

SKILL THREE: OPENING TO OUR BREATH

If someone told you could magically bring an exhilarating sense of aliveness, a deep feeling of calm, and a feeling of safety into your life, would you be interested? Of course you would! The wonderful thing is that you can. There really is something you can do right now that will bring you all these healing gifts. And you don't have to purchase anything or go anywhere. All you have to do is breathe, which brings us to the third skill — Opening to Our Breath.

To open to your breath is to open to yourself. To open to yourself is to open to life. As we know very well by now, this is what you are truly hungry for when you are compulsive — a deep and open connection with yourself and with the present moment of life. Let's explore this now.

Soften your belly and allow a deep breath. Feel the opening of an in-breath — how it lifts your body, making more space within. Now ride the wave of the out-breath, speaking a deep and resonate ahhhhh. Allow it to open you to the delicious experience of melting back into just this moment. And again, there is the in-breath, ready to fill you with its healing presence. Take a little time and enjoy each facet of your breath — the opening of the in-breath and the letting go of the out-breath.

Now put the two together by consciously riding the circle of your breath — in-breath turn, out-breath turn — and feel the joy of being fully connected to your breath. If you let go enough you can even feel the experience of being rocked by your breath. Ride

this ancient rhythm for a few minutes, giving yourself the gift of simply being. When you are ready, continue reading.

It is amazing when you truly recognize how wonderful it is to breathe consciously in an open and relaxed way. The word *inspiration* literally means “in-breath,” for the breath opens us, filling us with more than just oxygen. It brings more spirit into our bodies, our minds, and our emotions. And it is no accident that the sound of a deep and satisfying out-breath is *ahhhhh*, the sound of satisfaction. We express it when we have just finished a great meal, seen a newborn baby, or are trying to let someone know we understand. This sound points us to the release of a full out-breath, a release that allows us to let go and trust ourselves to the living process of life.

The Gifts of Opening to Our Breath

Most likely you have already gone back to more shallow breathing. This type of breathing cuts you off from some of the best things in life: aliveness, connectedness, deep peace, safety, openness, and centeredness. Because you live in a society of shallow breathers, I want to inspire you with all the gifts that open breathing can bring to you. Opening to our breath brings us six core gifts. As you read about these gifts, I invite you to come back over and over again to a deep and slow breath.

A Sense of Aliveness

To breathe is to live. We can survive a month or more without food and a number of days without water, but only a few minutes without breath. And even though our bodies can survive on shallow breathing, they long for deep and open breaths and the aliveness they

bring. To breathe fully is to be truly alive. Every cell in our bodies is a little factory that needs raw material to keep working. Much of the food we eat is turned into glucose, a core fuel for our cells. But it takes many molecules of oxygen for every one molecule of glucose for a cell to function efficiently. In other words, the main fuel for our body is oxygen!

When we don't get enough oxygen, the body doesn't work efficiently. (And we wonder why we are tired!) The body is like a wood-burning stove. If we close down the dampers of the stove, stopping the flow of oxygen, the fire will eventually burn out, leaving a lot of ash. But if we open the dampers, the fire will burn brightly. The same is true for our bodies. When we breathe deeply, we bring in more oxygen and our cells glow with aliveness. Often when I thought I was hungry for food, I was truly hungry for some deep breaths.

This vitality doesn't just come from oxygen. Breath contains a healing essence beyond its physical components. Many religions, cultures, and healing systems have cultivated this essence for thousands of years. It is called by a variety of names: *prana* (India), *chi* (China), *ki* (Japan), and *num* (the Kalahari), to name a few. But they are all pointing to the same thing. It is understood that this healing force exists in all forms of matter and is taken up with every breath. Research done with respected tai chi, meditation, and chi kung masters has shown not only that this energy empowers a person but also that it can heal. To breathe normally is to receive some of this energy, but to breathe consciously and freely is to replenish and store this vital substance.

Soften your belly now and allow a deep and slow breath.

