

# Fully Awake

## *The 12 Essential Practices*

Janice Lynne Lundy



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## Introduction

Since childhood, I've been intrigued with the story of Rip Van Winkle. It is the story of a man who fell asleep for many years and awakened to strangeness—unfamiliar surroundings, sights and sounds. As I speak with people today, they report similar experiences. They feel as if they are “waking up.”

Like Rip Van Winkle, they have a sudden realization that their life is not as it seems. Life feels different. It is as if they have been given a new pair of eyeglasses through which to view the world and the circumstances of their life, or, as in the fairy tale, been awakened from a deep slumber. This is both intriguing and intimidating.

Life crisis often does this for us—boldly shakes us, wakes us. Personal tragedy; the loss of a relationship, loved one, or job; a health crisis knocks upon our door. Any one of these can jolt us from our metaphorical life sleep, and we find ourselves, like Rip, bewildered, looking about, asking—“What happened?” and “What now?”

Once we have awakened, it's natural to wonder how we are supposed to live. The landscape has changed and new rules seem to apply. We're different. Life is different. Very simply, we can't live as we did before our awakening.

Uncovering new personal “truths” and cultivating practices that support them are vital to living an awakened life. We find that the truths feel good and natural because they are connected to the new values that emerged while we were awakening—virtues such as simplicity, authenticity, meaningful work, loving relationships, and peace of mind.

The practices, however, are a different matter altogether. They require effort. They are a necessary part of our awakened life because they work to keep us alert and aware, in alignment with our values, so we don't fall back to sleep. They are challenging because they ask that we actually *do* something, engage differently, or create a new habit. Practices require faithfulness. Practices help us walk our new talk. They convey to the world that we've made a commitment to a new way of being in the world. Indeed, it requires dedication to live in an awakened manner.

As I've experienced it in my own life, wakefulness asks much of us. It is far easier to sleep walk through our days or to live on auto-pilot. Wakefulness invites us to something more, something quite extraordinary. It invites us to live courageously, with conviction; to publicly represent the values we have come to know and hold dear. As the poet Robert Frost described, it *is* the road that is less traveled, and

choosing to take it often sets us apart from others. It is a path of heart. The word *courage* derives from the French word *coeur*, which means exactly that—to live with heart. Living an awakened life is a heart-full life.

And, yet, the pull is great to go back to sleep. It is easier to follow the masses. Simple to succumb to the ego. Alluring to fall into the lap of materialism. As a beloved cultural character, Kermit the Frog, reminded us, “It’s not easy being green.” It’s not easy staying awake in a world that thrives and hums on being more and having more. If we are awake, we are “different”—yet I’m certain Robert Frost and Kermit would cheer us on.

And so would the Persian poet Rumi who was an enormous advocate of staying awake. He espoused:

*The breeze at dawn has secrets to tell you.  
Don't go back to sleep.  
You must ask for what you really want.  
Don't go back to sleep.  
People are going back and forth across the doorsill  
where the two worlds touch.  
The door is round and open.  
Don't go back to sleep.*

The secrets of which Rumi speaks are the joys and blessings of living an awakened life. Of knowing our true identity, our potentiality, and harboring a vision of the magnitude of what our lives can be, if—if—we can hold on to this experience of awakened mind and heart. He knows how easily we can fail; how easily we can be drawn back into self-delusion. He advocates the path of wakefulness, to stop drifting between the worlds and to live here, now, fully aware of our purpose and power.

This new life path we’ve chosen to walk begins with courage but is bolstered by an antiquated virtue of which saints and sages speak. Vigilance. Personally, it is a word that I have come to love because it helps me stay faithful to my awakened life. The word, *vigilant*, from the French, means to “keep awake.” The definition speaks of that which we know; to live consciously, with integrity, we must keep careful watch for possible dangers and difficulties. We must be self-aware enough to know when we are getting drawn into ego, or dragged into delusion.

Vigilance is a state of action. It says, ‘Choose, and act in the name of wakefulness.’ Indeed, vigilance says, ‘Be aware. Be mindful. Know what you’re thinking. Be attuned to your feelings. Know your options. Then, make the wisest choice.’

This is being awake. And this is how we stay awake.

Within the pages of this book, you will discover twelve practices that I believe are essential for staying awake. I use the term “practices” because each is a mindset,

supported by a set of actions. Each requires an open mind and fosters mental calmness. Each invites us to the landscape of the open heart so wisdom can shine through. I maintain that this spiritual dozen are vital, because, in reality, they are who we are in our core, they reflect our true identity like a lake reflects the sky. We practice them so we can remember them, so we can, ultimately, *be* them. The practices enable us to do what the Buddha so nobly taught, “Be a lamp unto yourself.”

We can be, and we can also serve as lamps to one another. Our light, skillfully honed, can illuminate the path of others who have awakened. They may need a bit of light to find the way. The path is not always easy, nor is it crystal clear.

I invite you to share and shine. Together, we find our way.

With metta ~ loving-kindness

Jan Lundy  
August 2012

## Essential Practice 1: Breathe

*Sometimes all it takes to stay awake is to breathe.*

Generously caring for ourselves allows us to generously care for others. When our personal reservoirs of well-being are full, when we are rested, healthy and happy, everyone around us benefits. In fact, others can receive more from us (time and attention) because we've replenished ourselves and have more energy to give.

There are many, many ways you can lovingly tend to yourself—from choosing healthful, nutritious foods to eat, to daily exercise and periods of relaxation, to outright pampering. My very favorite way to self-nurture and care for myself—body, mind, and spirit—is to breathe.

*Simply breathe.*

It's the perfect and most natural way to nourish our body, ease our mind, and soothe our spirit. Most of us are not aware how important breathing is for harmonious well-being. Most of us don't consciously think about breathing at all. We are so busy rushing here and there that we may not take a decent breath. We breathe shallowly, gulping down ragged breaths, or hold our breath altogether as we nervously respond to life in the moment.

When we breathe like this, tension builds and sits right in the center of our chest like a heavy ball. Or, it wraps itself around our head, neck, and shoulders like a vice. I'm sure you've felt the difference in yourself when you're aware of that tension; how your body positively responds when you take a deep breath in then letting it out. Breathing in, deeply and evenly, and exhaling in the same way, releases tension. It releases not only bodily tension, but mental and emotional tension too. When you become intentional about your breathing, your whole self will benefit in these important ways:

### **Physically:**

When you breathe deeply, your body receives very specific health benefits. Your blood is oxygenated, which provides fresh *new* blood flow to the brain, enabling you to think more clearly. It streams to your organs to facilitate new cell reproduction; to muscles and ligaments, strengthening them and increasing their flexibility. Deep

breathing invites your pulse, heart, and metabolic rates to slow down. By harnessing the power of your breath, your body can access its own innate healing energy.

### **Mentally/Emotionally:**

When you bring your attention to your breath, it allows your mind to let go of chatter and to slow racing thoughts. It can help you focus when you're feeling scattered, feel more creative when you're blocked. Negative thoughts and feelings that cause wear and tear on your emotional state, as well as your body, can be released through deep breathing. And, lest we forget, destructive emotions (like worry, anxiety, or anger) can manifest themselves in bodily duress, which can, in time, cause significant health problems and dis-ease.

