, on the out-breath, breathe back at your biological self in the mirror all your eternal self's peace, bliss, strength, and healing power.

Make sure that your in-breaths and out-breaths are equally deep and long. Breathe in the black ball of smoke from the stomach of your biological self; pause and imagine it dissolving in the boundless blue sky of your eternal heart-mind. Then breathe out as deeply and fully as you breathed in, consciously sending out to your biological self as you do so all you know of the faith and radiance of your own divine truth.

If you do this nine times calmly and confidently, you will be amazed at how much better and more grounded you will feel. You will now be ready to turn to the second part of the practice.

In this second part of Tonglen, you will be giving and receiving for someone else. Select a person who you know is in psychological or physical pain. Imagine him or her clearly in your heart's eye; meditate as deeply and sensitively as you can on all the difficulties he or she is experiencing and all the grief and fear he or she must be feeling. If the person you have chosen is someone you have had conflicts with, or someone you have ambiguous feelings for, don't be surprised if these surface and try to block your compassion toward him. When these feelings arise, offer them for transformation. You can even, as I often do, perform a kind of mini-Tonglen on the feelings themselves: breathe the difficult feelings in, then breathe out to yourself the compassion of your innate nature.

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Now imagine that all the psychological or physical anguish of the person you have chosen issues from her stomach in the concentrated form of a hot, black, grimy ball of smoke. As you breathe in, breathe in that black ball of hot smoke; as you breathe out, breathe out to her all the peace, strength, happiness, and bliss of your innate love nature.

Something a young Tibetan practitioner once told me has helped me immensely in this stage of the practice. He said, "Never be afraid that if you breathe in someone's pain that it will somehow 'get stuck' in you. Remember that there is nowhere in you for it to get stuck; in your essence, you are the boundless space of Buddha consciousness." Reminding myself of what he told me has prevented me time and time again from involuntarily closing down to the being I have chosen to practice for. He also told me to imagine that as I breathe out, the blessing my out-breath sends to the person I have chosen doesn't end with him or her but travels on and on throughout the universe. "All acts of true compassion," he said, "are infinite both in their origin and in their effect. Imagine that your out-breath cleanses, purifies, and blesses not only the person you have chosen, but the whole cosmos." As you breathe out, then, imagine with great faith that the person you have chosen is completely irradiated with grace and healed of everything that afflicts her. It helps to see, in your heart's eye, the person smiling or laughing or dancing with joy and health. Imagine that the blessing of her joy and health is contagious and spreads invisibly through all things everywhere, illumining them all with Divine Light.

Now, in the third part of the practice, turn in your heart to confront the suffering of the whole planet. Imagine the birds and mammals dying in forest fires, the sea creatures suffering from pollution, the women and children murdered or maimed in wars, the monotonous horror of the lives of the desperately poor in slums and ghettos. Imagine the danger the planet faces from environmental destruction of all kinds and from the possibility of nuclear annihilation. With all the force of the Divine within you, try to face, without illusion or false consolation, all the aspects of the agony that the entire planet is now going through.

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Imagine now that the entire earth is a ball of hot, black, grimy smoke in which all these horrors are concentrated. Imagine, too, that the Divine Self you are now is as vast as the universe. Take that vast black ball of agony into your heart and dissolve it in your heart's pure transparency. Breathe in the earth's black smoke; pause as it dissolves utterly in your sky-like heart, breathe out the light and bliss and strength of your Divine Self and imagine the whole earth bathed in its healing glory. Do this nine times slowly, with total concentration.

Your intention to transmute the suffering of all sentient beings and of the whole earth has transformed you now into a diamond being whose body, heart, mind, and spirit are on fire with brilliant white Divine Light. Send this light with its all-transforming powers in all the four directions, and know with faith and joy that it will do wonders and instigate great secret healings.

As you keep sending out the brilliant white light from your diamond body, make a vow to renew your Sacred Activism with devotion and humility.

A Prayer Practice: The Prayer of Saint Francis

I recommend that all Sacred Activists recite and meditate on the Prayer of Saint Francis.

When I was 18, I spent eight months hitchhiking around Italy. At the time, I was about to go to Oxford, and I thought that I wanted to be an art historian. So I visited all the great centers—Florence, Rome, Naples, and Venice. Then, one day in early May, I found myself in Assisi, where Saint Francis had lived and died. Nothing I had seen prepared me for the impact of Giotto's paintings of the life of Saint Francis in the basilica; their grave, exalted purity dazzled me. I decided to stay to contemplate them for a week, and I slept out in the ruins of an old castle, surrounded by the rough, fragrant hills of Tuscany in spring.

