

THERE NO PLACE LIKE OM ~ KATE VOGT

Make your personal practice a refuge, and you'll always be at home, no matter how far the winds of life blow you off course.

I love when at the end of movie *The Wizard of Oz* Dorothy closes her eyes, clicks her heels and says those simple words, “There is no place like home.”

She has just completed a treacherous and tangled journey to find the great and powerful wizard who she thinks can use some special magic to get her home. Her trusty travel companions unknowingly bring along the courage, heart, and smarts needed to help her navigate the tough spots along the way.

Part of the reason this point in the movie speaks to me is that the real vehicle to get her there was always right there with her, in her heart—she just couldn't see it. Throughout the movie she had been convinced that she *needed* the wizard. Only as the self-declared wizard floats away does she realize that this was a false hope, and that what she really needed all along was to be true to the tug of home deep within her heart.

When she is at last freed from doubts and distractions, Dorothy becomes still and visibly at peace and fully home in her own heart. Then, completely immersed in the purest feelings of home, she simply taps her heels together, repeats her simple mantra, and wakes up in the place of sincerest happiness.

What better metaphor for a home practice?

Heart First

Like Dorothy, when you connect to the innermost core of your heart, you'll discover the *home* that has always been there. It is “no place” but it feels “like home.” This is not the anatomical heart but a symbolic heart within your torso that eternally radiates peaceful wisdom and love. On the deepest level it is like a beacon of our sacredness; on a more practical level, it offers a feeling of safety and unconditional acceptance. We touch our chests rather than our heads when asked to point to ourselves.

For most of us, however, our busy lives cloud the presence of the heart. We wake ourselves up by mentally making a list of responsibilities and things to do. And, before we are fully out of bed, we have recalled unfinished conversations from the day before and planned all those that are yet to be started in the day ahead. The clock prompts us to review the dozens of activities we might squeeze in for the next few minutes. If the phone is nearby, we quickly check messages and e-mails.... and before we know it we our day has already begun with feelings of being pressured or agitated.

In our modern lives, it often takes unexpected transitions to disrupt our morning patterns and reconnect us with the workings of the heart. For example, when tragedy hits our life, grace may flow in and carry with it auspicious support. Strangers and people whom we have not seen in years may miraculously appear. Common advice when we face huge disruptions or large dilemmas goes something like this, “The heart knows all,” “Trust your heart,” or “Search within your heart.”

Wouldn't it be smarter if, rather than waiting for an outside event or person to take us there, we make our own effort to reconnect with the heart? You can do that. In fact, that's the entire purpose of doing a simple daily Home Practice, like the one that starts on page 5.

Initially, the practice can help you find a respite from your usual morning ruminations and stressful thoughts, and get your day started in a more gentle way. It is like a mini refuge within the peaceful comfort of your heart. Over time, as you develop a regular connection with your heart, you likely will find that you naturally feel more compassion, happiness, and kindness toward others and yourself. You may also find that you are able to more gracefully ride the waves of life.

The emotions that reside deep within the heart are among our most untainted feelings; it is like uncovering a seam of rare, hidden gems deep within. Most of us can evoke these feelings by recalling what it felt like when we visited a sanctuary or sacred site. The sacred place differs for each of us. It may be visiting a church, a mosque or temple, or a place in nature such as a mountain or sunrise. Or, it may be a universal symbol of purity such as the lotus blossom floating above the muddy waters.

As you explore your own heart, you'll begin to uncover sweet feelings like hidden gems. They may feel sweet and expansive. They may feel like a sense of deep contentment or boundless selflessness. Or, there may be remembrance of being enveloped and enfolded in a vast and indescribably loving. There also could be a feeling of emptiness or nothingness. The experience is personal to you. What resides in your heart is yours alone.

Every one of our life experiences, whether pleasant or unpleasant, leaves an inner trace or imprint within our body, heart, and mind. This includes all that we've ever taken in, consumed or experienced – ideas, food, relationships, trips, being near the sacred, etc. With the right stimuli, these imprints can re-surface in the form of thoughts and feelings. In the Home Practice, we are intentionally evoking and reconnecting with our most loving, peaceful experiences.