### **Spiritually:**

Conscious breathing allows you to access quiet, to get in touch with the center-point of stillness which resides within you. It can usher in greater peace of mind, especially with ongoing practice. It also provides the perfect opportunity to come back to the present moment where the mind can rest. In the present moment, we remember much of what we've forgotten when we're living with an ongoing sense of overwhelm. It reminds us of the importance of harmonious relationships, meaningful work, the joy of laughter, the gift of life itself. Breath invites us to connect with the "Now," to enjoy beauty and the majesty of nature.

In other words, conscious breathing can enhance the quality of life. It is a practice that restores the *whole* self.

You can access the healing power of breath by dedicating time each day to breathe with *intention* and full *attention*. Many people do so for 10 – 20 minutes, once or twice a day. While engaged in simple, everyday tasks like washing dishes, driving in the car, or waiting in line we can remember to breathe. In the midst of a tense situation, taking ten deep breaths can bring relief—even create miracles.

Thich Nhat Hanh, a Buddhist monk and the author of *Peace is Every Step*, offers a wonderful breathing exercise that I have found to be very helpful. I can only imagine how peaceful each of us might be if we took just a few extra minutes daily to breathe deeply and make manifest his simple, but powerful words:

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

Nurturing ourselves with the wondrous gift of our breath is simple and effective. It is one of the very best ways to "stay awake," and to care for ourselves in a compassionate way. It simply takes remembering to do so.



## Essential Practice 2: Savor

*Set the intention and pay attention to live in the Now.*

We are not very good at savoring. In the mad dash to fill our days with productivity or play, we often lose sight of our life purpose. We organize, schedule, call, line-up, plan—all in the hopes of creating the ideal day. Amidst the hustle and bustle of life, where is our attention? Generally, we're focused on what's next. Are we ever truly able to sit back and savor, fully aware that this very moment will never repeat itself again? Literally, it's now or never when it comes to savoring the day.

How can we learn to truly savor our days to foster wakefulness? Consider these intentional steps:

***Slow down.*** Take a deep breath and assess what is going on around you. Let go of the choreography. Pull up a chair and put yourself smack dab in the middle of your life in this very moment. Look around and take a mental photograph. Be fully present — Now.

***Forget about what comes next.*** Recently I ran into a new bride. I was eager to hear how her wedding day had been. She replied, "Fine, I guess. I really don't remember." I was puzzled by her response. She went on to explain that during the course of her special day she found herself continually focusing on what to do next. She admitted, "I realize now that my body went through the motions, but *I* wasn't really there. I had to watch video of my wedding to remember it."

This is a potent example of not being present to our own life. We can circumvent this by planting ourself firmly in the present moment and let it unfold naturally. We can let go of our need to orchestrate and follow along instead.

***Turn your senses up to "high" and soak it all in.*** Imagine that you are seeing, hearing, tasting, touching, and smelling what is in front of you for the very first time. When you head out to the ocean to view a sunset, don't just check it off your "To-Do List." "Check, went to the ocean. Check, watched the sunset." Savor it, instead.

Breathe it in. Breathe in the beauty of this cosmic handiwork. Take a mental photograph and log it in as a forever memory to be called up when your spirit needs sustenance. When you bite into Aunt Betty's blueberry pie, relish it. Listen to the gentle lullaby of crickets at night. Seek out the elusive white glow of fireflies amidst the trees at night. Step into the morning dew and feel its cool wetness between your toes.

Have you noticed that children naturally know how to savor? One morning my youngest daughter (age four at the time) sat beside me on the sofa as I bemoaned another day that began far too early. We sat looking out the window my mental fog dissipated. Slowly and ever so gently, she put her arm around my shoulder remarking on the beauty of the sunrise. "Look at in, Mom. Isn't it beautiful?" Groggily, I nodded in agreement. I turned to take a closer look and her little arm held me tighter. "This is a special moment, isn't it, Mom?" I began to realize that indeed it was. Ah, from the mouths of babes ...

We continued to watch the dawn unfold. We enjoyed the early morning silence together. We savored, and created a Kodak moment that would last and last ... and it has.

You can too, one precious moment at a time. All it takes is the *intention* and *attention* to do so.

## Essential Practice # 3: Befriend Yourself

*Awakening to self-love is the gateway to other-love.*

Our journey to be more loving toward others begins with being more loving towards *ourselves*. In fact, other-love must begin with self-love. It is impossible to demonstrate kindness or compassion to other people (all beings, in fact) when we continue to be unkind to ourselves.

There are many ways that we are unkind to ourselves every single day. We push ourselves beyond all reasonable limits. We have very high expectations, often holding ourselves to impossible standards of perfection. We over-work and don't get enough rest. We believe we must meet everyone else's needs first before tending to our own. We may even feel responsible for the happiness of others.

As we wake up and become more aware, naturally we wonder how we can stop treating ourselves this way. How can anyone *really* live more kindly, more gently—in a practical manner, that is—considering the demanding pace of our lives? Despite all our good intentions to slow down, stop, and smell the roses, we keep pushing.

If all of this sounds quite familiar, and if it's something you continue to struggle with (it is for oh, so many of us), it may be time to *befriend* yourself. Befriending is self-compassion personified.

My friend and mentor, Sue Patton Thoele, describes the relationship between compassion and befriending in this way: "I believe it is essential that you become a loving and tolerant friend to yourself. Do *you* act as a sheltering tree in your own life? Take a moment to think about how you treat your friends. Do you express the same kindness and consideration toward yourself? Many of us hold a deep-rooted belief that we don't deserve to be loved. "They" deserve friendship, but for some unfathomable reason, we don't. This is a false belief. We are worthy of love. We *do* deserve our own support and friendship."

To treat ourselves as kindly as we do others is at the core of self-compassion. Befriending requires an *attitude* of loving-kindness toward one's self, personified by actual *acts* of loving-kindness. Wishing it or thinking about it does not make it so.

Loving-kindness invites us to actually let go of anything that causes stress, frustration, or anger. Anything that keeps us disconnected from our essence and its core qualities of inner peace, love, and joy. Anything that prevents us from living as

our awakened self—a person who is *naturally* peaceful and compassionate. When we adopt an attitude of loving-kindness toward ourselves, we begin to live more gently, to release the pressure to do and be more. We relax, let go, and embrace ourselves and our lives with deep understanding and an attitude of mercy.

When I think of how important this is for living an awakened life I think of what the Buddha taught about loving-kindness.

*“You can search throughout the entire universe for someone who is more deserving of your love and affection than you are yourself, and that person is not to be found anywhere. You yourself, as much as anybody in the entire universe deserve your love and affection.”*

Self-compassion is our ticket to wholeness and living fully awake. Compassion is not a word I grew up with or thought much about until I stumbled into Buddhist teachings years ago. Though the concept came up again and again, I gave it no heed. I took it to mean something we should have for others. In fact, any dictionary would define it as such: “the deep feeling of sharing the suffering of another; to have mercy for someone.” I understood how important it was for any of us to show compassion to others. What I missed altogether was how important it is to feel and offer compassion to ourselves.