I can still remember the sunlit afternoon when, sitting in a field of yellow and blue wildflowers, I first read the Prayer of Saint

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Francis. Every word pierced me with the freshness of Giotto's vision and of that high and noble Tuscan landscape:

Lord, make me an instrument of thy peace.
Where there is hatred, let me sow love;
Where there is injury, pardon;
Where there is doubt, faith;
Where there is despair, hope;
Where there is darkness, light;
Where there is sadness, joy.

O Divine Master, grant that I may not so much seek
To be consoled as to console,
To be understood as to understand,
To be loved as to love:
For it is in giving that we receive,
It is in pardoning that we are pardoned,
It is in dying that we are born to eternal life.

I remember that afternoon, reading the prayer over and over, savoring every word, how astonished I was at its spiritual truth and beauty. The more I contemplated the prayer and the holy passions behind it, the deeper my joy became, until I, the sunlit afternoon, and the wind moving in the brilliant flowers seemed to become one vast sustained movement of adoration within the being of God.

The practice I am going to describe is found in its essential outlines in many of the mystical traditions; it has great power to transform your heart and personality.

Memorize the Saint Francis Prayer. Then, sitting calmly in meditation, say it over and over again to yourself very slowly, bringing your mind home to its words whenever it begins to stray. Do this for about half an hour at a time and you will find that your mind and heart will be made joyful and peaceful and that, over time, your entire being will begin to fill with the strengths and virtues that the passage celebrates. All mystical systems know

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that we become what we think; this exercise is a wonderful way of saturating the heart and mind with holy truth and passion.

That afternoon in Tuscany 40 years ago initiated me into the prayer's mystic power, and everything I have learned since on my search has only deepened my joy at its depth. It seems to me a prayer that transcends any particular religion; in a very few utterly stripped and simple phrases, it condenses the deepest wisdom of the Path of Sacred Activism. Over the years I have shared it with seekers and activists of all kinds; they have all recognized the transmuting power of the holy inspiration that still sings in its lines. One young Tibetan doctor I met in Ladakh translated it into Tibetan and started to use it every day in his morning prayers to the Buddha of Compassion. A Hindu devotee of Shiva I know, who works with slum children in Mumbai, uses it every morning in her prayers to the "Lord of Love."

Begin by sitting calmly in your place of meditation, breathing in and out deeply to steady your mind. If you have any incense, light a stick of it so the whole atmosphere around you can become fragrant.

When you feel ready, read the entire prayer slowly once through, savoring each word and trying to enter as deeply as you can into the meaning of each phrase. When you have done so, rest a little in the sacred emotion such a reading will arouse.

I find it helpful at this moment to pray to God to open me still more deeply to the holy passion of the prayer. Often I say something like "May the love speaking this prayer open me completely to itself!" or "Remove all fear from my mind and heart so it can go fearlessly into the fire of absolute love!"

Then, slowly, I start to say inwardly the first line: "Lord, make me an instrument of thy peace." I try to dwell richly on each phrase. What does it mean to say "Lord, *make* me," for example? What *is* an instrument of peace, and what has to be given up in oneself to become one? Why does Saint Francis seem to stress the holiness of peace above all other aspects of the spiritual life? What is thy peace? To each inner question I try to bring the totality of everything that I have understood about these questions from my

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search and from my own experience and from the experience of others.

Very often my mind starts to wander almost immediately. Something about the power and beauty of this prayer scares it profoundly. I think this is a prayer that breathes in each phrase the kind of sacred selflessness that terrifies the ego. I try to be compassionate to my mind and its need to evade the seriousness of the prayer's intentions, but I also try not to let it wander too far. As soon as I catch it wandering, I bring it back to the line of the prayer it was contemplating before it started to wander. This can be difficult work, but it is worth it. It trains the attention and, over time, allows the sacred power of the prayer to infuse the mind and spirit at profound levels.

Slowly and with as much sacred concentration as I can muster, I go through the prayer phrase by phrase, trying to bring everything I know and long for to my reading of it. Then, after a brief pause, I go back to the beginning. In the course of half an hour's meditation, it is rare that I find myself saying the prayer in this way more than 12 or 13 times; instead, I find that if I practice with sufficient devotion and sincerity, the prayer draws me into the passionate silence of the heart that it was created from. To enter and become one with this silence is the true goal of all prayer. So, when this silence arrives, I stop speaking the words of the prayer inwardly and continue only when my mind starts getting restive.