Connectedness

Living in shallow breathing supports the notion that each of us is an island unto ourselves. Nothing could be further from the truth. Every time we breathe in, we take in trillions of atoms that were once a part of eagles and butterflies, dinosaurs and stars, slaves and mighty kings. When we breathe out, we send on their way particles that were once an integral part of our bodies, letting them go to a life of infinite adventure. To take a full and complete breath is to open to life on multiple levels, intimately connecting us to the web of existence throughout time and space.

Taking a conscious breath also brings us back to the joy of being in our bodies and reconnects us with the rhythm that is life. The world pulsates with the ebb and flow, the rising and falling of rhythm. It is evident in the tides, the seasons, our hearts, even the peristaltic waves of our intestines. Each of us, as an integral piece of the planet, is joined with the larger rhythms through the pulsations of our bodies, especially our breath. The tides of breath rise and fall every moment of our lives, connecting us to the whole of creation.

Soften your belly now and allow a deep and slow breath.

Deep Peace

Taking an easy, open breath brings deep peace to our whole being. It turns on the parasympathetic nervous system, whose job it is to calm us down. Yet we live mostly with its companion, the sympathetic nervous system. This system says, “Go, go, go; do, do, do!” We live in a society that is addicted to the sympathetic nervous system. We love

scary or violent movies. We live at breakneck speeds. We ingest coffee and sugar to stimulate our bodies. (It is probably a good bet to invest in coffee stocks!)

The great rhythm of doing and *being*, fast and slow, rest and work is broken by our love affair with speed. This speed always takes us away from ourselves, leaving us more vulnerable to the ravages of compulsion. This is one of the main reasons that we are usually more inclined to be compulsive at the end of the day. We have spent our time running as fast as we can and moving farther and farther from ourselves, and to stop feels uncomfortable at first. To breathe deeply turns on the calming part of our nervous system. This brings us back to ourselves to sanity and to calm, even in the middle of a busy day.

Soften your belly now and allow a deep and slow breath.

Sanctuary

The breath is a sanctuary that is available to us no matter where we are or what is happening in our lives. Whenever my mind is restless, instead of searching for peace *out there* in another mouthful of food or in getting things under control or in some other heart-numbing activity, I now have a place where my attention can return — the rising and falling of my breath. It brings me back into my body, into the here and now and into the wellspring of wisdom and support within.

Every morning and for a number of times throughout the day, I allow my attention to rest in this ancient rhythm. Because I have become friends with my breath, I actually feel like the great Mother of Life is rocking me in a cradle. Those moments are like minivacations that allow my mind to quiet down and insight to flood my awareness.

Soften your belly now and allow a deep and slow breath.

Dissolving Old Patterns

Opening to our breath also minimizes the deepest pains of human life. This is most evident on the physical level, but it also works like magic on our emotions. We all have a tendency to tighten down around physical pain. When we do, it only makes the pain worse. Imagine somebody squeezing your hand until it hurts and then, when you say it hurts, they squeeze it more. We do this to ourselves with headaches, backaches, injuries; we even do it when we're at the dentist. Our muscles tighten down around the pain. We can reverse the process by breathing into the experience, allowing our breath to expand into it, much like blowing up a balloon. It not only frees up the cramping, it also opens space for the blood vessels to bring the necessary ingredients for healing.

We can breathe into our emotions as well. Over and over, I have watched people in the throws of a deep emotion react to what they are experiencing and then react to their reaction. When I invite them to bring their attention to the part in their body that has tightened because of the emotion and then to breathe into the sensations instead, most people are amazed at how this lightens the experience.

When you are being overtaken by an emotion — whether it is anger, fear, sadness, or a variation of one of those — taking a few deep breaths focused on the physical sensations of that emotion can transform your experience. What we fail to see is that emotions are amplified when we resist them. When we participate with them instead — and one of the simplest and most profound ways of doing that is through breathing into them — many of them become like clouds moving through us rather than a storm

that “rains on our parade.” I call this the Balloon Breath, and it is one of the most powerful tools we have to dissolve the old patterns within us that fuel our compulsions. I invite you to try it:

After you take a few deep breaths, bring your attention into your breath, feeling it from the inside. Feel how the in-breath expands and opens your body and how the out-breath carries with it a sense of letting go. Now find a tight spot in your body and imagine that your breath is a balloon that you are blowing up inside you, right at the experience of tightness. On every in breath, pull air into the balloon, allowing it to gently push against the tension you find there. Then let go on the out-breath, saying out loud a long and slow ahhhhh. Do this for a number of breaths, each time expanding a little bit more the area of tension. Your tension will respond to the gentle but opening pressure of the breath.