To do so, we begin where we are. We take small but sturdy steps to strip out the unkind attitudes and expectations we hold for ourselves. Pushing ourselves to exhaustion, caring for everyone but ourselves, and setting impossibly high standards for ourselves is not healthy. Nor kind.

Though keep in mind that living gently may not be a simple task. Living compassionately with ourselves takes great courage. Why? Because most of us live in societies that do not advocate this type of living. We are not taught how to live gently, nor is doing so valued. Instead, we find ourselves, even from childhood, focused on achievement, on accomplishments; pushing, striving, having more. Excessive busyness characterizes our days and the pace of our lives increases year by year. Faster and faster we go; busier and busier we get.

Living gently, on the other hand, asks us to let go of inner and external pressures to do and be more. It advocates slowing down so that we can live in a way that honors our innermost desires and our innate rhythm. Doing so enables us to live more in the moment and savor each day as a precious gift; to stop and smell the roses before it's too late. Living gently gives birth to true self-compassion.

And as it does, our heart flutters open. It softens, becomes more pliable. We start to feel better about who we are, more hopeful about our life. Ironically, we begin to see the people around us in a new way, too—through the eyes of compassion. We see how they struggle with this too, just as we are. With a slight shift in perception, we

can see how every single one of us is struggling to cope with the pressures of life as they are. Self-compassion gives rise to compassion for others.

Self-compassion opens the portals of our hearts to one another through greater awareness of the universal struggle to be human. Magically, wonderfully, voila! Compassion is born. Spaciousness reigns, and there is room in our heart for everyone.

Especially ourselves ...

## Essential Practice #4 - Seek Stillness

*Be still and know ...*

Experts say that we think, on the average, 60,000 thoughts a day. I know from experience that I must think many more than that. My mind moves so fast at times you would think I was speed-reading the world. It has taken time, dedication, and practice for me to be able to quiet my mind, but, thankfully, I have. Any of us can, with dedication, patience and gentleness.

### Where to Begin

The pace at which we move through our days contributes to having a dearth of thoughts. The faster we go, the more we have to think about, the more we have to focus on “what’s next.” At the peak of my busy-mindedness, I was mothering three small children, struggling with a part-time career, volunteering, and spending lots of time in the car—playing chauffeur, running errands to keep a busy household afloat. I lived by “To-Do” lists and sticky notes pasted on the dashboard of my car.

Thankfully, I had a breakthrough in understanding that the faster I went, the faster my heart raced. So did my thoughts. When I took the time to slow down, I felt better. Consciously slowing down—actually walking, driving, even speaking more slowly—began to have a positive effect upon me, and life stopped spinning, as did my mind.

It takes concentrated effort to learn how to slow down our thought processes to arrive at a place of mental quiet. The practice of meditation can help us with this. Meditation is described by Sri Chinmoy (*Wings of Joy*), as “going to the bottom of the sea where everything is calm and tranquil. On the surface of the sea, there may be a multitude of waves, but the sea is not affected below. In its deepest depths, the sea is all silence.”

It can be the same with our minds. When our mind is calm, like that seabed, the waters of life are clear. We find that we can navigate easily and see where we are going. We can then make skillful choices all along the way.

For years, I’ve aspired to this way of living. I maintain that if we are calm (and the more it is calm), clarity will naturally arise. Clear-seeing is a powerful gift, and when it stabilizes within us, other treasures present themselves in succession. Wisdom

arrives in the form of happiness, inner harmony, compassion, loving-kindness. The formula for optimal living is evident: *Calm + Clear = Wise*.

The challenge remains. How to still a busy mind? If meditation has been a difficult practice for you, I offer two simple strategies for accessing the sea of stillness within.

### **Quiet Mind Strategy #1:**

Begin to physically slow down. Notice how quickly you engage in any activity—especially simple actions like preparing a meal, cleaning the house, or answering e-mails—and try to do them more slowly, with focused attention, with intentional awareness. Then notice how much better you feel. Moving more slowly takes practice, for most of us are hardwired to function in high gear. We have been conditioned to get things done quickly, so the default setting of our body/mind system is “move!” Time and re-patterning are required to shift into a lower gear, but it can be done. Truly, slow can be good for what ails us, and may be precisely what the doctor ordered for recurring and consistent stress, including anxiety.

### **Quiet Mind Strategy #2**

It takes practice to notice the nature of our thoughts—to be their observer—and gently guide them in a more positive direction. One technique that can help is to connect with a phrase that calms us. Said silently, we repeat it gently again and again to ourselves for as long as it takes for us to settle down. We engage this process not from our head, but from our heart. We drop our awareness down into that deeper place; we allow the phrase itself to “breathe” through our heart. This phrase can be an affirmation, a song lyric, a scripture, a mantra; a positive “something” that holds our attention; something that has meaning for us.

I have a few favorites that work well for me. Singing softly to myself, “I am safe, I am loved, I am free,” is one of them, a lyric from a favorite Kenny Loggins’ song. Another such phrase of my own creation is: “Inner peace is mine, one step at a time.” I’ve been sharing this one quite successfully with women in the courses I teach. In fact, I received a lovely e-mail the other day from one participant who shared how she had taken the phrase and personalized it. She decided to say, instead: “Inner peace is mine, one *breath* at time,” knowing that peace of mind is, indeed, just a breath away. She told me that the practice of saying it this way was transforming her. “I came home to myself,” she wrote. “Once again I’ve discovered the benefits of an open mind and open spirit.”

Each of us, by birth and destiny, are meant to be calm in our body, mind, and heart. We just don’t take the time to propagate the practices that can lead us there. We continue to live on autopilot, frantically tugged here and there by an increasingly fast pace of life—one that will inevitably create an overly busy mind.

To free ourselves from the disabling effects of too many thoughts, we must, first and foremost, want relief—and want it badly enough to change our habits and cultivate new, more beneficial ones. If you find yourself drowning in a sea of thoughts and you desire relief, rescue yourself. Stillness is yours for the creating.



## Essential Practice #5 - Grow in Gratitude

*An awakened heart is a grateful heart.*

When we gather with others, it often seems our conversations drift to what's happened, what's wrong, even a litany of sorrows or complaints. The awakened life is a well-constructed one that would be ripe with gratitude, rather than discontent. It seems to me that gratefulness is an attribute one might inherit, but more than likely, it is one that must be sown, nurtured, and harvested much like crops in the fields.

We all know people who see their lives as rich and full. They awaken with a smile on their face and greet the day with a song in their heart. My friend Donna is like that. Despite past adversity and many health and family challenges, she harbors a gratitude attitude. At any given moment in her presence, you would not be surprised to hear her say, "I am just so grateful ..."