The one thing in life you can influence the most in your life is your self. You have no singlehanded control over natural disasters or other people, but you *can* influence the workings of your own heart and mind.

Self Control

The river of thought generally flows in two patterns: an outward cycle, with a tendency toward insatiability and continual dis-ease; and an inward one, associated with ease, well-being, steadiness, and ultimate peace. If you allow the first cycle to go unchecked we will be further and further bound by its endless hunger to be fed with all its cravings and moods. But through practice, you can weaken its strength and its pull for endless wanting of new experiences, entertainments, and objects. You can begin to reverse the flow, directing it to the more stable, peaceful ground within. There is no short cut for doing this, but when you consistently show up for the heart and its deepest and purest feelings, you essentially are creating a non-demanding and contented flow of thought.

The *Home Practice* is designed to help you connect to the sacred feelings of the innermost heart. We draw our hands together over the heart to remind us of the ever radiant and infinite presence. As those feelings seep into our awareness, we softly relax, breathe, and allow them to cradle us as though we are being held by the timeless, all-loving presence. When they fade, gently thank them and let the rise again and again, without forcing.

However, we need to be aware that the mind might rebel at this process, and that cycle of the senses rushing outward will continuously exert its strength. Almost as though it fears its own extinction, the thinking mind will present recognizable obstacles, such as excuses, doubts, boredom, judgment, procrastination, and other options to rebel at attempts to connect with the innermost heart.

Counter this by progressively bringing to your practice awareness of each of the supportive elements of practice: simplicity, consistency, regularity, and simplicity.

Sincerity will help you stay more aware of the quality of your attention throughout the practice, and allow you to truly embrace our inner self. It allows you to infuse every cell of your being with lightness and vitality. Undertake the practice with the intention of simply observing the heart with love, rather than reaching a predetermined end point.

Consistency in a regular heart-centered personal practice helps strengthen the thought cycle associated with ease, contentment, safety, and other feelings of true home. Consistency allows you to be like a sculptor, gradually revealing the essence of your truest self through your own efforts.

Regularity allows the mind to relax into familiarity. The ideal time to practice is the first few minutes of the morning, before you give in to the urge to check or respond to messages, make a to-do lists, or engage in other binding activity. An early morning commitment allows you to symbolically

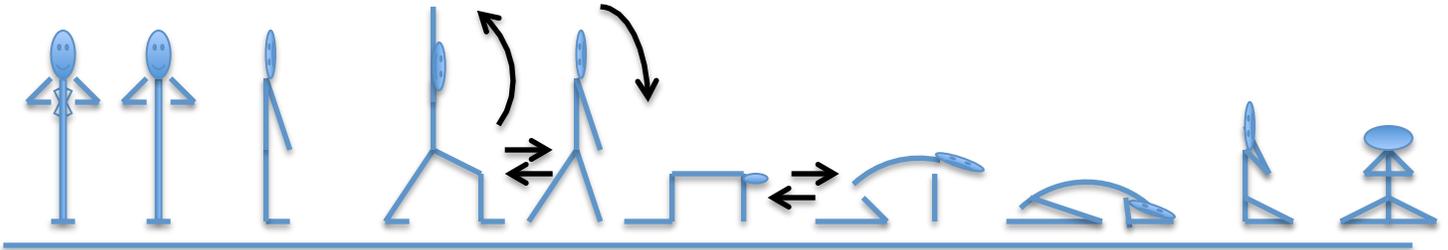
start the day from your inner home. By communing with the heart upon awakening, you can nourish and strengthen your affinity to live by universal values such as truthfulness. Gradually, we become more and more heart-centered. Consider it a warm up to set the tone for a later asana or meditation practice, and the activities of the rest of the day.

Simplicity allows us to work the same practice in, day after day. The *Home Practice* is not long, or fancy, or particularly challenging. All it requires is that you be willing to synch your movement with the smooth, even flow of the out-breath and in-breath as you focus your mind on your own heartfelt feelings.