Soften your belly now and allow a deep and slow breath.

Centeredness

Taking an open breath also brings the center of gravity down into your body, tapping you into the wellspring of wisdom in the belly — an amazingly powerful and healing place to live from. Just as an umbilical cord connected us to the source of our nourishment when our bodies were being formed in our mother’s wombs, an energy umbilical cord in our belly connects us to the wellspring within us that is sourced from the wisdom at the heart of life.

When we were little, we were grounded in our bellies, and this energy umbilical cord still pulsed with vitality. This is one of the reasons we were able to be so alive in

our play. Rooted in the nourishing soil of our bellies, we could whirl and twirl, leap and dance with a sense of balance that is lost to most adults. It is also why, in our younger years, we were so resilient in the face of deep emotions.

Can you imagine twirling and tumbling like you did when you were a child? As adults, we usually keep our center of gravity in our heads with shallow breathing. Having lost the sense of balance that comes from being connected to our bellies, we are like top-heavy trees, vulnerable to the storms of our lives and the unconscious illusion that we can take care of ourselves through our compulsions. Cultivating an open breath takes us back into the safety of being connected to our bellies and all the spontaneity and trust that lives there.

To watch somebody who naturally breathes from the belly is a thing of beauty. Whether it is a postman or an accomplished ballerina, when someone is connected to her belly through her breath, her movements are wondrous to behold. We recognize in her an alive connectedness that touches us to the core.

Soften your belly now and allow a deep and slow breath.



As you can now see, to give ourselves the gift of a full and open breath is one of the most healing things we can do, for healing is about opening what has been closed, softening what has been hardened. The wonderful thing about breath is that it heals us on all levels of our being — physical, emotional, mental, spiritual. I can't describe how much I love a deep breath that comes from my belly. It reminds me of the kind of joy I know when I am laughing so hard I almost pee in my pants. It also reminds me of lying under the stars with nothing to separate me from deep reverence for life. It can even bring

back the essence of those moments when I was looking into my lover's eyes, giving and receiving love with every cell of my being. In all these experiences, my belly was soft, my breath was free, and I was animated from my core. As we learn how to connect with our breath again, it can become both our teacher and our healer, taking us back into what we are truly hungry for — intimate, alive, and loving connection with ourselves and with life.

Soften your belly now and allow a deep and slow breath.

Breathing Through Our Compulsions

As we become more intimate with our breath, not only does it bring us all the gifts we have explored, it also assumes the role of a wise and benevolent teacher. It is full of valuable information that can show us how to relate to a wave of compulsion rather than becoming lost in it.

From our very first breath until our last, our lives are a continuous river of breathing in which the experiences of life flow along. When we first learned to ride a tricycle, this river was breathing us. When we laughed and when we cried it was breathing us. Every time we were swimming, showering, shopping, kissing, singing, and sleeping it was breathing us. Every breath has been different, influenced not only by the needs of our body but also by our thoughts and emotions. It is fast when we are excited and slow when we are resting. It can be shallow when we are angry and deeper when we are at peace.

If we watch the ever-changing nature of breath, it will tell us how close or far away we are from ourselves. Whenever we are caught in our heads, with its continuous

addiction to control, we tighten our bellies and breathe more shallowly. This contraction indicates that we are cut off from the nourishment of being connected to ourselves and thus are vulnerable to being compulsive. As we learn how to be attuned to breath, it can point out to us very early in a wave of compulsion that we are in need of connection. As we become more in tune with ourselves, it can alert us even before the wave begins.