At the end of the practice, I find it helpful to recite the entire prayer once more, steadily and slowly, dedicating my whole being to its force and power. Then, as the final act of the exercise, I dedicate whatever insights and sacred emotions saying the prayer has aroused in me to the awakening of all sentient beings. To make this dedication at the end more real and vivid, I imagine that saying it sends dazzling white light in all directions in God's name, light that will heal, save, inspire, and embolden all those it invisibly touches.

A Sacred Body Practice: Savasana

I would like to share a restorative practice from the Heart Yoga that Karuna Erickson and I developed. The following excerpt from our book *On Fire: Heart Yoga* describes one of the simplest but most transformative of yoga positions, Savasana, a position I use several times a day (especially when working hard) to bring my body into sacred alignment.

Lie down on your back with your arms stretched out. Begin with your knees bent, feet flat on the floor. Gradually draw your awareness inward. Consciously and slowly, one at a time, lengthen your heels out along the floor, inviting your legs to fall back and rest.

Elongate your arms down to your sides, releasing any last vestige of stress or exhaustion. Turn your palms up into a soft, receptive position, like a baby's hands. Feel yourself letting go of whatever you have been holding on to.

Allow the skin of your face to soften away from the bones. Your eyes drop back in their sockets, away from the inside of your eyelids. The gaze moves down, resting in the warmth of the heart. Vision now seems to come from your heart. Your ears also turn inward towards the heart, to listen to its whispering.

As you drop deeper and deeper into Savasana, your skin starts to grow more porous and transparent, almost translucent, so that the light inside you can radiate outwards and the light all around you pours inwards. As your skin continues to open to the light, your boundaries begin to soften and dissolve.

The boundaries of your personality also begin to soften. Let go now of anything that keeps you separate from other beings and from the joy and bliss of your essential nature, letting it all float away like clouds in an infinite blue sky.

From this vast awareness, find your breath and follow its path as it flows down into your body with your

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inhalation and as it empties out with your exhalation. Breathing in, your eyes soften; exhaling, your breath dissolves into emptiness. Breathe down into earth, breathe out into spaciousness.

Notice the moments of stillness at the very end of the inhalation and at the very completion of the exhalation. This is not a holding, but rather a suspension of your breath. Imagine this pause like a hawk suspended on a current of air. With the inhalation, drop down deep into the still pool of the pause at its end. Follow the exhalation all the way to its completion, and savor the exquisite moment at the end when it dissolves into space, like smoke disappearing into the sky. Inhale, and pause for a few heartbeats; exhale, and pause for a few heartbeats. Continue this practice for a few minutes.

Breathe into stillness and breathe out into spaciousness, returning again and again to the breath, to the breath inside the breath. Breathe into the earth, the Mother; breathe out to the sky, the Father. Offer your body, mind, and heart onto the altar of service. Expand and dissolve into the spaciousness of Savasana.

Let the spaciousness of the silence soak into every pore of your skin and every cell of your body. Let the silence take you to the core of your life. Rest in Savasana at least ten minutes.

When you feel ready to return from the spaciousness of Savasana, very slowly bring your awareness to your breath. Visualize your breath as a mist drifting toward you across a vast snowy field. Watch it flow into the core of your body, gently and tenderly touching the deepest places inside you. Feel each inhalation as a blessing and each exhalation as a prayer. Remember that this peace and stillness are always available to you, in any circumstances, simply by returning your awareness to your breath.

Grounded in this awareness, slowly begin your journey back from Savasana. Rise back up from Savasana gradually,

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like a deep-sea diver slowly returning from the depths of the sea. Pause when you want to pause. Remain connected to the beauty you experienced in the oceanic depths of yourself.

Let your transition back from Savasana be gentle, gradually coming fully into your body. Feel the warmth and radiance that surround your body and the touch of the air on your face. Listen to the sounds around you.

When you are fully present in your body, in this moment and this breath, roll to your right side, feeling the support of the earth beneath you. Slowly let your eyelids part, keeping your eyes soft, your brain quiet, and your heart open.

Let your soft, compassionate presence radiate out from you. Imagine it cradling the whole world, and offer the benefits of your practice for the peace and liberation of all sentient beings. When you feel ready, sit up, and bring your hands to the Namaste position in front of your heart.

Bow to all beings and dedicate your life to their sacred service.