Donna did not get that way by happenstance. Many of us come to feelings of gratitude through "not having," or life crisis. It appears that the school of hard knocks, the university we call life, often gives a diploma in gratitude once we walk through its gates. Through loss and adversity, we become aware of what we do have, rather than what we don't. We view our days as rich and full, rather than half-empty. This realization comes with spiritual maturity and experience.

The phrase, "Practice makes progress," is a wise mindset to adopt. If we take time daily to express our gratitude, we become more comfortable with it, better at it. It may take us a lifetime to achieve, but that's alright. We make the effort and devote ourselves to gratitude as a spiritual practice. In time, we'll find it has become a welcome part of our daily routine. May these suggestions serve your "practice" and, in time, make room in your heart for gratitude to stay.

### **Speak it.**

Say your gratitude aloud to others. Thank and verbally acknowledge people throughout your day. Tell the people in your life how much you appreciate them and all that they do. From the postal carrier who conscientiously keeps your mail dry on the rainiest of days, to the local farmer who grows your produce, offer them a hearty "Thank you, very much!" Tell others what you love about them. Look your family members in the eyes and tell them you are grateful to have them in your life.

### **Write your gratitude.**

Some of us have a difficult time saying what we mean. To grow in gratitude we can write out our feelings of appreciation on paper.

One way to do this is to write in a journal. Sarah Ban Breathnach, author of *Simple Abundance*, encourages us to keep a formal Gratitude Journal. Each day, record five things that you are grateful for in your journal. The idea is to begin to seek out and find the good things in your life, then write them down. This practice can serve as a consistent reminder of what your life has, instead of what it has not. In time, this can bring increased awareness and appreciation for the many blessings in your life, even those that may be hidden from view.

Another way to share gratitude is to pen notes or send cards to the people who bring you joy and happiness. A simple note of appreciation tucked in a lunchbox or a Hallmark greeting sent in the mail can say what your voice may not be able to express: "I love you," "I need you," "I am so grateful for your friendship." The written word has tremendous power to heal and transform.

### **Choose to look at life from a positive perspective.**

Do you see your life as a struggle or as a celebration? Do you complain about your life or do you see the possibilities? In truth, we have the power to view life and what happens to us in any way we wish.

Set an intention to greet the day with gratitude and see how it shapes your day. Before bed, reflect on your day and what blessings you experienced. Thoughts of gratitude can be consciously culled anytime, anywhere. While driving in the car to work, preparing a meal, or taking a walk, we can mentally offer our gratitude.

### **Focus on the bigger picture.**

Everyone suffers tragedy and sorrow, as well as immeasurable happiness and joy. Is your situation so dire compared to the challenges of others? Often, in the midst of our angst, we lose proper perspective. We become overly focused on "what about me?" Keep in mind that everyone is struggling with life. Everyone wants to be happy and most people are having a hard time achieving that. Examine the length and breadth of your life and see how, in retrospect, things have turned out, blessings have come, love and happiness have been present. Life is basically good even though, at times, it may feel challenging.

**Look for the lesson and seek the gift of each situation.**

Each difficult situation or heartbreak may indeed be an opportunity to wake up and see more clearly. Ask yourself, "What am I being asked to learn or know right now?" Pay attention. Look for the gift.

Once you recognize the invitation of each situation, you can choose to grow from it. Everything you've experienced in life thus far has contributed to creating the version of you that exists right now. And that is certainly something to be grateful for!

It takes time and practice to create any new habit. Gratitude is no exception. With intention, attention, and dedication, we may notice a subtle shift of mind and heart, a lightening of our spirit if we stay the course and keep our eyes on the gratitude trail.

## **Essential Practice #6: Commit to Spiritual Practice**

*Dedication to the mat, the pew, the trail creates lasting wakefulness.*

We've all witnessed others engaged in meaningful spiritual practices. Bearded men garbed in black, bobbing rhythmically at the Wailing Wall in Jerusalem. White-robed swamis chanting "Hare Krishna." A Gospel singer raising the rafters with heartfelt strains of "Amazing Grace." Sufi Dervishes whirling. African drummers drumming. A lone Buddhist meditating cross-legged on a craggy peak overlooking the ocean. All these and more fill our imaginations, ever hopeful that we, too, might find practices that enliven our spirit.

Spiritual practices, simply put, are those activities that connect us more deeply with the virtues of the spirit, our essence, basic goodness itself. They are practices that provide us with a unique opportunity to experience sacred time and space; to remove ourselves from the distractions and noise of a too busy world, and remember our spiritual connection. Spiritual practices, properly cultivated, enable us to access inner calm, joy, and gratitude for life.

### **A Feast for the Spirit**

The variety of spiritual practices available to us is boundless, as is our understanding of the sacred. There are quiet practices: various forms of prayer, meditation, silence, or sacred reading; active practices: singing, chanting, dancing, worship, or creative expression; and physical practices: yoga, bowing, tai chi, gardening, or mindful walking. Spiritual practices can be done alone or with others. In one's home, in nature, in a church, temple or mosque, at all times of day or night.

It might seem that we must search long and hard to find the spiritual practices that will nourish and sustain us. In truth, all we need do to uncover them is explore a bit, then listen deeply as we "feel" our way through them. The measuring stick by which we discern whether a particular practice suits us is through body awareness—through the vehicle of our thoughts, physical senses, and emotions.

Any spiritual practice that we try on for size should, initially, have a positive effect upon us. We notice what thoughts we are having; if conscious thought has slowed or disappeared, altogether. Is our body at ease? Are our senses pleased? Are we feeling a sense of connection to our wise self or "Spirit"? We listen to what our body/mind says and we honor its wisdom.

With dedication, we will locate the "right" practices for us. By staying faithful to them, we will begin to experience their deeper benefits. The key is regularity. It

takes time for spiritual practices to work their magic upon us. Psychologists tell us it takes twenty-one days to create any new habit, ninety days for that habit to stick. Spiritual practices are no exception. It may take a year or more for them to become an invaluable part of our lifestyle.

### **Have Practices, Will Travel**

A personal spiritual practice, well honed, can also provide comfort and stability in a very busy life. It can dependably deliver us to the shores of peace and well-being no matter where we find ourselves. For example, if nature is our spiritual connector, all we need do is step outside, take a deep breath, and feast our eyes on Mother Nature's glory. If music enhances our sacred connection, we can plug into that—literally—with an iPod or CD player, in a car or on an airplane. Books for inspirational reading can be taken anywhere, as can a yoga mat or prayer rug for devotional practice. Have practices, will travel, I say. It is sound and wise for us to cultivate spiritual practices that can be done alone, anytime, anywhere.

### **Becoming the Practice**

In time, the lines of distinction between our self and the spiritual practice will begin to blur. We actually *become* the practice. Its benefits—inner calm, openheartedness, generosity of spirit—meld into us. One day we may actually awaken to realize that we not only *feel* more loving, but we have *become* more loving; that we do not just *feel* more peaceful, but that we have become a peaceful presence in the world. Our friends and family confirm this. They tell us we are different; that we have changed for the better.

