

Mountain-Sun-Sky

This is a practice from Kelly McGonigal, who is a researcher and the principal teacher of Stanford's Compassion Cultivation Training Course and Teacher Certification Program.

Begin by standing. This practice helps us begin to touch into the embodiment of certain qualities of compassion.

1. Groundedness and steadiness - like a mountain: bring attention to your own foundation and posture - make a more conscious choice of the placement of your feet, legs or hips. If there is a lot tension holding you together, think of spreading your base: whether that means spreading your feet or hips. From here, inhale shoulders up to ears, exhale, let the shoulders drop down. 3 times total.

Close your eyes - and notice the sense of attention stabilizing. Notice what you sense in your own body - and pay attention to the sense of stability or groundedness. 30 sec. Take one hand to the heart or chest - eyes open or closed - inward toward sensation.

2. Your own natural warmth - like the sun: sense around the heart and 3-dimensionality of the breath - like a radiant sun, sense of expansion as you inhale, gentle release as you exhale. Bring the other hand to the belly.
3. Acceptance and spaciousness - like an expansive blue sky that has room for everything - all the clouds that pass by. Sense in your own body, the breath moving in and out. Sensing the body as a spacious container for the breath.

You can take these qualities into a seated meditation.

1. Mindfully take your seat and find the quality of steadiness - the mountain - the support underneath you - maybe spreading hips or feet beneath you or the sit bones rooted into the floor. Make a conscious choice of where you place your hands whether in your lap or on your knees, in contact with the breath - keeping with the quality of stability, encourage you to stay with this to encourage the body to enter stillness to the best of your ability.
2. Connect with the quality of the heart by setting an intention - bring to mind your intention for being here today - bring to mind - same quality of heart can hold the intentions of everyone in the room - we all came with intentions and to connect to those intentions of the others in the room for being here now.
3. Bring in the quality of the sky with our attention and breath. Focus on how it feels to breathe - maybe the feeling of expansion and release in the core of the body - or from the inside out, rather than from the thinking side - come from the felt sense in the body of what it is like to breathe. Allowing the body to be a spacious container for the breath. Invite you to notice when your mind wanders from the breath and gently bring it back.

Invoking the image of clouds in the sky - if we go outside during the day, we look up and see the sun, but sometimes, you look for the sun, but depending on the day or weather, you look up and you see something else instead... storm clouds or pretty clouds, or something else in the way of our seeing the sun. In our own practice, we get this experience: we may look for stillness and focus, but what we see is the agitation of mind or distraction or strong emotion or suffering, but it is the process of being willing to go through that that gives us the taste of the stillness and spaciousness of the mind. So, the invitation is to look for the sun, but instead you may see the clouds. You might see the clouds or the barriers to compassion, stillness, ease. It doesn't mean anything other than that the conditions (the weather) is just like this and we may get breaks in the clouds or glimpses of the sun and that seeing the clouds are also important in the development of compassion, stillness, ease.

Compassionate response to our suffering

When we notice our own suffering we can do this practice - it's a bit like lovingkindness practice:

It's often helpful to place a hand on the heart and one hand on the belly. Then, we use these phrases:

Choose one of these phrases to say to yourself:

- This is a moment of suffering (mindfulness) or
- Suffering is a part of life (common humanity)

Next, choose one of these phrases to say to yourself:

- May I be kind to myself (self-kindness) or
- May I accept myself just as I am (acceptance)

Notice the hand on your heart, feel the warmth of your hand, the gentle pressure of your hand. Connect with the quality of the Sun: warmth, kindness radiating outward.

Notice the hand on your belly, and notice your chest rhythmically rising and falling beneath your hands. Connect with the quality of Sky - open, spacious, allowing everything including clouds to be held.

Breathing into that part of the body on the in-breath and breathing out from that region on the out-breath, exploring the sensations, watching their intensity shift up and down from one moment to the next.

See if you can bring an even deeper attitude of compassion and openness to whatever sensations, thoughts, or emotions you are experiencing, however unpleasant, by saying to yourself from time to time,

"It's OK. Whatever it is, it's already here. May I accept this with open spaciousness and awareness."

Stay with the awareness of these internal sensations, breathing with them, accepting them, letting them be, and allowing them to be just as they are. Say to yourself again, if you find it helpful,

"It's here right now. Whatever it is, it's already here. May I accept this with open spaciousness and awareness."

Soften and open to the sensation you become aware of, letting go of any tensing and bracing. If the sensation or emotion is too difficult, come back to the felt sense of the hands on the heart and belly and connect with the warmth and spaciousness.