As you move through the *Home Practice*, you can soften and re-soften the areas around the throat and neck, which can tend to grip if the mind is rebelling against the heart. You can also practice softening and relaxing the entire surface of the scalp, forehead, face, and shoulders. To help with the inner focus, your eyes can be in a soft gaze and you can touch one or both hands to our heart center with a relaxed palm and fingers. If you have overslept or are rushed, don't skip over your practice—do just the first pose with sincere and honest attention. To make the practice feel even more sacred, you can chant the seed mantra *om*, or reverently repeat a prayerful phrase from your faith.

Trust fully that, over time with this simple practice will you fully settle into your own sacred home. Then when life's winds blow you off course, you'll only need to touch your heart to remind you that you are already exactly where you need to be.

MORNING HOME PRACTICE



Home base

1

- a) Standing, lightly rest your palms over your heart center with one hand on top of the other; gently close the eyes and bring to mind remembrance of a peaceful and sweet calming feeling of when you were in a sanctuary or very sacred place. Without force, but with full effort, allow your mind to be completely held and absorbed in that hallowed feeling. Just the feeling, free of mental analysis.
- b) Bring the hands together in the shape of a lotus bud (fingertips together, base of the palms touching the lower part of your sternum with a softness in the knuckles). Make a small vow that you will begin each morning with loving attention and care for this feeling and that you will come back to it again and again. It is a precious gift that you have been given and with regular and continuous nurturance, it will grow and become easier to find and return to. Pause here for a few breaths - softening the tongue, throat and chest while still being with the feeling. Then, allow your arms to relax alongside your body and your eyes to open.

Practice returning to home

2

- a) With a soft gaze, turn one foot slightly outward, and take an easy step forward with the other foot. Pause here and see if the inner feeling that you just cultivated is still with you. Without judgment, just notice. If it is gone away, lightly touch your heart center with the fingertips of one hand - as though to bring it into your awareness as you practice how it is to move with the breath and still be enfolded in a feeling of sacredness.
- b) Initiate an in-breath and while inhaling simultaneously bend the front knee and bring the arms forward, upward and alongside the ears. Pause. Recall the feeling. Soften across the face, throat, and chest. Initiate an out-breath and while exhaling simultaneously allow the leg to straighten and the arms to come alongside the body. If you are comfortable chanting, chant *Om*, quietly and gently say *Om* on the out-breath. Be still, stay with the feeling.
- c) Repeat step "b" 3 times, then step the front foot back to meet the other foot, and repeat on the other side. Bring the fingertips of one hand to the heart center again before transitioning to the floor.

3

- a) On hands and knees, with an out-breath, draw the belly in toward the spine and allow the back to round upward and the hips to move partially (about $\frac{1}{2}$ way)

back toward the heels. With the in-breath, simultaneously come back to all fours. If you are comfortable chanting, chant *Om*, quietly and gently say *Om* on the out-breath. Be still, stay with the feeling.
Repeat 6 times.

- b) On the last exhale, bring the hips back to the heels, knees apart and rest the forehead on the floor, or on the backs of your hands. Allow the breath to be smooth and easy as though it were carrying a fragile and timeless message. Pause for several breaths.

4

- a) In a comfortable seated position – on the floor, bolster or chair – lightly touch the heart center with the fingertips of one hand, once again inviting the mind to return home. If you are familiar with alternate nostril breathing, practice 3 full rounds while releasing tension across the forehead, throat, chest and torso. If you are not familiar, practice six even in- and out-breaths. Pause.
- b) Return home. Bring the hands together to form a lotus bud (fingertips and fingers together, softness around the knuckles, and the base of the palms touching the lower part of your sternum). Bring your gaze to your fingertips. Pause. Let there be nothing but delightful, calm peacefulness for just one more moment. Know that friendliness, steadiness, compassion, and lightness in your being will flow from daily patience and attention to this feeling. Then, cross the hands over the heart again as though to seal in this feeling for the day.

Note: If your mind is too restless and unable to stay focused on the feeling, try adding to the feeling a mental image of a sacred site or what you hold as most divine. For example, if you have a particular faith, choose an image that symbolizes the ultimate Supreme Being.