Ultimately, by engaging in spiritual practices, we have not only benefitted ourselves, but we have done the world a great service. Perhaps, unknowingly, we have succeeded at what peacemaker Mahatma Gandhi invited us to: to *be* the change we so desperately wish to see in the world today.

## Essential Practice # 7 - Cultivate Happiness

*True happiness begins with our thoughts.*

Have you checked your happiness quotient lately? How happy are you—really?

I like to imagine that on any given day, I can stop, take a pause, and check my happiness level—an inner barometer with a contentment range of 1 to 10. Today, I'd say I'm at a 9. You?

I firmly believe that happiness is an inside job. Sure, it's nice to have creature comforts, but these can be fleeting. Real, lasting happiness comes and stays as a welcome guest when our mind and heart are pleased and satisfied.

If your happiness quotient is low today, I'd like to invite you to consider two very important principles—and their supporting practices. They can boost your happiness barometer to enjoyable new heights.

### **Your Most Predominant Thought**

What do you think about most often? When you stop and take a moment to notice your thinking, what preoccupies you?

If you are like most people, your mind may be focusing on what is wrong. That's the nature of the human mind. Its "default setting" is negative. It naturally drifts off to troublesome scenarios. It scans your horizon, seeking security and comfort; noticing what it doesn't like or wants to be different. As a result, we easily find ourselves lost in thoughts of worry or regret, fear or anxiety.

Doesn't it make sense that if we're spending much of our time focused on what's wrong—albeit, unconsciously—that we might feel unhappy or discontent? It does to me, and I know for a fact that this is how my mind responds to life—if I don't do something about it.

If we want to feel happier, we'll need to practice shifting our attention toward what feels skillful, right, or true. The mind is quite elastic, trainable, and we can literally point it towards something new. With time and practice, focus and concentration, we can retrain our brain.

A very powerful course of action we can take is to notice the nature and subject of our thoughts—and where they lead us. Are they worry thoughts or fear thoughts?

Kind or generous thought? We can identify them, then notice what reality they are creating for us. Are they leading us toward feelings of well-being? Do they create sensations of happiness or do they promote drama and tension?

We can also determine if these thoughts are repetitive. Perhaps they keep us stuck in brain looping, an annoying state whereby our mind keeps saying the same thing, repeating the same old stories over and over again. As a result, the same scenarios are acted out in our lives, again and again.

No matter the nature or quality of our thoughts, we can illuminate them, refocus them, and redirect them to those that support our awakened life.

Our thoughts need not overrun us or control us. We can begin to steer them, work with them. When a skilled shepherd notices that one of his flock has wandered away, he will expertly guide it back into the fold. We, too, can corral our wild mind in much the same way.

Begin by stopping yourself, at regular intervals throughout the day, to notice what you are thinking. *Stop, look, listen and feel.* Then consciously choose to think about something else—something positive, hopeful, appreciative, or joyful. Notice how different this makes you feel.

You will need to engage in this process again and again for the mind to catch on. Give it at least 21 days of practice. What we focus on expands. Patiently, we retrain ourselves, and how we respond to life. We're switching our mind's default setting to "Happiness"!

### **Your Most Predominant Mind Pattern**

Each of us has very specific ways in which our mind works. We have deeply embedded patterns, story lines, likely sourced in childhood, that have created habituated ways of thinking—and they tend to run us. And they cause undue stress.

For example, many people have "worry mind." We incessantly mull over what might happen in the future—to ourselves or to our loved ones. Another pattern is "busy mind." With the frenetic pace of our lives, this is not surprising. The faster we go, the busier our minds get. "Busy mind" can cause anxiety levels to escalate. Both of these mind patterns can be extremely debilitating, cause severe stress, and culminate in poor health.

One of my predominant mind patterns is "planning mind." Being a teacher by training and calling, I often find myself lost in thought, creating lesson plans for an online class I teach, blog posts, or simply planning out my life weeks ahead of time. I

seem to think that allowing my mind to behave in this way will bring peace of mind. In reality, it often creates feelings of anxiousness or overwhelm.

What would be one of your predominant mind patterns? No matter which pattern you have the good news is that you can work with it successfully. And please know this: there is no shame in having a certain “kind” of mind. All thoughts and habits are simply a result of being human. We’ve all thought and felt everything ...

Use the **“Stop, Look, Listen, and Feel”** process with all of your thoughts. Simply notice the thought, name it, and with the assistance of some deep breaths—let it go. Turn your attention to something else. In time, you can “rewire” your thinking to be less rigid, more flexible, and workable.

Choice by choice, we can shift how we respond to our minds. We do not have to be run ragged by pesky thoughts or mind patterns. Infuse yourself with purpose and passion to feel happier and you can. Take good care of your mind and I’m confident you’ll be happier in no time—happy, from the inside out.



## Essential Practice #8 – Forgive

*Forgive, let go, move on. Life is too short to do otherwise.*

Many of us hold idealized versions of how relationships should be. Rarely, does an intimate relationship play out as it is portrayed in novels or romantic movies.

In relationship, one of the things we struggle with the most is forgiveness. We associate forgiveness with giving in, relinquishing some hurt or source of anger for the sake of peacemaking. Perceived in this way, it may feel that, in the forgiving, we are giving up a part of ourselves to rectify the situation—or that we're giving in. What if we looked at the act of forgiveness in an enlightened new way?

In my own life, I've often stubbornly held to my point of view when a point of conflict would arise. It was so important to be right! I would dig in my heels. Not surprisingly arguments would arise, for if one or both partners passionately holds to what they believe to be "right," there is little room for forgiveness to find its way in. Grudges and resentment can build and, over time, create a thorny mess of tangled emotions.

With awakened insight, we can view the act of forgiveness in a new way. Forgiveness is no longer, "giving in" or "giving up." It is "letting go." Letting go of our need to have the last word. Letting go of any need to be right. Letting go of our need to self-protect or have the upper hand in the relationship.

We may also believe that by forgiving someone we are letting him or her off the hook, so to speak. Someone has hurt us or committed what we perceive to be a wrongful act. If we forgive them, it seems we are condoning what they did or it somehow diminishes the power of the act.

Author, Eldonna Edwards Bouton, describes forgiveness this way in her book, *Loose Ends: A Journaling Tool for Tying Up the Incomplete Details of Your Life and Heart*:

"Imagine the person that you cannot forgive as someone who once held a fishing pole. They've set down the pole and gone on to other things, perhaps even hurting others. In the meantime, you are still floundering in the murky waters of the past, snagged on their hook. As long as you are spending precious energy resenting, hating and being angry, you will be unable to swim freely. What I am asking you to do is gently remove the hook that keeps you entangled in the past. "

Forgiveness, framed in this way, is not about letting someone else off the hook; it is letting *yourself* off the hook. Knowing this, wouldn't it be much easier to forgive someone? We have the choice to perceive things in any way we wish. We can expend great emotional energy trying to prove ourselves right or to make someone else see the "wrong" in what they did. Or, we can let the situation go, release ourselves from its emotional grip, and move on.

