

Spiritual Practices for Times of Crisis

by Joanna Macy

At this turning in humanity's journey, science and spirituality converge, and we can glimpse new possibilities for a life-sustaining civilization. But the going is rough. One mega-disaster follows another. Economic, political, and ecological systems spin out of control, in what David Korten aptly calls the "Great Unraveling."

As the rug is progressively pulled out from under us, it is easy to panic, and even easier to simply shut down. These two instinctive reactions — panic and paralysis — are the roadside ditches that border our pathway to a livable future. To fall into either one is the greatest of all the dangers we face, for they deaden the heart and derail the mind. If ever we needed spiritual practices and disciplines for staying alert and connected, it is now.

The greatest gift we can give our world is our presence, awake and attentive. What can help us do that? Here, drawn from ancient religions and Earth wisdom traditions, are a handful of practices I have learned to count on.

1. Breathe

Our friend the breath is always with us. When we pay attention to its flow, it merges mind with body, and connects inner world with outer world. Mindfulness of breathing in and breathing out can center and steady you.

"Feel how your breathing makes more space around you," writes the poet Rilke.

"Pure, continuous exchange with all that is, flow and counterflow where rhythmically we come to be."

Notice that you are not deciding each time to exhale or inhale; it's rather that you're being breathed. Breathed by life. And so are all the other animals, and plants too, in vast rhythms of reciprocity. Feel that web enlivening you and holding you.

The felt flow-through of matter/energy brings a measure of ease, and opens us to the flow-through of information as well. This lowers our usual defenses against distressing information, and begins to unblock the feedback loops, so we can more clearly perceive what we've caused to happen.

2. Come from Gratitude

As burning rain forests and dying plankton progressively diminish our oxygen supply, each breath seems more precious. Thankfulness for that precious gift galvanizes us to act, to protect.

With gratitude we affirm our birthright to be here in Earth, endowed with self-reflexive consciousness, the power to choose. To be here in solidarity with each other. To be a living, intrinsic, blessed part of this living Earth.

We have excellent teachers of gratitude in indigenous peoples the world over, and especially Native Americans. In every council meeting of the Six Nation confederacy of the Haudenosaunee, the thanksgiving address constitutes “the words that come before all else.” Spoken afresh each time with spontaneous variations, these words offer not only “thanks,” but also “greetings” to each being and element of the natural world they honor. I think this practice is at the root of the dignity and self-respect that has survived centuries of dispossession and humiliation.

As we adapt this practice to our own lives, say at the start and close of each day, and even bring into meetings, we make two discoveries. The first is that gratitude is not dependent on external circumstances. The second is that gratitude is a revolutionary act. Helping us realize how much we already have, it helps to free us from the grip of the consumer society.

3. Respect your Pain for the World

We are in grief. With all that’s being inflicted on the natural world and the social fabric of our lives together, there’s fear too, anger as well. These responses are natural and healthy. If we disown them, we cripple our vitality and intelligence.

So we bow to them instead. When pain for the world arises within you, recognize it and pause. Pause and breathe, as if making room for it, as if letting that pain flow through your heart. Realize that you are capable of suffering with your world. Suffering-with is the literal meaning of compassion. It is proof positive of our interconnectedness, indeed of our inescapable inter-existence.

“There is no birth of consciousness without pain” said Carl Gustav Jung. Our pain for the world releases us from the illusion of separation. It has a key role to play in birthing the collective consciousness that may well be the only resolution to the global crisis of our time.

4. Engage the Power of Benevolence

Metta or loving kindness is a Buddhist meditation-in-action that many today are finding wonderfully efficacious. It is good for dispelling fear and ill-will, as well as generating care and understanding.

This practice functions not as a vague, diaphanous feeling, but as a series of fairly precise person-by-person intentions. One traditional Burmese practice, for example, takes a four-fold form such as this:

May (a specific person) be free from physical suffering.

May he/she be free from mental suffering.

May he/she be free from conflict.

May he/she have ease of well-being.

It's important to extend this to oneself as well ("May I be free from mental suffering" etc). Variations are encouraged ("May he/she be free to develop the beauty of his/her mind.") This practice, when in play, cannot co-exist with fear.

5. Inhabit Larger Fields of Time

We are relating to time today in a way that is surely unique in human history. The growth economy and nano-technologies require decisions made at lightning speed for short-term goals, cutting us off from nature's rhythms and from the past and future as well. Both the legacy of our ancestors and the needs of our descendants become less and less real to us.

This relation to time is not innate. Throughout history men and women have labored at great personal cost to bequeath to future generations monuments of art and learning they'd not see completed in their lifetimes. And they honored through story and ritual those who came before.

We, too, can broaden the temporal context of our lives. To help us do that, cosmology and evolutionary sciences now offer vast vistas into the past. As to connecting with the future, ten thousand generations are now brought within our reach by nuclear wastes. The consequences of our actions (our karma) play out on a geological time scale.

Our moral imagination is the essential tool for opening us up to the depths and breadths of time to which we belong. Extend it both backwards and forwards. Open your mind's eye to the immense journey of life on our planet by meditating on your hand. "See" its evolutionary development, one life-form to another from its origins as a fin in primordial seas. Behold in it also the countless generations of human hands whose tasks and skills shaped our world.

Invite the future ones into your awareness. Feel the strength of your desire that they find clean air to breathe, water to drink, trees, topsoil. Try asking for their guidance in the work that is now to be done. And, for a practice I hope you'll enjoy as much as I have, imagine a person of a century or two hence (perhaps related to you, perhaps not) who can see back through time, and sees you at this moment of your life. And then write yourself a letter from this future person.