As we learn how to breathe down into our bellies again, our open breathing awakens our wellspring of deep knowing. In this awakening, we find that it becomes easier and easier to make wise and skillful choices, even in the face of the urge to be compulsive. For, as we discussed in chapter 4, our empowered no is a part of the wellspring of wisdom in our bellies. At the heart of this type of no lies a yes to life — a yes to balance, skillful living, and peace. Notice what your breath is doing right now. Are you holding onto it or letting it freely rise and fall? I first became aware of how much I held my breath while watching cartoons with my children. Now, as far as I can see, watching TV is usually not life threatening. But while watching the Road Runner approaching a cliff with Wily Coyote hot on his trail, I saw that I had pulled up and contracted my whole body, especially the right side, and was hardly breathing at all.

I had had enough contact at this point with the joys of open breathing that I was curious about this old pattern of contraction. As I began to watch my breath throughout the day, to my amazement the only time I experienced an open breath was early in the morning when I was by myself and felt completely safe. As the day wore on, my breathing usually got tighter and my connection with myself became dimmer, making me more vulnerable to my compulsion.

I wanted to stay in contact with myself, nourished by this connection for more than an hour or two in the morning, and my breath became an exquisite biofeedback system. It showed me when I was tightening down and turning away from myself again. I began to retrain this ancient response by softening my body and taking a deep breath whenever I noticed how contracted I had become. This brought my attention out of the narrowness of my mind and into the spaciousness of my body. At the beginning, I could only do this when I was sitting still. Slowly I became able to breathe back into myself as I moved throughout my day.

As I became more receptive to the experience of my breath (and the joy of an open one), I saw that this contraction was always present when I was caught up in a wave of compulsion. At first I couldn't do anything except watch. The grip my struggling mind had on my breath was too strong. But as I played with my breath when my compulsions were quiet, I began to feel the profound satisfaction of my breath going all the way down to my belly. It not only felt right, but I could see that a deep hunger inside me was satisfied when I allowed my breath to be that open — the hunger for being connected to myself.

It took me a while to learn that when the hunger of compulsion would appear, rather than heading down the ever-tightening spiral of reaction, I could feed it with a few deep breaths. These breaths reconnected me with myself, and often the wave would pass through, leaving hardly a ripple. Other times, when my compulsion needed more than just a few breaths to feed it, opening to my breath put me in contact with exactly what I was experiencing, which was usually something uncomfortable that was fueling the compulsion. Through this contact, I took back my power. When I turned toward the

experience, using my breath to open to exactly what was going on rather than being devoured by the experience (the main fear of the mind), I could now recognize what was happening.

In this recognition, I had the choice either to be present with what I was experiencing, allowing my undivided attention to transform these tight places within me back into the free-flowing energy they came from, or to close down and run away again. All my life I had been running, and when I first started being present for myself when I was compulsive, I still ran sometimes. But shallow breathing was always there to remind me that running away just made the experience worse.

Breathing into Our Wellspring of Wisdom

Opening to our breath also puts us in contact with a source of Intelligence that, thankfully, is much smarter than anything we can figure out on our own. If we watch carefully, we will see that whenever a wave of compulsion knocks us over, it feels like we are David facing Goliath and that there is no help for miles around. Yet nothing could be farther from the truth. In our bodies lies our wellspring of wisdom that is connected to the very Intelligence that gave us life in the first place. This Intelligence is waiting to help us with our compulsions.

We can begin to understand the depth of wisdom within our bodies by looking at the intricate creativity it took to bring forth human beings in the first place. It is astounding that life has been able to bring the light of the universe into the living, breathing being that is you, a person who can see and touch and hear and celebrate the awesome wonder of life. We could say that each of us is light that has learned how to see,

hear, taste, touch, and describe itself. Our limited minds can't even begin to comprehend this, let alone explain it. Nonetheless, we get all the benefits from the imaginative inventiveness of life — we get to be alive!