This is not to say that in many situations we shouldn't stand up for what we know to be good and true; or that justice should be served, wrongdoing brought to light. We should. But in other situations, we waste precious time and energy attempting to make someone see the error of their ways.

The only person we can change, the only person we have control over is *ourselves*. When we engage in forgiveness, we grant *ourselves* personal freedom.

By forgiving, we are free to let go and move on to the next enlightening experience. Seen in an even broader light, an act of forgiveness is an act of healing. Granting forgiveness to another may just be the greatest act of self-love we can perform.

Forgiveness is not an easy thing to do. But by not forgiving we continue to add to this sack of pain we carry. Why not lighten the load, lay down the grudges and resentments, and walk more lightly through life? Let us forgive any and all who need forgiving. Let's set ourselves free.

## Essential Practice #9 - Be Kind

*When in doubt, do the kindest thing.*

In 2008, the Gallup poll revealed our choice of the world leader we admired the most. I was not surprised by the result—His Holiness the 15<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama—but the creators of the poll were. Apparently, this was the very first time that our top choice was someone who was perceived as both a political leader *and* a religious leader. This made me wonder, what is the common thread that winds through each of the roles that this esteemed man plays? The answer came quickly: Kindness.

In fact, the Dalai Lama himself has said this repeatedly, *“My religion is kindness.”* He has also been quick to add that he believes kindness—along with its cohort, compassion—is at the root of all the world’s spiritual traditions. In fact, even if you do not consider yourself to be a particularly religious person, kindness would likely still form the bedrock of your spiritual life and how you relate to others.

Kindness transcends all boundaries and borders; permeates all walls and wounds. Kindness connects us, no matter what we believe, where we live, or how we earn a living. Kindness is the common language we speak as human beings. A smile, a generous gesture, an act of caring transcends all our differences. Kindness is the key to a life well lived. Kindness matters.

Do you consider yourself to be a kind person? Do you generally respond well to the people you meet on a day-to-day basis? Are you open and receptive, hospitable, especially when others do not seem so kind themselves?

These are important questions to ask ourselves now, especially with the state of the world as it is—when communities and families are struggling to maintain equanimity. It is easy to lose focus and move away from kindness. We become self-absorbed, stressed, overwhelmed, worried, or fearful. Our first thought in any number of situations may be, ‘What about me?’

In truth, taking the focus off ourselves and placing it on the well-being of others can shift our preoccupation—and our pain. Thinking of another first and how we might enhance his or her day can brighten our own. This is what I understand His Holiness the Dalai Lama aspires to do on a moment-to-moment basis. His focus is not upon how he can make himself feel better, but how his presence or words might uplift another. Kindness can be the cure for what ails us.

So how can we be more kind? What can we do to keep our hearts open to one another, to keep the well-being of others in the forefront of our thoughts? I'd like to offer these heart-opening suggestions:

### **Notice the "I"**

Beginning first thing in the morning, notice what words you speak. How often do your sentences begin with the word "I"? Try and catch yourself doing this. Then try to stop yourself from speaking about *you*. When we use "I" so often, that's a tip-off that we are thinking an alot about ourselves and, likely, not enough about others. Set an intention to speak about yourself less often. Minimize the "I" in your vocabulary.

### **Take a Good Look**

Eye contact seems to have become a scarce commodity these days. I recall when I visited New York City years ago, a well-meaning friend offered a piece of advice about staying safe. "Don't look at anyone," she said. "You'll be fine." I took her advice and avoided all eye contact, looking down at the sidewalk the entire time. I felt as if I were insulating myself from the world, literally, cutting myself off from my fellow human beings. I believed that the most important thing was to keep myself safe, that other people did not matter. They became invisible to me. I hated the whole experience and couldn't wait to get back to my safe little hometown where people looked at one another and smiled. Or did they? I began to take notice ...

When we're engaged in the busyness of everyday life we may be moving so quickly that we do not really *see* one another. We do not greet each other eye-to-eye. I witness this most often while in the grocery store. The check out person may not even look at me, nor I her, if I do not make a concerted effort to do so. Though we are in close proximity, we are amazingly invisible to one another.

I invite you to slow down, take a good look, and truly *see* the other. Make eye contact, smile, acknowledge his or her presence with a genuine 'Hello.' An act as simple as this can put us back in touch with the unique presence and well-being of another.

### **Random Acts of Kindness**

Once we have begun to slow down and really notice people, we may feel compelled to offer a kindness of some kind, especially if we see that they themselves are disconnected from others. By reconnecting through a kind act, we may facilitate an opening of *their* eyes, *their* heart, by a demonstration of our own.

Simple gestures speak boldly of kindness. A door held open; a hearty "Thank You" when one is held open for you. Offering up the closer parking space. Randomly

placing money in someone's expired parking meter. Providing the small change someone doesn't have to pay their grocery bill. The list is endless. Be creative and create a kindness list of your own. Ask yourself, What very simple thing could I do right now to show kindness to this person? Then, do it!

I try to keep myself attuned to daily acts of kindness by remembering these powerful words by Mother Teresa ...

"Let no one ever come to you without leaving better and happier. Be the living expression of (God's) kindness in your face, kindness in your eyes, kindness in your smile."

Kindness does matter. In fact, in the grand scheme of life, it may be the only thing that does ...

## Essential Practice #10 – Invite Peace

*Peace, anytime, anywhere is entirely possible.*

When you need to get away from it all, to have greater peace of mind, where do you go? You may think you need to board an airplane and head for a solitary Himalayan peak or a deserted beach on Bali. Consider this unique destination instead—your heart—and the value of dropping down into it to access your innate and ever-present calm. Without going to a distant locale, you can restore and rejuvenate yourself by using any number of peaceful practices right where you are.

The process is simple really. You just need to remember to do it. At any time during your busy day, stop what you're doing and take a break to center yourself—to remember who you are—a “human being,” not a “human doing.” Gift yourself with a brief period of dropping in, a mini-break, if you will, from the hectic pace of life. This will help you reconnect with your wise self and the peace that resides naturally within you.

Here are 6 peaceful practices you can do—anytime, anywhere— guaranteed to restore your sense of center, no matter what is happening in your life.

### **Memory Vitamin:**

If you're feeling overwhelmed, search your memory bank for a particular event, for a time in your life when you felt truly peaceful, relaxed. Would your thoughts be of sun bathing on a warm beach, savoring a vista from a mountaintop, laughing with your children rolling in the cool grass? Select a Memory Vitamin from your past and allow yourself to sink into all its sensations. Fully re-live it in your body/mind as if you were there again and notice how wonderful you feel, just as you would after a real vitamin boost!

### **Breath Refresher:**

Push away from your desk or computer, close your eyes and take a long, slow leisurely breath. Breathe in, counting to 8. Hold your breath for a count of 2. Then release it, doing so even more slowly to the count of 10. Many of us take deep breaths thinking this will calm or focus us. Actually, it is the exhale that brings about the relaxation response. During your workday, notice if you are holding your breath or breathing very shallowly. Take a literal “breather” using this formula of 8 inhales to 10 exhales—and notice how much clearer and focused your mind feels.

