**Gathas of the Heart**

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When we look around the world to witness what’s happening in our homes, neighborhoods, cities and nations, the heart can crack again and again. There appears to be so much suffering everywhere! Times are difficult for many and perhaps for you too, or the people you love. Though it often hurts to get in touch with such suffering, we can harness the energy of suffering and transform it into the energy of Love and healing.

One of the most powerful techniques I know of to work with a broken-open heart is the use of a "gatha." The word "gatha" means "verse" in Sanskrit. It is a way of putting intention, words, and breath together in a poetic, yet power-filled way. Gathas are repeated like mantras or lines of scripture. And in the broadest sense, can be used to bring anything into greater awareness.

Like a mantra, a gatha stabilizes the mind because it is a form of concentration practice; it brings us to the edge of what is possible in the present moment. It can be used to bless ourselves and others.

Zen Buddhist monk, Thich Nhat Hanh, is the person who has brought the use of gathas to the forefront of inter-spiritual practice. Creating and repeating gathas is becoming more mainstream because of its association with mindfulness practice. Perhaps Thay's most well-know gatha is this one:

*"Breathing in I calm my body.
Breathing out, I smile.
Dwelling in the present moment,
I know this is a wonderful moment."*

Though gathas were traditionally associated with Epic Sanskirt (and sourced in the Jain and Buddhist traditions), we can create new gathas for everyday living that root us more solidly in the Sacred no matter our tradition. This is what Thich Nhat Hanh has done in his teaching by drafting gathas for everything imaginable—from loving others more, to preparing food and cleaning up the dishes!

Here are two of my favorites from Thay's book, *Peace Is Every Breath:*

*"Waking up this morning, I smile;*
*Twenty-four brand new hours are before me.*
*I vow to live each moment fully*
*and to look at all beings with eyes of compassion."*

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*"Each step is a miracle.
Each step is healing.
Each step is nourishing.
Each step is freedom."*

Gathas are traditionally two, four or eight stanzas. (Most are of the shorter version.) Over the years, I have enjoyed creating them and incorporating them into retreats as prayers, as well as using them in my own life to calm my mind and connect with my soul. Anyone can do this.

Let's consider how we might create gathas that keep the heart open; those that send the intention of Love and support to the people around us, especially in times of suffering.

**The Practice**

You do not have to be a poet to create a gatha. Simply get in touch with what it is you want for yourself and/or others and write down some key thoughts.

My favorite gatha practice is to match those thoughts with the phrases that have to do with breathing in and breathing out, Thich Nhat Hanh style. Here’s an example:

*I breathe in love.
I breathe out loving-kindness for others.*

*I breathe in peace.
I breathe out blessings of peace for all beings.*

Said in this way, we are harnessing the power of our own loving heart and sharing its goodwill with others.

**Create your own gatha.** What do you wish for yourself today? What do you wish for a dear one who is struggling?

Once you have created the stanzas, say the first line on the inhale. Breathe in the qualities you wish for yourself.

Breathe out as you say the second stanza, sending out your good will to others.

You can create gathas for others too. Feel free to personalize them, adding the person's name or "May you ... " to the beginning of the phrases.

As you repeat the gatha, focus on your sacred breath. Focus on expanding your heart. Imagine your boundless love flowing out to others who are struggling and know that you are doing something quite wonderful as you share your precious heart with others.

**Bio:**

Dr. Janice Lundy is the co-founder and co-director of the [Spiritual Guidance Training Institute](http://www.spiritualguidancetraining.com/) which provides training in interfaith and interspiritual companionship. She is an interfaith/interspiritual guide and supervisor, and the author of several spiritual formation books including [Your Truest Self: Embracing the Woman You Are Meant to Be](https://www.amazon.com/dp/B002MRS5CY/ref%3Ddp-kindle-redirect?_encoding=UTF8&btkr=1) and [My Deepest Me](https://www.janlundy.com/new-book.html). She is also the creator of the [Pure Presence®](https://www.janlundy.com/pure-presence-practitioner-training.html) method of compassionate listening. She is currently Visiting Professor of Spiritual Direction at The Graduate Theological Foundation. She resides in Michigan, USA.

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