Not only are you a recipient of this Intelligence, you *are* a field of Intelligence. It resides inside every cell of your body and is most evident in the ribbon of information called DNA. This is the blueprint that makes you *you*. Each cell is less than one thousandth of an inch across, and yet it contains enough information to fill one thousand books with six hundred pages each! If you uncoiled the ribbons of DNA from all the cells of your body and placed them end on end, they would stretch to the moon — which is more than two hundred and thirty thousand miles away — and back one hundred thousand times.

Before you go on to the next sentence, let that sink in. I think we can safely say that the Intelligence that orchestrates our bodies is greater than all the knowledge that human beings have ever gathered. Not only does this Intelligence operate inside individual cells, but when these cells come together into communities called bodies (or organisms), it also orchestrates a complexity of processes that boggles the mind. Imagine driving a car, talking on a cell phone, and trying to listen to directions from a passenger. This is almost impossible to do, and yet it is only three tasks. Your body administers zillions of tasks every moment of your life. There are so many that it is impossible to comprehend. And yet your body hardly ever misses a beat.

As humanity has crawled up into the attic of our minds, we have learned how to rely on our own resources, cutting ourselves off from the vast sea of Intelligence that is life and the wisdom and support that are always with us. Feel your body, as you are

reading this book. You will find myriad sensations — pressure, heat, itches, and pain. If you pay deep attention, encompassing all those is a vibration, an aliveness. That is the field of Intelligence.

This Intelligence is often given the name God, and then all sorts of definitions and rules spring up around it. In a workshop I attended, author Stephen Levine once said, “I can use the word God because I have absolutely no idea what it means, but there is nowhere that I see it not!” Contrary to many popular religious beliefs, contact with this Intelligence does not happen in some far-off place (usually after you die) and only granted if you have done your life “right.” The doorway to immediate and intimate contact with this Intelligence is inside you right now.

One of the many gifts that compulsions provide is that they won’t let us off the hook until we stop trying to live our lives all by ourselves. Compulsions are here to invite, cajole, push, and prod us back into our bodies and into recognition and connection with this Intelligence. We will explore how to ask for help from the wellspring of wisdom within us in chapter 12. Until then, know that opening to our breath brings us back into our bodies, making us receptive to the awesome field of Intelligence that resides there. This Intelligence will guide us in listening for what we truly need at any given moment of our life — not for what we want, but what we need.

Practices for Nourishing Ourselves with Breath

To be in contact with our breath is a wondrous thing. As we have been exploring, deep and open breathing brings a vitality and a calmness into our bodies that is positively delicious. It also nourishes the deep hunger we have for an intimate relationship with

ourselves. As we cultivate an awareness of what our breath is doing, it also becomes our friend, signaling when we are disconnecting from ourselves. The breath can then be used as a great healer, transforming our formerly frozen feelings into the joy of flowing energy. Yet most of us aren't even aware of the healing rhythm of our breath that is happening right under (and through!) our noses. Breathing unconsciously and shallowly, we are cut off from the friendship of our breath.

The most important thing we can do to access the joy of alive and open breathing is simply to notice how much we hold our breath. And, in some ways, that is enough. We can't force ourselves to breathe openly again. That kind of struggle is exactly what caused us to hold our breath in the first place. But we can become curious not only about how much we hold our breath but also about how wonderful it feels when we don't. That noticing begins to seed a process whereby we *want* to be in contact with our natural breath rather than feeling that we *have to* make our breath be different from what it is.

From this longing to know free breathing again, you can begin to cultivate your Deep Natural Breath. I invite you to play with it right now as you are reading.

The next time you breathe out, when you come to what you think is the end of your out-breath, keep on breathing out, slightly pulling in around the region of your belly button. When you do this, you will discover that a lot more air is left in your lungs and this slight pressure can gently push it out.

When you come to the completion of the out-breath, let your belly go and feel the in-breath come flooding in, lifting and opening your body. As the in-breath turns again into an out-breath, watch how you can let go of much more air when you include your belly. Make this a gentle push. Don't force it. When you come to the end of the out-breath

feel the joy of softening your belly, making space for the in-breath. The more space you make in your lungs through a full out-breath, the deeper your in-breath will be. Keep breathing deeply as you are reading, getting a sense of what it is like when you involve your belly again in your breathing.