### **Let Nature Nurture:**

No matter where you are, at home or work, going outside invokes a natural relaxation response. Step outside and turn your attention toward something in nature. This can be something small—a leaf, a flower, an insect— or large, like the landscape. Focus intentionally to truly *see* what is in front of you. Notice the details—colors, shapes, textures, smells. Studies indicate that people who take nature breaks throughout the day are less stressed, produce more, and use both the right and left hemispheres of their brain more effectively. Our relaxation response comes 50% more quickly when we are out-of-doors rather than if we stay inside. Knowing this, consider taking your coffee break or lunch hour outside; let Mother Nature nurture you on all levels.

### **Liquid Calm:**

Replenish your physical reserves by taking a drink. Health experts say we should be drinking 6-8 glasses of water a day. As the pace of our day increases, many of us forget to drink water. National statistics on the reported frequency of dehydration bear this out. If you are feeling sluggish, lightheaded or dizzy, unable to focus, recall information, or get a task completed, drink water. You may be dehydrated. Caffeinated beverages don't count for water intake. In fact, their caffeine or sodium content depletes the body. Stick with water or juice to restore your energy.

### **Heart Opener:**

Feeling closed down, irritated, struggling through your day? Stop what you are doing, stand up, and stretch your arms out to your sides as if you were an airplane. Breathing slowly and evenly, gently arch your body back as if there is an imaginary string connecting your heart to the sky. This heart opening stretch not only releases bodily tension, but enables your emotional heart to open if it has felt tight or closed down. Stay in this position for a minute or two, continuing to gently breathe in and out, for as long as you need to feel genuine relief.

### **Baby Bliss:**

In need of a very *large* dose of inner peace? Become an infant for a few minutes and give yourself a healthy dose of mother love. Come down to the floor, kneeling. Then slowly lower your body until it is resting on the floor like a frog; chest pressed to thighs, arms back and resting comfortably beside you. Turn your head to the side, temple to ground; rest, breathe. (In yoga, this is called "Child's Pose.") Imagine yourself as a small child or a baby in a crib, experiencing pure happiness, lying on soft sheets, a comfy mattress, nowhere to go, nothing to do, just BE-ing.

May these peaceful practices fill your body, mind, heart and soul with “good medicine.” May they provide you with portable peace, with the ease and comfort you truly deserve as a busy person in today’s challenging world.



## Essential Practice # 11 - Offer Presence

*Awaken to the needs of others and give with your whole heart.*

My parents were good listeners. If any of us four kids ever had a problem, we knew that we could go to Mom or Dad and they would listen—really listen. Not react. Not yell or scream. Not respond with finger pointing or “I told you so.” They would sit quietly, receive whatever we had to say, and respond calmly, thoughtfully. If I, or my brothers or sister, had a need to talk, the television was turned off, the newspaper set aside. We knew beyond a doubt that we had our parents’ undivided attention.

This is how I knew I was unconditionally loved.

This is also how I’ve tried to parent my own children over the years, though, admittedly, I didn’t quite hold to my parents’ stellar standard. But I tried. I still do, and I try to do the same with anyone with whom I have contact. Any of us can.

In *The Art of Being a Healing Presence: A Guide for Those in Caring Relationships*, author James Miller describes being present—fully present to others—in this way. “...the condition of being consciously and compassionately in the present moment with another...believing in and affirming their potential for wholeness, wherever they are in life.”

To give someone the gift of your presence, to be a *healing* presence to them, may just be the gift of a lifetime—and a gift of unconditional love. Consider these five ways in which you can cultivate this ability in your own life:

### **Give Them All You’ve Got**

The first step in demonstrating to anyone that we care for them unconditionally is to be there when they need us; fully attentive, current activities halted, the potential for distraction eliminated. Giving him or her our full and present attention is a tremendous gift. It says to them, “I am yours, no matter how long this takes.”

### **Zip the Lip**

A second act of unconditional presence is being able to listen without having a personal agenda. We all have a penchant for advice giving. And, as you may well know from your own experience, advice giving doesn’t always go well. It can raise another’s hackles in a nanosecond because it sends an unconscious message that says, “I know what’s best for you.” Putting aside our own agenda (keeping our

mouth closed might be a more practical way to put it) enables the speaker to hear him or herself speak; to gain clarity and insight as their own words are spoken.

I don't recall my parents ever giving me much advice. If anything, I recall them gently asking me, "What do YOU think is right?" "What do YOU think might be a good next step?" They'd patiently wait for my answer and, if one was not forthcoming, like seasoned coaches, they might lay out some options, faithfully holding space for me to find my own way.

### **Permission to Ponder**

A third indicator of our love and support is suggesting that our friend or child take all the time they need to make a decision. Give them permission to think about things; to not jump into something quickly just to "get it handled." Encourage them to take their time to figure something out, to weigh the options, and "sit with it." We can assure them that we will listen with our whole heart while they navigate this process.

### **Acts of Faith**

The fourth indicator of presence is to honor the choices they make. We can hold faith that common sense, that conscience, and their wise heart will prevail. We, ourselves, can cultivate trust that each person can make their own decisions, survive their own mistakes, and learn from them.

### **Mistakes Are for Learning**

My parents allowed me to fall down and pick myself back up again. And as I did, they were at my side, metaphorically dusting off my soiled knees. We can do the same. We can suspend judgment about the "error." We can choose to respond kindly instead of berating our dear one for the choices they made. We can lovingly welcome them back into our embrace—and encourage them to embrace themselves with compassion for their choice and its results. We can encourage them to grow from their mistakes.

When it comes right down to it, all anyone wants from us is love; to love them as they are; to be there for them; to never give up, even when the road gets rough. No one ever said life or friendship would be easy. Well-equipped with a reservoir of unconditional love, the journey can be made more enjoyable.

Life is short. Time moves quickly. When all is said and done and we look back upon our lives, what we'll remember most are the people who were truly present for us. We can bring that circle of caring to completion by being a loving and listening presence to those around us. Indeed, that is all that may be required for healing, both personal and planetary, to take place.

Resource: *The Art of Being a Healing Presence: A Guide for Those in Caring Relationships* by James E. Miller with Susan C. Cutshall. Available from Willowgreen Publishing: <http://www.willowgreen.com>

## **Essential Practice #12 - Steward the Earth**

*Fully awake, we serve as wise caretakers of the planet and, by doing so, create health and hopefulness for all beings, beginning with ourselves.*

“The Environmental Movement” that picked up pace in the 1960s is no longer a movement but, for many of us, a complete way of life. “Thinking Green” is becoming less and less a matter of choice.

With dwindling resources, a threatened water supply, and struggling species, it is a necessity, and an essential key for perpetuating awakening on a global scale. By treating the planet with care and respect, we care for ourselves, as well. In the words of Brooke Medicine Eagle, “There is hope if people will begin to awaken that spiritual part of themselves, that heartfelt knowledge that we are caretakers of this planet.”

Consider these options for you and your family to L.I.V.E. G.R.E.E.N. when the call sounds—as it inevitably will more and more in the coming years. May we be fully awake and take our role of planetary stewards seriously.