This is the art of full and open breathing, the kind of breathing that nourishes you from the inside out. The key to this kind of breath is to focus on the exhalation. At first it may feel a little awkward, a little like trying to rub your tummy and pat your head at the same time. But the body knows how to breathe this way, and with a little bit of coaching your natural breath can begin to make itself known again. You can then let go of consciously pulling in your belly as you are breathing out, for the body will deeply exhale on its own.

You aren't trying to make the breath stay in the belly — that would just be more struggle. But when you take a moment to consciously cultivate a deep and full breath, you change your breathing from shallow to open and from tight to free. You can then remember the joy of open breathing, and in that remembering become more attuned to when you are again holding your breath.

Notice your breath again. It has probably left your belly and is again in the upper part of your chest. Don't try to change it. Just notice how different this breath is from the open breathing you played with a few minutes ago. Stay with your shallow breathing, becoming familiar with how it feels. It is important to know both extremes of breath — the open, free breath and the shallow, contracted breath.

When we practice full and open breathing we bring a center of vitality, safety, and creativity into our lives. Familiarity with shallow breathing attunes your awareness so

that when you are holding your breath again, that familiarity will wake you up, indicating that something needs your attention. With this familiarity, you can begin to use your breath to signal yourself when you are heading down the path to compulsion.

To attune yourself to the nourishment of an open breath and to use the shallow breath as a signal that you are disconnecting from yourself, it is helpful simply to pay attention to your breath at certain times every day. I do this every morning. For a few minutes, I breathe the deep and open breath that we explored earlier. This always quiets my mind and brings a sense of vitality to my body. I then allow my breath to be exactly as it wants to be, and I bring my attention to the experience. To spend even a few minutes a day in curiosity about the breath creates a relationship with this wise and wondrous teacher, a relationship that will guide you in healing and being healed by your compulsion.

It is also helpful to pause throughout the day and simply take one full breath. If it moves into a number of deep breaths that's great, but just one will do wonders for your life. I do this every time I wash my hands. Because it is so easy to forget to breathe open breaths, try to connect a deep breath to something that you do repeatedly throughout the day, giving yourself these nourishing moments where you are returning to yourself. All our moments of waiting — at the doctor's office, in rush-hour traffic, or in all the lines we stand in — can become moments when we cultivate a deep and open breath.

Another favorite breathing exercise of mine is to imagine on my out-breath that I have roots growing out of the bottom of my feet and down into the earth. As I become as grounded as a tree, on my in-breaths I imagine the deep nourishment of the earth filling me with its presence as I send my roots ever deeper on the my out-breaths. This is

wonderful to do while waiting for an elevator, standing on your porch in the early morning, cooking dinner, and so on. It cultivates a centered strength that is deeply grounding and nourishing.

It is very important not to make either open breathing or paying attention to your breath into *shoulds*, engaging in the same struggling mind that created compulsions in the first place. These words are an invitation, and for some of you that will be enough. If you don't force these practices, they will become seeds that will grow into full and open breathing in your own time and in your own way. Trust where you are. At the same time, trust that a free and open breath is your destiny, for it is an essential component of a deep and nourishing connection with yourself and with life.

Soften your belly now and allow a deep and slow breath.

Core Ideas

- Open breathing is a sanctuary that is available to us no matter where we are or what is happening in our lives.
- Open breathing brings the center of gravity down into your body, tapping you into the wellspring of wisdom in the belly.
- Opening to our breath lessens the deepest pains of human life. This is most evident on the physical level, but it also works like magic on our emotions.
- When compulsions appear, rather than heading down the ever-tightening spiral of reaction, just take a few deep breaths.
- Pause throughout the day and simply take one full breath. If it moves into a number of deep breaths that's great, but just one will do wonders for your life.</>

- Every time that you pause for just a moment, take a breath, and check in with yourself, you take another step along the path of healing.</>