### **L = Love Your Body**

In the 1990s when my hormones began to fluctuate, I learned about the hidden estrogens in body care products: shampoo and conditioner, soap, make-up, lotion, and so on. According to Cornell University research, “Ingredients in a wide variety of cosmetics and personal care products can mimic the effects of the hormone estrogen.” Scientists are concerned that even at low levels, these environmental estrogens may work together with the body’s own estrogen to increase the risk of various forms of cancer.

We can safeguard our health, love our body more, and honor the planet by using products that are natural and organic— plant based. Choosing these also minimizes the chances of animals being harmed in the production of such products. Interestingly, as soon as I switched to natural/organic products my hormone fluctuations ceased and I physically felt better, more balanced.

### **I = Invite Green Indoors**

Most of us live and work indoors most of the time, shut off from Mother Nature. We experience her through doors and windows rather than up close and personal. This can disconnect us from the beauty and importance of the natural world. Bring nature in and let it fill your living and work space. Plants and trees purify the air we breathe; flowers bring enjoyment and connect us with the soul of living.

## **V = Value Your Greenbacks**

Spend wisely. With transparency, take a moral inventory to determine how much you spend on unnecessary items. Mass consumerism has created a “spend, spend, spend!” attitude which means produce more, more, more! And producing more uses precious and limited resources. Think twice before you buy something. Consider what resources (trees, plants, oil) are needed to make what you think you must have.

## **E = Eat Local**

Support your local growers and purchase from them. Not only does this help your neighbor earn a living, it saves fuel consumption too (i.e. the cost of shipping products cross country). Eating locally grown food enables you to know more about the quality of what you’re eating. You can ask a grower about chemical use and harvesting practices; antibiotic and hormone use in meats, as well as how humanely animals are treated before slaughter. Don’t forget to support local fishermen too.

## **G = Grow Your Own**

Consider container gardening and grow your own vegetables. You don’t need a plot of land to make this happen; a patio, porch, or deck will do. Grow indoors also. Start seedlings from scratch to plant outside later. Grow sprouts in jars for salads. Create a windowsill herb garden in the kitchen. Indulge your cats with homegrown catnip. Feel your green thumb grow!

## **R = Reduce Your Usage**

Electricity: use energy efficient appliances and light bulbs, update your furnace, re-insulate windows and doors, use ceiling fans instead of air conditioning

Gas: car-pool, walk, ride a bike, drive a hybrid or electric car

Cleaning supplies: avoid chemical solutions, use natural ones instead

Reduce packaging: purchase in bulk

Heating: turn down the thermostat, dress in layers, heat only the rooms you use, consider energy efficient space heaters, heat with pellets

Water: take showers instead of baths, use water saving toilets, turn off the water when brushing your teeth

### **E = Extend Yourself**

Give what you don't need to others who may use, enjoy, or refurbish your "junk." Recycle. Re-gift. Donate to charity. You might be surprised to learn that, with a little research, there's an organization that would appreciate your cast offs. Electronics, computers, cell phones—even batteries—can be recycled. Look in your local Yellow Pages for drop off centers.

### **E = Energy Awareness**

Spread the word about the good green stuff you're doing. Tell others what you know. Share what works for you and be an agent for change. Inform your neighborhood and band together for a group project. There is power in numbers and grass roots efforts do grow and make a difference. Your voice *does* matter!

### **N = Normalize!**

Let's make Green the new "normal" so it's not just something we do once in a while or when it's convenient. Let's rise to the challenge and *live green*. Doing so is no longer an option if we're realistic—it is *the* way to live happily and healthfully *and* to guarantee that our children and grandchildren will as well. Let's leave our big blue planet better than we found it so future generations *do* have hope and a powerful reason to live as wise stewards themselves.

## Final Thoughts

Living an awakened life is *the* journey of our lifetime. It is not a goal to be met or a destination to be arrived at. Being fully awake takes time, patience, and practice. It can be a joyous journey if we embrace it as such.

Many of us have spent our entire lives striving, trying to get everything just right. Our spiritual lives can also fall prey to this mindset. We can push too hard, set impossibly high standards, even in spiritual terms: “I simply must be more generous!” “I should love everyone.” It is easy to get caught up in the psychobabble of spirituality and feel less-than-wonderful about our own unfolding; impatient and judgmental about ourselves and our pace of growth.

If you experience this yourself, a deeper call may be sounding. It may be inviting you to treat yourself with ever more kindness and compassion. Mindfulness invites us to be well with ourselves as we are and, at the same time, to move forward and stay true to this path of awakening. Mindfulness can be our trustworthy, constant companion, as well as our guide.

Being fully awake does not necessarily imply gut-wrenching work, but it does require dedication. Dailyness, paired with breath and loving-kindness, allows us to continue to embrace ourselves as the beautiful beings we already are—and to unfold a fully realized version of ourselves, too—who we are meant to be. This process can be pleasurable and ease-filled if we are fully present to ourselves. I hope that I have conveyed that in these pages.

Let’s continue to treat ourselves kindly, with tenderness, so that our path of awakened living is a gentle one. In truth, the more we are able to do this, the more open and loving we will be with everyone we meet. Our paths converge in kindness.

May the 12 Essential Practices I’ve presented here serve you well. May they sustain and guide you in the days ahead. May you remember that everyone benefits from your “good work of self.” Together, with intention and attention, we can journey into the collective, good wise Heart. The world will be the better for our efforts.

Bengali poet, Rabindranath Tagore, may have said it best: “Before the end of my journey may I reach within myself the One which is the All.”

Indeed, may it be so for you. May it be so for all beings.

## About the Author



**Janice Lynne Lundy** is passionate about living an awakened life and helping you live yours. She is an educator, a renowned seminar and retreat leader, and Interfaith Spiritual Director. She is the author of four personal/spiritual growth books: *Coming Home to Ourselves: A Woman's Journey to Wholeness*, *Awakening the Spirit Within*, *Perfect Love*, and *Your Truest Self: Embracing the Woman You Are Meant to Be*, acclaimed books that encourage us to live mindfully, with compassion and loving-kindness for ourselves and all beings.

For over 20 years, Jan has been helping people meet the challenges of everyday life with courage and grace. She does this in-person and online through life-transforming programs. As a Spiritual Director/Mentor, she works with individuals (one-on-one, in-person and long-distance) to view their lives from a spiritual perspective. Students, mentees, audiences, and readers alike remark upon her peaceful presence and describe her as possessing deep and gentle wisdom.

Jan lives with her beloved husband, Brad, along the peaceful shores of Lake Michigan. She is the mother of three, stepmother of four, and a grandmother of five. Her life motto is, "Be gentle. Be kind. It's a long journey."

Visit Jan at her website and learn more about her books, current course offerings, in-person events, and private mentoring. Read her blog, "Everyday Wisdom," and subscribe to her monthly, "Awakened Living" newsletter. You may also enjoy receiving daily "Beads of Wisdom" to help you stay "fully awake."

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